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# アルオ ツテイル 伝

TALES  
OF  
LEO ATTIEL

◆ 首なし公の肖像 ◆

杉原智則  
イラスト \* 岡谷



# Novel Illustrations



レオ  
TALES OF \* LEO ATTIEL

アツテイル伝

I


首なし公の肖像

杉原智則  
イラスト \* 岡谷

公子さまといたって、  
要は、弱い国が  
強いアリオンに差し出した人質だ。

※ アール公国第二公子 ※  
**レオ・アッティール** ♪

人質同然の身でアリオンへ赴き  
将来を見通せないながらも武芸と学問に励んでいる。



レオ兄さままで  
そんなことはいっ、  
フロリーに意地悪するのだから。

※ アリオンの将軍の娘 ※

## フロリー・アングラット

レオが身を寄せる辺境太守の娘。  
幼少時よりレオのことを兄同然に慕っている。



※ 荒ぶる僧兵 ※

カミュ

「十字教」の敬虔な  
信者にして槍の名手。

悪を滅する神の聖戦であるぞ。

ただ一撃でいい。  
敵が寺院に刃を向けたことを  
後悔させるくらいの一撃を与えられれば。

今日、食べるものを  
食えりゃそれでいい。それだけだ。

※ 僻地からきた傭兵 ※

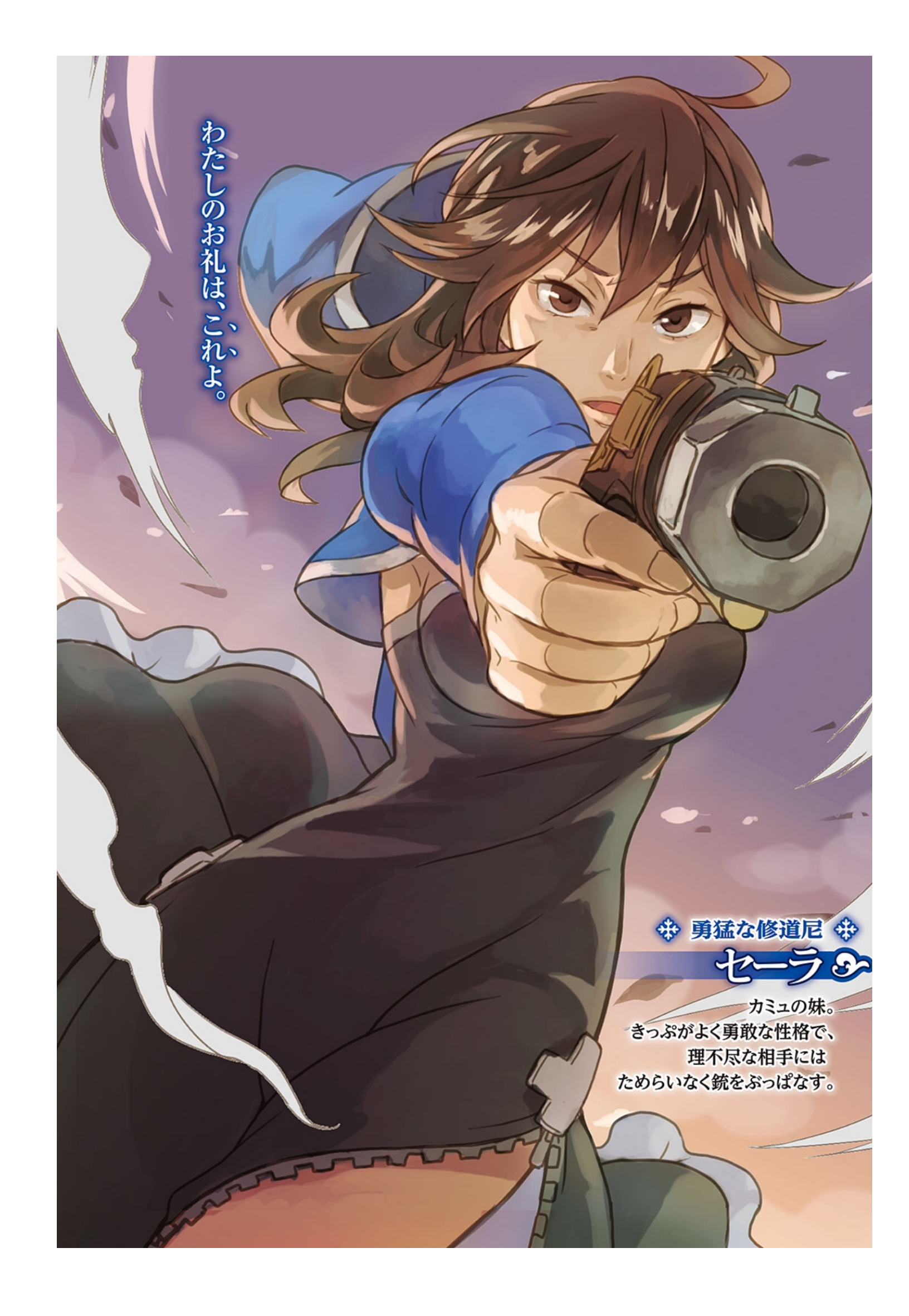
クオン

剣の腕にも隠密行動にも長けた若者。

※ アトールからの援軍 ※

パーシー・リイガン

功名心あふれるアトール名門貴族の次男。

A character with brown hair and a blue hood is aiming a handgun. The character is wearing a dark green or black jacket. The background is a mix of purple and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. There are some white, smoke-like or energy-like effects around the character.

わたしのお礼は、これよ。

✦ 勇猛な修道尼 ✦

セーラ

カミュの妹。  
きっぷがよく勇敢な性格で、  
理不尽な相手には  
ためらいなく銃をぶっぱなす。



なにを怒ることがある？  
これまでの六年、貴公は虜囚の辱めに  
耐えてこられたのだろう。

＊ アリオン王の血族 ＊

ヘイデン・スウィフト ♪

コンスコン寺院攻略の指揮官。  
なにごとにも満たされない日々を  
過ごしていたが……。

アリオン王国とアトール公国の  
国境地帯にあるコンスコン寺院。  
寺院といいながら、その実態は  
多くの僧兵を抱える中立の城塞都市である。  
そのコンスコン寺院と大国アリオンの関係が悪化。  
来る戦を前に、寺院には各地より  
傭兵や援兵、義勇兵が集結する。  
一見、地方の小競り合いと思われたこの紛争より、  
レオ・アツテイルの運命は動きはじめる――

デザイン ＊ ビイ・ピイ







# Preface

– Without the slightest trace of hesitation, the man began to talk in the presence of the emperor and empress.

Nowadays, we have no way of knowing what Leo Attiel looked like.

He did not like to have his portrait drawn. He forbade the commoners from making sketches of him and displaying them from the edges of the houses' eaves, and the only exception he made was when he allowed the sculptor Idias to create a bust of him to mark the joyous "Day of Red Usurpation".

For a while, Leo's complete bust proudly adorned a gallery within Atall's palace, but today, that bust is displayed in another castle, as a trophy of war, and is widely known to be missing its head. No one knows if it got swept up in the chaos of war, if someone deliberately destroyed it, or if, perhaps, one of Leo's few loyal retainers carried it away to prevent it from passing into enemy hands.

Well then, as Your Imperial Majesty knows, the man who was born the second son to the ruler of the Principality of Atall has many nicknames. "The Usurper", "the Venomous Serpent", "the Enemy of God", and the one which has spread the widest throughout the world... Indeed –

"The Headhunting Prince".

He is, of course, of ill-repute. There were a very great many who feared Leo Attiel. It is said that not only his opponents, but also the allies who fought beside him, the retainers, and even his own blood-related kin dreaded him above any other.

It is truly ironic that this "Headhunting Prince" should be missing his own head. Amused by this irony, in some areas, there are people who call him by a

new nickname –

“The Headless Prince.”

Well then, Your Majesty...

I am truly blessed to have been granted the opportunity to tell Your Majesty the tales of Leo Attiel.

I have long felt that there were a great many deficiencies in what is now known of his story. History is, after all, told by the victors, and the many who were buried in defeat cannot demand a fair evaluation.

I wish to spin here a new tale of Leo Attiel. Although having said that, I will not be overturning all evaluations of him and claiming that Leo was a saint.

It is a fact that he was an “Usurper”, and everyone recognises that his historically real actions make it fitting to call him a “Venomous Serpent” and an “Enemy of God”. As for the “Headhunting Prince”, it is best not to speak of it.

Yet while I acknowledge that, I will assert this: Leo Attiel was undoubtedly a hero. A hero without precedent, be it now or in the past, in the east or in the west.

Ladies and gentlemen gathered in this hall, laugh now if you will.

I have acquired many documents and new testimonies, and many of those records come from the families of Claude Anglatt and Percy Leegan, who are today counted among Allion’s heroes.

Hearing that, has your interest not been piqued, if only a little?

At the very least, he was not the one who brought the fires of war to Atall...

And so, I say once again that Leo Attiel was a hero.

The tale which I am about to tell is a truer biography of Leo Attiel than those that are currently known, and it will be told from a less biased point of view.

Our story first begins in the Kingdom of Allion, in a region near the eastern border...

# Chapter 1: Prince Leo

## Part 1

Leo was lying spread-eagled in the grass.

The sky was a light purple. First one, then two stars started to twinkle.

*Will I die? he thought. Am I going to die?*

The sun would soon have set. He had heard that at this time of year, nights were unbelievably cold in the mountains. Leo had not yet experienced winter in these lands.

It had all started with the two brothers, Walter and Jack.

“We’re going out hunting,” Walter had suddenly woken him up early that morning.

“Hurry up and get ready. Everything you guys from Atall do is so slow,” Jack’s shrill voice came next.

Without understanding what was going on, he was made to get dressed, and a bow and arrows were shoved into his hands.

“The wild animals in Allion are way faster than someone like you, and they have keen noses. If you dress up too heavily, they’ll catch the scent.”

With that for an explanation, he was taken outside in thin clothing. Given that the brothers were properly equipped against the cold, it was obvious that this was what they had been aiming for from the start.

Each astride a horse, the three of them had galloped north of the Anglatt family’s manor.

“Listen,” on the way, Walter had sternly lectured him, “I don’t know what it’s like in your country, Atall, but in the Kingdom of Allion, a weakling who can’t bring down a deer can’t inherit his House, and wouldn’t even be recognised as a man in the first place.”

“And, of course, you can’t use a gun. You have to do it with a bow, like a man,” Jack, the younger brother, had followed up. “So in other words, here in Allion, you’re just someone who isn’t even a man yet. You’re already eleven, right? Go on and prove that you’ve inherited that noble blood. I’ll especially let you use this bow. This was specially made for when I killed a boar when I was two years younger than you...”

Leo realised they were lying. It didn’t seem like a very Allion-like custom. Besides, although the two of them were always taking every opportunity to boast about “here in Allion”, they weren’t part of Allion’s royalty or nobility. Leo Attiel, on the other hand, was incontrovertibly the son of the current ruler of the Principality of Atall. But when he had pointed that out –

“Oh, is that right? Is that riiight? Then in that case, can you show us your might, O great lord?” Walter’s lips had curled into a faint, contemptuous smile.

“Yeah, yeah,” Leo remembered how Jack had immediately chimed in.

So he had not protested. He wordlessly followed the two of them into the mountains. After following a river on horseback for an hour, they had tied the horses to trees which had lost all their leaves, and had then climbed on foot for another hour.

“Right, this is the perfect place to hunt,” when Walter came to a halt, Leo was already drenched in sweat and his breathing was ragged.

Seeing that, Jack sneered. “Men from Atall have no stamina.” However, given that he was three years older than Leo, and that Walter was more than five years older, that was not exactly a fair evaluation.

“There’s a good view from here. We’ll drive the game towards you right away, so you lie and hide in that underbrush.” “Don’t let go of the bow. Keep your breath quiet and lie still.”

“Once the prey comes, kill it in one strike. Like you're hunting the heads of

enemy soldiers.”

The two of them spoke in turns before leaving Leo behind. They were soon gone.

Leo lay hidden as he was told. He pulled the bowstring a few times. Although it was quite a bit smaller than the ones adults used to hunt and go to war with, his thin arms couldn't even draw the bow a third of the way. He was worried that he would not even be able to kill a rabbit with it.

He realised at once though that it was a needless anxiety. He didn't need to wait half an hour, or even ten minutes. Their two figures had vanished from sight, the sound of their footsteps faded, and afterwards all he could hear was the occasional sound of a branch swaying in the wind and the chirping of birds.

*Yeah, I knew it: it was a lie.*

There was absolutely no sign that the brothers were driving prey towards him. They had, from the very start, had no intention of going hunting. He was willing to bet that the horses tied fast in the woods – his own included – were already gone.

Even so, Leo continued to lie where he was for a while longer. If he hurried back to the manor, the two brothers from the Anglatt House would feign ignorance.

“Yo, you sure were slow.”

“It's fine to be engrossed in hunting, but don't get that caught up.”

While behind his back, they would be sticking their tongues out and jeering behind his back.

Therefore, Leo didn't move. It didn't need to be a wild boar or a small deer. If a bird or two could swoop down in front of him... or even just a squirrel that was late hibernating. As long as he went back carrying something, nobody was likely to openly make fun of him.

*Oh, but I need to be careful. Florrie loves those birds with the green-tipped feathers. If I come back with a dead one of those, there'll definitely be a fuss in a different sense.*

Leo pictured the sight of that girl who was a year younger than him sobbing and wailing. It was only at that point that his mouth formed into a wry smile. Determined to see things through, he once more turned his gaze forward.

In the end, however, he did not even stay at it another hour. His sweat had long since dried, and the cold wind had instead robbed his body of its heat. Leo stood up and brushed the dirt and grass from his clothes.

“Let’s head back,” he said to no one. Even though going back was entirely his own intention, perhaps he had needed to hear himself say it.

Although he knew that it was pointless, he went back to where the horses had been tied.

Or rather, he tried to go back, but was unable to do so. When they had climbed for almost an hour, they had practically walked in a straight line. He had thought that going back would be easy, but no matter how much he walked, only unfamiliar scenery surrounded him.

*Weird...*

As was to be expected, he got irritated and impatient. He started worrying that he was going down the wrong way, and decided to go back the way he had come. Then, just as he was turning around, his ankle twisted beneath him. Leo’s small body went tumbling down the hill. Stones of all sizes bit into his back and his chest, and branches slashed at his hands and feet.

When he stopped rolling, the evening light washed over his face. He had arrived in a somewhat open space. Leo didn’t move and stayed lying spread-eagled. Or rather, he no longer had the energy to move. The sky he looked up at was almost shockingly vast.

*Let’s head back* – he thought he was a complete idiot for having said that earlier.

Go back? And where on earth to? The Anglatt manor? To helplessly continue playing his part as a hostage?

Or else, would he wind his way north-east across these mountains until he was treading on the soil of his native country, Atall? At that thought, Leo’s cheeks quivered with laughter. Although, right now, he couldn’t even go back

the way he had come!

And to start with, he knew that he wouldn't be welcomed even if he did go back. He was a hostage. The proof of friendship between the two countries of Atall and Allion – it sounded nice, but basically, this was a reprimand and a punishment against Atall for having defied the powerful Allion.

It had been about two months since Leo had left his native country and set foot in the eastern part of Allion.

A general named Claude Anglatt was to take charge of him. Thanks to his achievements in the previous war, he had only just been made lord of a keep. According to rumour, he was a man who had risen from being a simple soldier, which was rare in Allion's long history.

From that day forward, the general's manor became where Leo was to stay. He would live in accordance with Allion's customs, would eat Allion's food, and would study Allion's learning. However, although it had already been two months, Leo had not yet met General Claude. Apparently, he had temporarily been posted in the royal capital, far to the west.

Jack and Walter were the general's sons. At first, they had been perplexed as to how to treat this noble who had suddenly come from a foreign country. No matter what the era or the circumstances, men were cautious towards those they did not know, exercised mutual restraint, and weighed up which attitude to take. The younger they were, the shorter that period was. The two brothers soon decided which manner to adopt.

*Even if he's a lord, the fact is that he's a hostage that a weak country presented to out powerful Allion.*

And like that, the mood coalesced into one of looking down on Leo.

Leo Attiel was eleven years old. He was too old to be cared for like a little brother, and too young to become a friend. Above all else, his attitude was not endearing. He was always plunged into his own thoughts, alone and with a sour look on his face.

Claude had one other child, the youngest, Florrie. From her, there was none of the caution and restraint between men. She simply innocently rejoiced that

“now I have one more big brother.”

In the hall where dinner was being held, she would pay no attention to her mother’s attempts to stop her, instead pulling her chair close to Leo, and badgering him for stories about the Principality of Atall.

Although he didn’t go so far as outright ignoring her, Leo adopted an uninterested attitude. No matter what he was asked, he would answer coldly with something like “Heh, how was it again? I don’t remember,” or “I’ve forgotten. I’ll try and remember next time.”

As Florrie sadly lowered her large eyes, her two brothers almost looked as though they were about to leap from their seats and throw themselves at Leo.

“Leave it at that, Florrie. The prince has only just arrived and he isn’t used to the atmosphere in Allion.”

The mother to Florrie and the boys, Claude’s wife Ellen, held the brothers back at times like these, but when she was not around, such as during his studies or martial training, Leo was made a target of. Near the eastern border was Conscon Temple, and Claude had invited one of the monks to educate his sons, but when Leo failed to answer the monk’s questions, they openly scorned him.

“The barbarians from Atall don’t know a thing.”

During sword practice and barehanded training, he was always hit so brutally that if the instructor didn’t intervene to stop them, he would have been left not just with bruises but probably with broken bones.

On the whole, and right from the start, Leo had not been concentrating on the lessons in Allion’s learning or military arts. He simply needed to live a long life. The value of a hostage lay in their continued existence, and currently had no other worth except as a hostage...

*I...*

Who would welcome him back if he stepped into his native land, which was so far away from where he was in Allion? Not the soldiers who had been wounded in the war, not the people, not the members of the ruling princely house – nobody would welcome him. Especially not his mother: her gentle

features would probably change all at once, she would look at him as though he were an enemy, and her plump lips would hurl out accusations as sharp as arrows.

“No!” In the same way as back then. “He’s only an eight-year-old child. And his health is particularly fragile. If it’s to send to Allion, can’t it just be Leo?”

Still lying stretched out, Leo harshly bit his lip.



As the darkness grew deeper, the ground under his back became colder and harder. His own body temperature seemed to be slowly seeping into the soil.

*If I'm here when the sun sets...*

He would die.

Would the point when his warmth finally disappeared within the earth also be the point when a beast prowling the mountain, now almost barren of prey, would smell the scent of fresh meat and gobble him up completely? The instant he thought of that, Leo felt a strangely pleasant sensation, as though his body had shattered into tiny pieces that were swept away by the early winter winds and flung to every corner of the sky that he had been gazing up at.

He didn't have anywhere to go back to anyway, and his life didn't matter to anybody, so it was better to end things that way. He was sure that the general he still hadn't seen, and that general's children, would be thrown into a panic. Worthless though Leo's existence was, he was still supposed to be a guest who had been left in their care by a foreign country. Having struggled to become a general, he would end up in a wretched state. He would be made to take responsibility, and his land and castle would probably be taken from him. Leo smiled. His features were naturally delicate and when he smiled innocently, he looked like a girl.

*And in Atall...* Just as he was about to imagine what would happen there, his hard-earned and happy delusions were shattered by the echo of horses' hooves.

He wondered if Walter and Jack had returned for him, but there was the sound of metal clanging. A sword at the waist. Leo didn't need to see them to guess that whoever it was, they were wearing armour. Probably a soldier serving General Claude. They had come searching for him because he hadn't been back in so long. The horse gave a light snort and came to a stop. Leo's eyes turned towards its direction for the first time.

He was immediately startled. An unfamiliar man was staring down at him from horseback. Just as Leo had guessed, he was wearing light armour and a sword. His build was sturdy and large, and his skin was tanned from the sun, giving an impression of weather-beaten leather. His bushy beard probably

hadn't seen a razor in a long time, and above it, his large eyes were glaring.

## Part 2

Rather than a soldier, this was a bandit.

*No way*, Leo thought for an instant. This territory had only just been torn away by Allion and because of that, immediately after being awarded the entire region, General Claude had been busy running around to subjugate it. This land lay deep within the mountains, so there were plenty of bandits and thieves, but Claude had fed them the taste of sword and bullet until they could taste no more. Leo had heard any number of those tales of bravery in the Anglatt house.

Meeting a bandit here in the area of the Anglatt stronghold shouldn't be... he gazed as though mesmerised at the man on horseback.

"Is your tongue not working, boy?" the man suddenly hurled at him. "I'm looking for someone. A noble lord by the name of Leo Attiel. I've been left with the important task of immediately bringing him back to the Anglatt manor, so do you happen to know anything about him, boy?"

"M-Me. I'm Leo Attiel," Leo answered him. Although he could have pretended not to know, he was overwhelmed by the wild energy flowing from the man. Whereupon –

"Oh, that right? I've been rude. I'm here now, so there's nothing to worry about. Come on," the man beamed with joy as he jumped down from his horse. His bandit-like features were completely transformed by his friendly smile.

Caught up in it, Leo got up and, with the man's help, scrambled into the saddle. The man himself once more got his feet in the stirrups, and Leo ended up clinging to him by the waist.

"Well then, off we go."

It was hard to believe from his appearance, but he really was a soldier in the employ of the Anglatt House. He seemed to be familiar with their surroundings,

and handled the reins to guide his horse without any hesitation.

They continued in silence for a while. It was only when they could hear the murmur of the river that the man unexpectedly started speaking.

“You’ve got guts. The locals would find it unbelievable for a child to go to spend a night alone in the mountains at this time of year.”

“It’s not like I wanted to do it.”

“Oh? But when I found you, you seemed relatively calm.”

“I figured that instead of wandering about without knowing where I was going, there was a better chance of people coming to rescue me without getting lost if I didn’t move.”

“I see. Just what you’d expect from a son of Atall’s ruling family. ...Is what I wish I could say, but the way I see it, it was a little different. You were looking up at the sky, smiling like a monk who had finally reached their holy land after a journey of martyrdom. Were you intending to die?”

Leo kept silent. After a while, the bandit-like man changed his question.

“For me, no matter how old I get or how many battlefields I’ve been on, death is just scary. How about you, aren’t you afraid to die?”

“I’m not afraid.”

Their surroundings had gotten darker. Because of the trees crowded around them, the evening light could not filter through. To their right, the sound of the river was growing louder.

The man gave a small snort.

“Those words would be heartening on a battlefield, but here, you’re in the middle of the mountains of a foreign country. If a prince of Atall gets eaten by a wild beast after being left to freeze to death, a great many people will grieve.”

“Who’d grieve if I died,” atop the horse, Leo let out a small chuckle. “I have an older brother. And... a younger brother.”

When he said “younger brother”, Leo stopped smiling for a moment, but he quickly gave another chortle. “So neither my parents nor the people who want

the princely house to continue would be sad if it's just me who dies. Even my family name, Attiel, is meaningless to me. The same way that if I die as a person, it would be meaningless to other people."

At that moment, the horse stood bolt upright. The man had suddenly pulled the reins in tight. Since he had also wrenched his waist aside, Leo's hands instantly fell away from it, and he fell from the horse's back. He couldn't even speak from the pain. He wondered if bandits really had appeared this time and the man was getting ready to fight them, but –

"Then die."

While Leo was groaning, the man took aim at him.

"I pushed my way into the mountain to come help a young lord of the Attiel House. It wasn't for some boy without a family name who would even throw away his own life. Who'd go risking their lives for a boy like that? If you want to die, then just go wherever and die."

"What did you say?"

It was as though fire had come crashing onto Leo's head. He might be a hostage, but there was no reason for him to be treated that way. He forgot the pain in his back and glared at the man with eyes that were slightly misty with tears. Just then, the man kicked his horse's flank and took off at a gallop.

"W-Wait."

Leo ran after the horse's vanishing rump. The heat that was like a fire in his head continued to produce, one after another, emotions so violent that he himself couldn't understand them.

"Die, you say? I'm a prince of Atall. I don't remember having to take orders from you. Get back here!"

"You're the one who said that names don't have any meaning. And same for me, I'm not in a position where I need to take orders from a corpse who threw away his own life."

Leo chased after him, repeatedly telling him to wait. Occasionally, the man would stop his horse.

“And why are you chasing after me? Are you planning on cutting down the insolent?” or “Hey-ho, a corpse is opening its mouth wide and running after me,” he would say, laughing all the while.

Each time, Leo’s face flushed bright red as, struggling and gasping for breath, he sped up and tried to reach the horse’s backside.

“Oh?” the man laughed as he once again halted his horse. “Best not to move. Those bushes to the left just rustled. A bloodthirsty beast with gleaming claws and fangs is aiming for you.”

With a sharp intake of breath, Leo stopped moving. Just as the man had said, the bushes to the left were making rustling noises as they shook. Although he thought that it must be the wind, he couldn’t be sure of it.

The man on horseback drew his sword.

“Nameless boy, want me to act as your backup?”

“Don’t need it,” Leo slowly moved forward while being vigilant of the what was on the left. “G-Give me your sword. I’ll get rid of it myself.”

“You’re a strange boy: didn’t you just say that your life had no value to you? Anyway, I won’t let you use my weapon. Be sure to die like a man.”

The man returned the sword to his waist and once more urged his horse into a canter. Leo was thrown into panic. He was afraid of drawing the beast’s attention by running, but it was even more terrifying to remain where he was. And so, he broke into a run. In other words, at that point, he realised something.

“Wait, waitwaiiit!” he shouted.

For all that it looked like he was burning with anger as he chased after the man, the truth was that Leo was utterly terrified of finding himself alone in this darkness. He looked up at the sky in which the sun was just about to set. In the end, dreaming about dying had been no more than nonsense that he could afford to think because he had been lying comfortably somewhere safe.

Leo hurried. At some point, he had started crying. He wasn’t calling out for the man to wait anymore. He couldn’t talk as he was desperately trying to

breathe. The man's back was gradually getting further and further away. Soon, his figure, which already barely looked human, would be swallowed up by the darkness. The sound of the horse's hooves was also becoming distant. Leo put all the strength he could into his hands and feet. Right then, a line of red appeared on the other side of the darkness. Illuminated by the light, the figure of the man on horseback once more came into sight. Leo exerted the last of his strength and ran.

They were at the foot of the mountain. The man had already halted his horse, and Leo sank to his knees, looking as though he was clinging to its rump.

He realised what that burning red light was: fires lit by a group of people. Soldiers and servants employed by the Anglatt House, and also as many as a hundred people from the castle town and the surroundings who had probably all been roped in, were milling about at the foot of the mountain, with fires blazing. As soon as one of them noticed the horse, he came hurrying up to it.

"Lord Claude!"

"Whoa," the man on horseback answered their call and waved his hand.

Leo suddenly had a new reason for gasping.

"The Ataltese prince is here," the man said loudly, pointing to Leo.

The people gathered around in a rumble of voices.

"General, you have only just returned yet we've already had to bother you."

"What're you saying? We're the ones' who've troubled you. My sons seem to have gone hunting and caught prey today. How about grilling their catch on the fire and eating it with everyone? Right? Walter, Jack?"

When the man suddenly raised his voice, those gathered together by one side of a fire gave a start. Walter, who had been hidden among the people there, took a step forward.

"I-I'm sorry, Father," he said quickly, "Although we did go hunting... we couldn't catch anything."

"I heard from the servants that you went home real triumphantly considering you were empty-handed."

“No, that was... er, to save face...”

“Fine. They’ll be some suitable snack if we rummage around the castle. It would be a disgrace to the Anglatt House if there was nothing. Although, there are a lot of people here, huh...”

When the man said that, everyone burst out laughing.

Leo looked up in amazement at his smiling face. The man that he had for a time seen as a bandit had been hailed as “Lord Claude”. Needless to say, he could only be Claude Anglatt: the lord of this territory, the one Leo had been entrusted to, and, of course, Walter, Jack and Florrie’s father.

Claude jumped nimbly from his horse. He grasped Leo’s shoulder in his large hand and stooped forward towards Leo, who could not break free.

“You said that you’d thrown away your family name,” he started to whisper, while pretending to be tying his boot straps. “However you look at it, every human’s name and family name is a gift they received from others at birth. People are free to keep it or abandon it, but it’s still too soon for you. You don’t yet possess power greater than the family name ‘Attiel’.”

He continued in a rush, “Originally, I didn’t have a name. Well, no, I did have one, but nobody knew it, so it’s the same thing. So I made a name for myself and proved my own existence. Compared to that, even if you abandon the name ‘Attiel’, it’s kind of a waste to let you die in obscurity. Until you’ve amassed power equal to it, why don’t you mentally lean on it for a while?”

After said that, he immediately stood straight, turned down a subaltern who was going to take his horse by the bit, and personally walked his mount away. People promptly came up to Leo and wrapped him up in a blanket. It was so warm that he felt like crying.

Led towards it, Leo also walked towards the line of lit fires. He felt that every step took him further away from the early evening sky that he had looked up at from the grass. Further from that moment in which his body and mind had seemed to fuse. Yet it was also for that very reason that Leo Attiel now took shelter by the fire, where the wind from the plain would not chill him.

## Part 3

It was clear from the affair on the mountain that Claude Anglatt was adored by the local people. This was a territory which had only just fallen into Allion's hands, and apparently unexpectedly at that, but this land which lay deep in the mountains had originally been criss-crossed by several national borders, and bands of outlaws had frequently laid waste to its villages. No sooner had he been granted the domain than Claude personally drove the horses forward and led his soldiers to annihilate the outlaw strongholds one after another. Moreover, he had put a network of soldiers and swift horses in place in the villages, and he kept the roads in order so that if anything happened, reinforcements could immediately be dispatched from the castle. He employed scores of locals for those engineering works, and although the wages they received were not high, during the slack season for farmers, the people – and especially the inhabitants of the poorer villages that had little livestock or pastures – were glad to have the money.

Walter and Jack often told Leo tall stories about how “I also rode with Father and drove my spear bang through those bandits,” when they boasted about their father.

After the night when Claude Anglatt had found him in the mountains, Leo Attiel gradually began to change.

For a start, he threw himself into his studies. From back when he had been in Atall, he had never disliked learning. He had a brother who was two years older than him, Branton, who was known for his love of scholarship and who provided an objective for Leo. At seven, he started on the books that his brother had finished reading when he was ten. When his brother was thirteen, he presented his own original analysis on a topic found in old documents; Leo poured over them, and wrote an essay offering a different interpretation from his brother's when he was ten. He did not show it to anybody, which meant

that nobody assessed it and it was no more than for his own self-satisfaction, but he had originally had an extraordinary passion for learning.

He regained it. During class, he spoke up more actively than anyone, he gave more accurate answers than anyone, and when the monk set an assignment, he wrote essays with opinions that no one else would have come up with.

The monk in charge of their education was deeply impressed, and even went so far as to compliment him by saying that “You could already be recommended to Allion’s university right now.”

Walter and Jack did not find this amusing. After the events on the mountain, the brothers had been quiet for a while, but once Leo started standing out, their antagonism flared up once more with the desire to bring him down a peg or two. However, their father, Claude, was often in the fief lately, so they could not openly torment Leo.

Thus it was only during combat training that they could show off their strength. There, the brothers struck Leo even more violently than before. Studies were one thing, but he could not overturn the difference in physical strength and physique simply by becoming a bit more motivated.

Moreover, from back when he had been in Atall, Leo had been poor at martial arts as a whole. He had a slender build, and not much strength. Let alone his older brother, this was the one thing he could not compete in even with boys of his own age. At eleven years old, he himself realised that *I’m not cut out for this*.

Naturally, Walter and Jack could no longer thoughtlessly designate him as a sparring partner. Allion had a unique form of wrestling called kabat. Opponents stripped naked to the waist and grappled with each other in a circular ring. Victory was obtained by pushing the opponent out of the ring, or by toppling him backwards to the ground. You could jab or kick anywhere beneath the neck except for the crotch. It was a popular competition in Allion, that was both held in large-scale tournaments and often used for hand-to-hand training.

Walter, who was proud of his own strength, easily hurled Leo away. Compared to his brother, Jack gave a somewhat weaker impression, and when the instructor wasn’t looking, he would hit Leo in the face with his shoulder or elbow.

However –

Leo started to take martial arts seriously. He didn't give up from the start just because he couldn't win. Even when he was thrown to the side, even when his mouth and nose were filled with blood, he stood back up, kicking himself off the ground.

His energy sometimes created a chance at victory. At the very least, compared to when he had given up right away, he had a better chance of winning. At most, he would come out triumphant in one out of every ten challenges, but as it continued on, the Anglatt brothers could no longer comfortably designate Leo to spar with. Previously, they had easily dealt with him, and had treated him as being beneath contempt, so losing even once in ten thousand times would be embarrassing.

They became afraid that they might even lose in public, and so in the end –

“I don't want Leo.”

“He's violent at kabat.”

– They complained with sullen expressions.

Thus, Leo continued to work hard at his studies and at combat, but even though it was true that he had acquired an awareness as a prince of the Principality of Atall, it was not in order to one day get revenge that he was absorbing Allion's civilian and military knowledge.

In fact, it was the opposite.

“Lean mentally on your family name, ‘Attiel’.” The words that Claude had thrown at him that night had left Leo astounded.

They also implied that there was a possibility for him to live as someone other than an Attiel. Not being an Attiel meant that on that night when he had been thrown into the mountains, he would not have been met by crowds of people and lit fires, and he would not have been wrapped up in a blanket. He would have had no choice but to obtain the fires and the blanket for himself.

Leo was fully aware that was currently impossible for him. In other words –

*When I lose my family name, I'll die.*

It was an absolutely terrifying thought but, at the same time, it was also a thought that Leo found extremely pleasant. He only had to decide to throw his life to the four winds, and then, at any time, he could cast himself into the vast horizon. Whenever he thought of it, Leo Attiel felt moved to tears. It was the same as when he had first become aware of 'death'.

And so, Leo worked hard at his daily training. He was all but in a trance. When he thought about a life other than as an Attiel, he got caught up in dreams. When he was studying, he imagined a future surrounded by countless books and fellow scholars; when he was training, he imagined himself as a soldier, armed with a single spear, standing on the battle front.

However... almost without fail, in those times, a feeling appeared in a specific part of his chest to block his happy daydreams. Those feelings, that were like a stagnant black *sludge*, were directly related to what had happened just before he had left the Principality of Atall. The warm blood that flowed throughout his body all at once ran so cold that it almost felt like it had coagulated. Leo consciously expelled those feelings from him. That was something which required more hardship and effort than forging his physique or than chasing tiny letters across a page – in other words, it was something that needed its own form of training.

There is no field in which daily practice would fail to produce its effect. Little by little, Leo grew better at driving out that *sludge*. He was able to put more effort into studying and military training. Still, the stagnant *sludge* did not completely disappear. He was aware of it, and it felt as though, with time, those feelings that had forcefully been torn from him acquired their own face and their own limbs, taking the shape of another Leo Attiel who stared at him intently from afar with emotionless eyes.

*I know*, it whispered soundlessly to him, *I know, I know it well, Leo Attiel. I know you...*

## Part 4

Time passed.

Leo turned seventeen years old. It had been six whole years since he had been sent over as a hostage from the Principality of Atall. Ataltese messengers would occasionally come to visit to check on him, but no permission to return to his home country was ever issued.

These past few years, Allion had rapidly expanded its territory through force of arms. The conflict which had resulted in Leo becoming a hostage was rooted in the ambition for supremacy that the current king of Allion had suddenly started displaying. This, however, also caused rebellions to frequently break out within his domains. Even though troops were sent out at once to put out the fire, what remained of it immediately scattered as small, smouldering embers that were still connected to each other.

Allion needed to be cautious, so that even when he received news around the time of the New Year's celebrations that his father, the sovereign-prince, was ill and had taken to bed, and although Atall was only a small power, Leo was not allowed to return home even for a short while.

Moreover, at that point in time, new embers were being lit, and they were not unconnected to Leo.

The monk from Conscon Temple who had long been in charge of educating the sons of the Anglatt House suddenly stopped coming to the manor.

Leo heard from people swapping rumours that relations between Allion and the temple had apparently turned sour. Yet he never once imagined that this would bring about a huge transformation in his own fate.

The Anglatt brothers had been restless since the previous evening. A 'ship'

was coming from the capital, and they intended to go see it.

Walter, the older brother, was coming up to twenty-two, and Jack, the younger, to twenty. Appearance-wise, they looked remarkably mature, but personality-wise, they had not lost their childishness.

The next day,

“My brothers apparently went to the waterfall before the sun had even risen,” Florrie, looking exasperated, informed Leo. “They said that since crowds of people were going to go have a look, they would go early to reserve a good spot. Don’t you think they’ve been a bit too unruly since Master stopped coming?”

Despite what she said, Florrie also seemed to be excited and, after breakfast –

“Leo, shall we go together?” she invited him to go see the ‘ship’.

A few days earlier, an envoy from Atall had arrived with books for Leo, so he had wanted to read them all in one go, but seeing Florrie look so lively, he couldn’t turn her down.

Ten days earlier, Florrie’s beloved horse had broken its leg and had to be put down. Florrie herself was not in the habit of going horseback riding, but she had always loved looking after animals, and she had, in particular, taken care of that mare, that she named “Princess”, since it was born. Florrie hadn’t shed a single tear in front of others. But every morning, when they met, her big eyes were red and swollen. Leo had seen how, in spite of her tell-tale eyes, she had smiled and pretended to be cheerful in front of her family. If it could help lift her spirits even a little, then he would go with her.

“Leo, look! There’re so many people!”

Just as Florrie had said, there were crowds of people on the hill from which you could see the front of the waterfall. Those gathered there were probably not only from the castle town but also from the nearby villages.

The River Bahré, which had once acted as the national border, coursed vigorously downwards and formed a small lake there. With the added sound from the waterfall, the area was already filled with noise. The Anglatt brothers were probably also somewhere in the crowd.

Leo and Florrie stood together some distance away from the end of the line of people.

An improvised pier could be seen on the lake. Amidst the throng of sightseers milling around, it was the only place which was left clear. On the other hand, soldiers armed with spears and guns were positioned on either side of it. The castle lord, Claude Anglatt, would personally greet the messenger who was to alight from the 'ship'.

"Look, your father's there."

"Where's that, Leo?"

Florrie stood on tiptoe and lightly jumped up and down, but it looked as though she couldn't see because there were too many people. Leo gave a small laugh.

"Want a piggyback ride?"

"Don't be silly," Florrie looked sulky.

At seventeen, Leo had grown very tall and had already overtaken Jack, the second son of the Anglatt House. However, since that was not matched by an increase in width, his lanky appearance gave an impression of frailty. He almost looked as though he might be blown away by a gust from the wind that blew from the waterfall, but as he imposed harsh daily training on himself, his legs were far steadier and sturdier than they seemed.

With that being said, from infancy onwards, he had always had delicate features that could be mistaken for a girl's, and even though he had a sword strapped at his waist for self-protection, in no way did he look like a military man.

His chestnut-coloured hair that was swaying in the wind was worn long. Apart from around Allion's capital city, neither the men in this region, nor in Atall had the custom of growing out their hair, and since it looked increasingly feminine, he had more than once wanted to cut it short.

"Oh no, it would be such a waste," Florrie stopped him every time. "Even the ladies in the capital would be jealous of such soft, fine hair. If you find it bothersome to have to take care of it every morning, then I'll do it for you."

True to her word, Florrie came to help every morning. Even if she had to drag him there before he could escape, she led her “brother” in front of the dresser and diligently combed out his hair. From time to time, when it needed it, she ran scissors through it. Occasionally also she would braid it into whatever shape her fancy dictated.

Claude Anglatt was from a line of hunters, but his wife, Ellen, came from a distinguished merchant family. She was also the only follower of Badyne within the family, so she was not pleased to see her daughter act that way.

“Florrie, an unmarried woman shouldn’t touch a man’s body anymore than necessary.”

Despite those admonishments, Florrie, who was usually extraordinarily obedient to her parents for a girl of her age, always became stubborn when it came to Leo. That morning as well, she had hastily braided Leo’s hair, which was now swaying in the wind, even though they had been running short on time before setting out.

The girl who was barely ten years old when Leo had come to Allion would now soon be sixteen. “I have a new big brother” – the child who had called him ‘brother’ ever since their first meeting, when she had welcomed him with an innocent grin, had grown up to be a girl so beautiful that whenever she went out, everyone who met her, regardless of age or gender, would unconsciously stop and smile, and think to themselves, *Ah, the young lady from the manor.*

Even now, a lot of people were sending glances her way. Even Leo, who, by nature, disliked being exposed to people’s eyes, felt somewhat proud.

“Florrie, are you cold?”

“No, I’m fine. Leo... Ah!” Florrie exclaimed suddenly and pointed to the sky.

The people gathered there all looked up in the same direction and likewise pointed while exclaiming out loud. The ‘ship’ had finally come into sight. This ‘ship’ was not sailing down the river. While everyone, Leo and Florrie included, shaded their eyes to look up, it flew down from the sky.



A dragonstone ship – commonly called an air carrier. By spewing out ether – a legacy from the Magic Dynasty – to repulse the earth’s magnetic force, the ship stayed afloat and, just as its name indicated, it flew in the sky. Since times immemorial, small, single-person airships had been used by messengers and scouts on the battlefield, but the ship which now appeared in the sky had an overall length of over twenty metres, from its curved prow to the end of its line of engines.

Air carrier engineering was said to have accomplished remarkable advances in the past few years, and every country on the continent was now building ships that were able to carry several dozen people.

Even for Leo, a prince of Atall, this was his first time seeing such a large ship, and as for the people of what was aptly known as a backwater area, this was the first time they laid eyes on any kind of air carrier. Everyone, young and old alike, greeted the ship with cheers.

This region had not long been part of Allion’s territory, so there was no landing pad for air carriers. Therefore, when Claude received notice of its arrival from the capital, he looked into using the lake on the River Bahré.

The ship’s slow descent made the spectators nervous, but it landed successfully on the water, sending up impressive sprays of water as it did so.

While cheers were raining down, a small airship appeared from inside the hold. Since it was the sort that the pilot operated while standing up, the design was very plain, with almost no cladding, and the seat was located directly above the engines. As it was a type of craft designed for when nobles had to travel short distances, this too was a novelty for the populace.

Given that the man aboard had alighted from the airship onto the pier, it seemed that this was the guest Claude had gone to meet. Even from a distance, he seemed young. Probably not yet thirty. Even so, Claude received him with great courtesy.

Apparently, he possessed a small territory close to the capital, while at the same time being a general with troops under his command. His name was Hayden Swift and he was a noble who had been chosen to act as a mediator with Conscon Temple, now that relations with them were breaking down. For

that reason, he would be staying a while at Claude's castle.

Leo narrowed his eyes to get a better look at him.

"I will be singing for him," said Florrie. It appeared that her father had asked her to entertain at the welcome reception that would be held that night.

"That's great," Leo nodded with a smile. Florrie, however, went sulky again.

"It's not great at all."

"Why not? Your singing makes people happy, Florrie. I'm sure Lord Hayden will enjoy it too."

"You're being mean to me when you say things like that, Leo," Florrie glared reproachfully at Leo. "I've heard that he's closely related to the royal family. The royal palace has tons of orchestras and singers that only perform there. Rumour has it that since our king is especially fond of music, he invited them from Allion, of course, but also from other countries. I'm going to be compared to all those famous singers, so please show some sympathy. He'll definitely snicker at me for having a weak and shabby singing voice."

Florrie was a young woman in appearance only, and when she pouted, she looked just the same as when she had been a child.

"You just need to sing as confidently as you always do. If you worry about useless things, your voice will dry up in your throat and you won't be able to show off even half of your talent," Leo said soothingly.

That evening, Leo attended the welcome dinner held for Hayden Swift alongside General Claude and his sons. Hayden himself, incidentally, did not bring a single attendant with him.

From up close, Hayden Swift seemed old.

It wasn't a question of appearance. Far from it: his looks were the sort that probably sent the court ladies at Allion's royal palace in a flutter, and he was every bit the young nobleman. The air around him, however, was dark. He spoke little, and although Claude talked about a variety of things, Hayden's attitude did not reveal any interest in any of them. He was the very definition of expressionless and impassive, and in that, he did not seem at all like a young

man, but projected instead an air of maturity.

Strangely, that caught Leo's interest. He himself could not tell if what he felt towards the man was dislike or its exact opposite, sympathy.

Claude's two sons sensed from Hayden's manner that he looked down on their upstart father, and so they seemed to have disliked him from the start. Since he was who was, however, they couldn't say anything and morosely continued eating their meal.

As Hayden drank, first one cup of wine, then a second, the sombre expression that clung to his eyes like dirt grew darker. As bad luck would have it, he began at that point to take an interest in Leo.

"Honourable prince of Atall... how long has it been since you came to Allion?"

Although startled by the attention, Leo cleared his throat and answered, "It will soon be six years."

"Six years... that's a long time," Hayden theatrically closed his eyes, as though to experience the six years that Leo had spent there. "I truly would not be able to bear it. I'm sure it would be painful."

"No... The Anglatt House has received me well. To go as far as calling it painful is..."

"For someone related, even in the furthest degree, to a royal house, being forcefully separated from their native land and family, and being treated like a prisoner... I, for one, simply could not bear it. Or rather, not me myself: my bloodline, that unbroken flow of history that courses through me, could never endure the dishonour."

"Dishonour... In terms of dishonour, I..."

"Why not go die in battle?"

Receiving that sudden strike, Leo was unable to breathe, as though he was moments away from meeting death. After a short while,

"What... What is it that you mean?"

"Atall and Shazarn had an agreement to set Allion's territory aflame. Although posterity will surely judge their actions to be those of foolish barbarians unable

to think ahead, since they *did* take action, Atall and Shazarn had both the will and the enthusiasm. So naturally, they must also have had the resolve.”

“Lord Swift,”

Claude was going to intervene between the two of them, but Hayden looked as though he did not hear what anyone else was saying. He continued to observe Leo closely. His gaze was like white flashes of lightning coming from behind rumbling, swirling black clouds.

“Take your enemy’s head, or have you own head taken... A noble should not hold a sword in hand without that resolve. And yet, as soon as they saw that the tide of war was turning against them, Atall easily sent messengers to broker peace. Their words and deeds are as insubstantial as air. That’s right, they’re as light as a whore who opens her legs for money.”

Leo furiously sprang up from his chair. His face was suffused with rage, which was rare for him. Claude’s two sons, who had simultaneously turned to look at him, drew in their breath when they saw his face.

Claude also started to get up. No matter how closely related Hayden was to the royal family, those words had crossed the line. Meanwhile, Hayden Swift, as though feasting on the boy’s rage, fixed his eyes on his face and tilted back his wine cup.



“Why are you getting angry? For the past six years, you’ve been enduring the shame of being a prisoner, haven’t you? The words I just spoke are the self-same words that everyone around you is silently thinking. You can’t tell me you hadn’t noticed.”

“I would like you to take them back,” the voice that came from him didn’t seem to Leo to have passed through his body, but rather to be reverberating from above his head.

“I refuse,” across from him, Hayden’s sneering face was as pallid as though the blood had receded from it, in sharp contrast to Leo’s face, which was flushed blood-red.

Leo started towards Hayden. He didn’t know himself what he intended to do. Or rather, in that moment, he could not grasp the true nature of his own fury.

There was of course no one who would laugh at hearing their birthplace being insulted. Yet Leo was someone who had once thought of abandoning the family name ‘Attiel’. It felt to him as though this time, everything he had secretly dreamed of without telling anyone, everything he had worked hard for, everything that had brought him comfort at that time had all been negated and denied.

*It’s hopeless, you’re an Attiel* – the stagnant black *sludge* seemed to whisper to him.

Hayden meanwhile had raised his hand halfway to his waist, and made it clear that he was ready to fight back.

Just as Claude was about to step between the two of them –

“Oh, my... What’s all this commotion about?” Florrie Anglatt, all dressed up, appeared in the hall.

Florrie apologised, saying that it had taken time for her to get ready. But there was no need to hear how her breathing was already uneven, or to see how her cheeks were coloured as red as roses, to realise that she had not readily agreed to sing before the guest. It looked as though her mother had forcefully pushed her forward the whole way until they finally came in.

Regardless, Claude Anglatt was far from blaming his daughter, and, indeed, he looked profoundly relieved as he led her to give her greetings to Hayden.

Hayden Swift politely returned it. Gone was his earlier pallid face, and the maliciousness had, for the time being, also left it. Wearing an expression as though nothing had happened, he even went so far as to say:

“Lord Leo. It seems my words were a little excessive. I am often criticised for making mistakes when I drink. It was just a boorish man’s ridiculously bad habit: won’t you laugh it off?”

Leo had no choice but to back down. He returned to his seat with a sullen expression.

Florrie looked nervous as she gave a bow. She formed a circle with the index and thumb of her right hand, and brought it to the tip of her chin. This was one of the numerous good-luck charms of the believers of Badyne and was said to be effective for taking away nervousness. Florrie’s mother had been brought up in a community which had many Badyne faithful, which was unusual in Allion’s domains. She did not force her religious precepts on her husband and children, nor, for that matter, was she a particularly fervent believer herself. However, since Florrie had been interested in these good-luck charms, the mother had taught many of them to her daughter.

The song started. It was a song of thanks dedicated to the spirits. Belief in spirits thrived in Allion, and not only among the nobles and the royal family. Even the farmers ploughing the soil, or the hunters tracking wild beasts, believed that spirits dwelt in their belongings, so even in run-down taverns on the outskirts of town, drunken, tuneless voices sang similar songs.

In short, it was an ordinary song.

After that, the dinner party peacefully came to an end, yet Claude was tearing his hair out.

*That was a strange turn of events.*

First of all, quite honestly, Florrie’s song had not been a success. In the past, when Leo had first arrived in their family, Florrie had cheerfully called out to him but, as she grew older, she had developed a shyness of strangers. When

guests came, she would often hole up in her own room and refuse to take a step out of it.

Thinking that he needed to do something to remedy this, Claude had brought his daughter out for Hayden's welcome reception but, predictably, she could not hide her nervousness. In front of her family, with her two brothers whistling and beating time with their hands, she would sing without a care. That evening, however, her naturally rich voice had been shaking, she lost her ease of modulation, and there were even a few times when she hadn't been able to make a sound.

Florrie had probably also been self-conscious about it since she left the room as soon as she had finished singing. Claude felt sorry for his daughter but, contrary to expectation, Hayden was satisfied with the performance.

Except that was not what had happened.

Apart from when he had been making snide remarks aimed at Leo, Hayden had remained impassive and unimpressed at all times. Yet when Florrie had earnestly been singing, he had gone wide-eyed, his mouth had been hanging open, and he had gazed at her with heated admiration.

In short, he had fallen in love at first sight.

Hayden was already married and his wife, who was of ancient and noble lineage, had borne him two children. Even so, the next day, when he went to see Claude alone in his chambers, he sounded him out.

"How about letting Miss Florrie receive an education at the royal capital?" he said. "Naturally, I will take responsibility for her so that her talent can blossom."

He did not ask that she be given to him as a concubine. But it was as good as. He intended to place her beside him under the pretext of letting her receive an education then, after she had acquired some polish by serving as an attendant to some influential noble lady at court, he would make her his.

Such was the strange turn of events.

In truth, this was not a bad proposal for Claude. Allion had a long history, and a man like Claude, who had risen from being a simple soldier, was naturally the target of a lot of criticism. He had now been entrusted with a castle, but this

was no more than one of the many unimportant fortresses along the border, and naturally, it was a poor territory that produced little.

Moreover, this territory was one that Allion had only just acquired, so it had been left to Claude until the situation within had settled down, but once the rebellions and banditry had been brought under control, and if the border line was fixed in position here, several fortresses would probably be combined into one large territory, and Claude would no longer be needed. It was the same for the family name 'Anglatt': when he had received the castle, the name of a famous historical figure had been handed over along with it.

In other words, Claude's position was still unstable.

Hayden Swift on the other hand was a person who was close to the centre of power. He was descended from a royal bastard, so his title of nobility and his position as a general existed largely in name only, yet even so, his ancestry was a force to be reckoned with. Claude had also heard that he was a close personal friend to the king. It would certainly be no disadvantage to an upstart like Claude to have a connection to the seat of power, and Hayden himself had hinted as much.

He had gone so far as to say: "A man of your ability, Sir Claude, should be in charge of a division of troops at the royal capital."

Claude's heart wavered. The upstart that he was had not yet given up on his childlike dream of achieving the kind of success in life that you heard of in legends. He did not plan to end up as no more than the governor of a fortress far from the centre of power.

But... Hayden...

The way he had insulted Leo, or more correctly, Atall, had left a deep impression on Claude. He had also heard several rumours about him in the royal capital. Although it was a fact that he was close to the king, and although it was said that the king was unusually fond of him, there were also plenty of unsavoury stories among those that he had heard. Claude had a commoner's love for his daughter, and his wish for her happiness outweighed his naïve dreams of success.

"As a parent, I really don't know what to do about my daughter, seeing as she

is that shy. Even though she is already sixteen, she is just no good at coping with strangers, as I am sure you realised from last night's song. Your proposal of course fills me with so much delight that I could jump with joy, but would Florrie be able to fit into life at our resplendent royal capital? That is not something that she is ready for yet," he gave a roundabout refusal.

Hayden Swift extended his stay to continue negotiating.

Even though neither Claude nor Hayden revealed a word about it, Leo and the others started to hear rumours of what was going on.

"You can't, Father."

"Of course you can't."

Walter and Jack protested vehemently. Although the two brothers sometimes made the gentle Florrie cry when they teased her, they very deeply loved their younger sister.

When Florrie herself heard about it, she flushed bright red and from then on avoided being anywhere near Hayden.

Yet Hayden was irritatingly persistent. Even though Claude did everything he could, choosing his words and attitude so as to not stir up trouble, he realised that Hayden's passion was continuing to be enflamed. And so, he lied.

"The truth is, my daughter apparently already has someone in her heart, and she cannot bear the thought of going to the capital and being separated from him."

Even so, Hayden was not going to give up so easily, but as the day of the meeting at Conscon Temple was drawing near, he was reluctantly forced to leave the castle.

On the day of his departure, Claude, his sons and Leo went to see him off. The lake on the Bahré was once again crowded with people. This time, they were there to see the ship take off.

Just as he had at the time of the banquet, Hayden Swift wore an entirely detached expression and, after having courteously given his thanks, he jauntily embarked on the air carrier.

It would be a long time, however, before Leo Attiel would forget the glance that Hayden cast towards him right at the end.

Even though he was smiling, he could not conceal the hatred smouldering in his eyes as he looked at Leo.

# Chapter 2: The Youths at Conscon Temple

## Part 1

Mount Conscon's market was bustling with energy and there were throngs of people. The children who were running around at Percy Leegan's feet had the same innocent expression that was common to children everywhere.

Yet only a small part of the market was officially in use. As evidence of that, there were practically no stalls selling food. According to what he had heard, the temple was now buying up food such as grain, vegetables, fruit and meat in bulk.

As a result, the voices of the hawkers were somewhat subdued. Yet even so, it was crowded with as many people as you would find in any large town, and that was due to the issue surrounding Conscon Temple.

Rows of buildings made of wood or stone encircled the city and, if one's eyes travelled up them, the edge of the temple came into view. A huge cross towered above the top of a slender spire.

*It's just like rumours say,* thought Percy.

The mountain was not just a temple where monks practiced ascetics, but formed an actual town. And not just any kind of town: it was a fortified citadel.

Percy included, five hundred soldiers had arrived there late the previous evening. The main temple gate was halfway up the mountain, and it was guarded by warrior monks, all of whom were armed with guns and spears.

There were also plenty of armed men to be seen in the market where Percy currently was. Setting aside from the groups of warrior monks who wore their

white clerical robes above their chainmail, these were predominantly rough-looking men in dishevelled clothing who each carried a sword at their waist. They were mercenaries temporarily hired by the temple.

Among them, there were devout believers spurred on by righteous indignation, who proclaimed that “We can’t just stand by and let our historic temple be burned to the ground!”, but they probably made up less than ten percent. Most of them were men who were fed up with a life of manual toil and who had come racing from their farming villages, or else they were penniless thieves or mountain bandits. Actually, just since the previous evening, Percy had heard plenty of them bragging about how “I was stealing over at such-and-such”, or “I laid that town to waste”, and other similar violent episodes.

Whatever their origins, it was because of mercenaries arriving in force that Mount Conscon was bustling with more energy than usual. There were people who seemed to have brought their own ale with them and who were drinking it together from early morning onwards; people supplying themselves with weapons and armour from the city blacksmiths; and in alleyways hidden from the temple’s eyes, there were shopkeepers secretly selling eggs and meat, who were busy haggling prices with customers who spoke with thick accents.

The reason the temple was buying food up in bulk was so that it could be rationed out to the mercenaries as well as to the actual inhabitants of the mountain.

From what he had heard, there were normally less than a thousand people living here. It was now so lively that it was almost impossible to believe than until just a few years ago, the place had essentially been an abandoned ruin.

Conscon Temple, which took its name from the mountain, had been founded by the religion which had always flourished in the eastern part of the continent.

The god they believed in was peculiar for not having a name that could distinguish it from other religions. However, since their temples and other buildings, as well as the clothes that their priests wore, were adorned with many symbols of a cross, their religion was commonly referred to as the “Cross Faith”.

According to what Percy’s tutor had told him when he was a child, their teachings had existed since before the immigrant ship had arrived on this

planet. It had taken root in this new land but, with the long passage of years, factions had developed within it. This would not have been a problem if the various faithful had simply cut ties with one another, but they had soon started fighting as each tried to propagate their own dogmas.

There were nevertheless many ascetics monks who were, by nature, uninterested in missionary activities or in world salvation, and who merely sought through prayer to bring their minds and bodies closer to their god. These monks disdained the secular world, and they had been the first to seclude themselves on this mountain.

Some of those who had come to train at Mount Conscon had later become famous throughout the entire continent, but that had already been some five hundred years ago. The number of monks going into seclusion on the mountain gradually diminished, and their stone-built temple, which in those days had been as sturdy as could be, had time and again been captured by the likes of bandits, or of nobles fleeing their country, until it had gradually crumbled away.

The one who had rebuilt it into its current form was Bishop Rogress, who held the highest position of power in Conscon Temple.

Percy had met him the previous evening. He was a plump man with eyes as vigilant as a fox's, and his age was somewhere above fifty. His appearance, combined with his uniquely deep voice engendered a calm atmosphere, like that of a weighty boulder. *Only this dignitary could pick a fight with Allion* – that was the kind of impression he gave.

The kingdom of Allion and the temple had once shared a good relationship. In fact, it was Allion which had generously provided the money and manpower to rebuild the temple. That had been about seven years ago. In those seven years, the mountain had once again attracted crowds of ascetic monks and had been reenergised. Accommodations were set up for the carpenters and stonemasons hired to rebuild the temple and, partly because of that, a number of people in various different occupations started to flock to the mountain. When it advertised the fact that trade there was subject neither to taxes nor to cumbersome rules, many merchants also came to open up shop, and Conscon Temple gradually grew in strength.

Then, however, relations suddenly took a turn for the worse.

The reason that was given later was that Bishop Rogress had been setting up a chapel within Allion's castle, but an incident broke out when this temple was set alight. Many of the monks who had been inside it died. The bishop had barely escaped with his life, and he immediately returned to Conscon Temple, from where he demanded that Allion extradite the criminals who had lit the fire.

Allion did not agree to this, but sent a delegation to try to repair relations. One of its members was Hayden Swift, who had stayed at General Claude's manor.

Yet the temple turned them down. Moreover, they flung curses at Allion's royal family.

"If Allion does not deliver the criminals to God's justice, then divine punishment will strike its royal family. It will be cursed for now and all eternity. Newborn children will all be plagued with illness; crops for harvest and prey for hunting will all rot and die; castles and estates will be engulfed in flames. Before long, those who wear splendid clothes and adorn themselves in silver will all be dragged to the gallows."

Allion was enraged. They considered it a declaration of war. The temple, meanwhile, did not back down, showing themselves ready to put up a fight.

The temple did not belong to any country, so it was often the target of brigands. Because of that, it had long since bought weapons – cannons and guns included – from various countries, and most of its young monks, despite being in the priesthood, were armed. When an enemy who blasphemed against God's teachings appeared, they were ever ready to repel them, not with words of prayer or curses but with steel and bullets.

Percy, however, could not help thinking that, *Allion is said to be able to mobilise ten thousand troops at all times. The difference compared to Atall is huge. It's not clear how many of those they'll use to threaten the temple, but it won't just be several dozen, or even several hundred.*

Although the temple had hurriedly recruited mercenaries, Percy had been wandering about the mountain since early that morning, and at his rough

estimate, the number of men available to fight was around seven or eight hundred. Moreover, most of them were not professional soldiers but bandits or the sons of farmers. Among them might even be men who had attacked the temple and more than once been repelled, so it was hard to say that preserving command would be easy.

Quite the opposite: if they had responded to the call for recruitment thinking that it would at least temporarily protect them from rain and hunger, wouldn't most of them run away as fast as they could once the fighting began?

Yet when he had met Bishop Rogress the previous evening, he had seemed as calm as though they were just chatting over tea. Although the difference in strength was obvious, surely, when the time came, God would sweep aside the enemies of the virtuous – the bishop could not possibly naively believe that.

*Or else... could Dytiann, in the east, be sending reinforcements?*

That thought had been on Percy's mind even before they had come rushing to the temple. The Holy Dytiann Alliance, which existed further east than Atall, was a collection of countries and states gathered under one religion. And that religion was the same one that the temple had been founded on. Currently, Dytiann was regarded as the only equal to Allion's might on the continent.

It would not be surprising if Dytiann sent reinforcements to the temple – not least as a way of restraining Allion, which appeared to be trying to extend its reach eastwards. The previous evening, Percy had obliquely probed around for information about the alliance's participation, but Bishop Rogress did not say what he had expected him to. Seperate from that, however, he had said something interesting.

"I did not curse Allion's royal family," Bishop Rogress had smiled gently. "For one who serves God, uttering curses is anathema. Besides which, God bound Allion's royal family and myself together so that this temple might be rebuilt. I feel nothing but gratitude towards the royal family, and there is no room in my heart for hatred and resentment towards them."

His slender eyes twinkled. "Rather than being about the relation between myself and the royal family, this affair will serve to reveal the wicked designs that some in Allion harbour. They will use any kind of lie and they twist the facts

so as to invade and plunder this sacred ground. Is it those repulsive sorcerers, who have made a nest for themselves at the centre of Allion's government, or is it depraved nobles or warriors who hope to taste the delicious fruits of war? Whatever the case, if I know the king of Allion, he won't squander any great amount of money or time on such a meaningless war. After sending troops once for form's sake, he is sure to immediately turn back."

*Is it really that simple? No... first of all, does Master Rogress even believe that himself?*

Percy could not read his real thoughts. Although this was a situation in which battle could break out at any moment, the bishop seemed proportionally unconcerned about his own life.

*Anyway, let's just hope that our Sovereign-Prince of Atall doesn't draw the short end of the stick,* while Percy continued to pursue his thoughts, he put the tip of his forefinger into his mouth, then brought his finger, moist with saliva, over both of his eyebrows.

"That's an unusual good-luck charm, Sir Percy," a voice suddenly called out to him from behind.

When he turned to look around, a young warrior monk was standing before him. Over his chainmail, he was wearing a white, knee-length clerical robe that was tied at his waist with a blue cloth. Although Percy realised that the man had been present last night in the room where the meeting with Rogress had taken place, that was not what surprised him.

"You remember my name?"

At the time, the leader of the five hundred soldiers, Nauma Laumarl, had been invited along with several platoon leaders, Percy included. The young warrior monk had not been present for more than a few minutes either.

"Once I meet someone, I never forget their face," far from looking proud, the warrior monk spoke as though blandly stating a fact. "It seems you have been walking around by yourself since early this morning, but have you eaten, Sir Percy?"

Smoke from breakfast fires was rising throughout the town. Mercenaries

could be seen lining up along the roadside.

“I’m sorry to treat an officer in command of a unit like an ordinary soldier, but please line up over there if you haven't yet had anything.”

“What are you saying? Honestly, there’s not much difference between a platoon leader and a rank-and-file soldier. Please don’t worry about it.”

“Is that so? Still, I feel a bit embarrassed to ask someone of noble blood to line up alongside bandits and burglars.” The young warrior monk cast an irritated gaze at the mercenaries who were talking in loud and vulgar voices.

*Somehow, he feels kind of fierce for a priest...* Percy noted inwardly.

First of all, the man's appearance was ferocious. He had thick eyebrows, sharp eyes that slanted upwards as though pulled by a thread, and cheeks that looked as if they had been hollowed out. Rather than a monk, his face was that of a young warrior burning with ambition. His physique was also impressive, and his height did not compare at all unfavourably with Percy’s, who was considered tall among those his age. The spear he carried in his hand was certainly not just for show. From the jaunty swing of his shoulder down to the way he walked, he exuded a certain air of self-confidence. Percy’s own strong point was his spearmanship, so he could tell.

It was obvious that he was valiant. So it must be irritating for him to be in a situation where they needed to invite people of doubtful origin into the temple precincts to protect it. It was easy for Percy to tell given that the warrior monk’s anger-filled gaze had, for a while now, been turned not only towards the mercenaries, but also towards Percy himself.

As mentioned previously, the one leading Percy's group was a man called Nauma Laumarl. The Laumarl House was a renowned noble family within Atall, and Nauma was the second son. When he had come here, however, he had introduced himself as “Nauma *Shalling*.”

“I was born and raised in a House directly descended from the nobility of the Magic Dynasty, one that has established a castle, albeit a modest one, far to the southeast of here. Up until now, I have simply passed my days in self-indulgence, supported by the good people who still continue to venerate the lineages of those ancient times, but on this occasion, in order to punish Allion

for its godless acts, I hastily shook the rust from my spear and armour that were lying idle in storage, hurriedly gathered my retainers, and immediately came to you,” he had claimed.

That was of course a complete lie. Percy Leegan had not revealed his family name either. Although the Leegan House was not as famous as the Laumarl family, they had supported the ruling House of Attiel for many generations. The reason they had concealed both of those family names was because they did not wish to reveal that they were ‘reinforcements from the principality of Atall’.

– When he had received the request for reinforcements from Conscon Temple, Magrid Attiel, sovereign-prince of Atall, had been tearing his hair out.

With Allion in the west and the Holy Dytiann Alliance in the east, his tiny country was only barely managing to maintain good relations with both of those huge powers. Although they had made the mistake of entering in a skirmish with Allion nearly seven years ago, the difference in power between them was just too great, so in the end, they were forced to negotiate a reconciliation by offering the second-born prince, Leo Attiel, as a hostage.

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Lending their aid to Conscon Temple against Allion would, inevitably, put an end to that reconciliation. Who knew what would befall the hostage Leo and, more importantly, the next place Allion would send troops to would be Atall. Therefore, when he received the appeal from Conscon Temple, Sovereign-prince Magrid should have turned away the messenger.

And yet, he had been “tearing his hair out”.

In plain speech, Conscon Temple was a neutral buffer zone between Allion and Atall. If Allion conquered it and established a military outpost there, for Atall, it would virtually mean having a huge blade thrust beneath their noses.

For some time now, Magrid had heard rumours that Allion was planning to

extend its power eastwards, that it was planning an “eastern expedition” so to speak. Atall was not its target; it was only a small power that they would trample through while advancing their troops to destroy Holy Dytiann. And there was someone who persuaded Magrid that Conscon Temple was the first step towards that.

“My Lord Sovereign-prince, if we overlook this, it would be the same as allowing vermin to devour our crops. In no time at all, our people, our assets, our buildings – all will be a harvest for Allion to pillage.”

The one who spoke was Oswell, a domain lord with a castle in the south of Atall.

The northern part of the principality was largely governed by Sovereign-Prince Magrid, his relatives and the retainers whose families had been loyal to his for generations. The southern half, however, was divided between the nobles who held lands there. These nobles, who were known as the ‘vassal lords’, had a somewhat complicated relationship with the ruling House of Attiel. Although theirs was a master-servant relationship, the sovereign-prince could not unilaterally issue commands to them.

Faced with this situation, Magrid had invited several vassal lords to the castle to offer their counsel, but most of them had opposed sending reinforcements.

“There is no need to even think about it,” even surrounded by scornful laughter, Oswell had stuck to his opinion. “We should send soldiers. We must hurry, and we cannot afford to lose the time spent here hesitating over this.”

“But wouldn’t that be handing Allion the perfect excuse to attack us?”

“If Allion feels like attacking us, they’ll come up with some excuse to invade us anyway. More importantly, this is Conscon Temple. Now that Shazarn was driven to the north in the last war, the temple is essentially our country’s final shield. We shouldn’t disregard its religious influence either. Even among Allion’s soldiers, there are many who belong to the Cross Faith. Because of the rumours about the royal family having been insulted, national sentiment is currently at fever pitch, but if the war drags on, more and more voices will start defending the temple. But if by then it is already a smouldering ruin, it won’t help us any. We have to lend aid to the temple to allow it to hold fast.”

Oswell seemed to be implying that the continued existence of the temple in its present form was vital to national interests – not their current interests, but those of Atall’s future. Taking into account the process by which he himself had arrived on the throne, Sovereign-prince Magrid placed his trust in Oswell’s words.

However, since they had sent a hostage to Allion, they could not allow their soldiers to fly the flag of Atall. Therefore, they informed only Bishop Rogress that Atall agreed to send reinforcements in the form of five hundred soldiers, while the official story was the earlier lie about “Nauma Shalling, who traces his lineage back to the ancient dynasty, etc.”

This young warrior monk who had called out to Percy probably knew all about it, however. Given that he had shown up at the meeting, he must be close to the bishop. And that was also why he was looking at Percy with unconcealed irritation.

*What a tedious thing to do. Or are you saying that Atall can’t be seen to uphold justice?*

His annoyance was directly connected to the misgivings that Percy had been feeling earlier about the bishop. In other words, no one could tell where this war – if it even came to war – was heading.

The young warrior monk tore his eyes away from the rowdy men.

“Please feel free to laugh at my ignorance, but I had never heard Lord Shalling’s name before. Where is his castle?”

“As his lordship said last night, it’s in a land far to the southeast.”

“Does that mean that it’s further east than Atall’s domains? Let’s see... if it’s near Dytiann, the situation would be a little complicated, but...”

He was implicitly pointing out that – *I know what that situation actually is.*

*At the same time – Does Atall intend to call it quits with a troop of just five hundred? Are there going to be reinforcements or not?*

Although aware of the implicit question, Percy avoided answering. It wasn’t so much because he had good reason not to answer, as because Percy found it

amusing how this man was desperately trying to swallow his annoyance. It was clear from his words that he was educated. And yet, perhaps because of his youth, or because of inborn temperament, it felt as though his emotions were in danger of exploding at any moment. Percy liked his fervour. He was jealous of it, considering that he himself could not work up anything but the minimal amount of enthusiasm for this fight. And because of that, he felt like winding the other up a bit.

Just then –

“Big brother, what are you standing around chatting about so early in the morning? I’m sure it’s something interesting. Won’t you let me join in?”

A woman called out to the warrior monk from behind him.

*Oh* – Percy unconsciously sighed in admiration.

That was how beautiful she was.

## Part 2

Given that she called the warrior monk her brother, she must be his little sister. Thinking about it, there was a resemblance in their facial features. The sharp sweep of her eyebrows and the upturned shape of her eyes were as similar to the monk's as though they had been carved by the same sculptor.

What differentiated her from her brother, who was still giving of a savage feeling, were her plump lips. They bulged out ever so slightly, and it gave her smiling face an indefinable charm.

Percy Leegan was dazzled for a moment. She appeared to be seventeen or eighteen years old; the same age as his fiancée back home. Between the two of them, whose figure was... Percy's youth was to blame for that fleeting but unpardonable thought.

"And this gentleman is?"

"Sir Percy. He arrived last night with Lord Shalling," the warrior monk spoke curtly. He then introduced her to Percy in the same brusque tone.

"This is my little sister, Sarah. Like me, she can be a bit clumsy, so please don't be too hard on her."

Percy and Sarah shook hands. From up close, Sarah's deep, dark gaze oscillated. The look in her eyes seemed to be appraising him, and it was a lot like the ones Percy received from the noblewomen that he met at social gatherings.

*Tall and muscular. Slightly curly light-brown hair: it suits his handsome face. Didn't they say that he performed remarkably well at the horseback joust? There were rumours at one time about his womanising, but that much can be overlooked in a young man. He's the ideal partner to drive off boredom on nights when my husband isn't around...*

Although he casually warded off the silent but bold passes that married noblewomen made at him, Percy had gone through some pretty terrible times.



He returned Sarah's gaze, looking at her just as openly as she was him. She was wearing the white robes of novices, so she must be a nun, but those clothes, which were normally supposed to be loose fitting, clung tightly to her and revealed the graceful lines of her body. It must be a sore temptation for young monks. At any rate, the novice habit that she wore was supposed to be a cage of celibacy and poverty, but instead of being locked up within, the girl's youthful figure was already bursting and overflowing from it. Feeling at risk, Percy quickly averted his gaze, and turned to question the older brother.

"You've kindly introduced me to your younger sister, but I have not yet asked you your own name."

"Ah," the young warrior monk looked slightly embarrassed. The ferocity which had filled his face vanished for a second, and a young man's honest face showed through. "I'm called Camus<sup>[1]</sup>."

Just as the monk had finished giving his name, a commotion suddenly broke out behind him. It was coming from where people had been lining up for breakfast.

"Oi, what the hell is this guy saying?"

In the group which had nothing but rough-looking men, an especially large one spoke in a voice that boomed like a gong.

"I don't get a word you're saying. How about speaking in human language."

It was clear at a glance that he was a bandit. He wore furs over his burly, muscular body, and he had a longsword and gun at his hip. Around him, men who seemed to be his companions struck suitable poses as they watched on, smirking.

Even among the other ruffians, this group seemed to be considered dangerous. Everyone else simply looked on from a distance or hastily turned away and walked off, even if they had been in the middle of lining up for the meal.

On the other side, one person was squaring off against them on his own. From where he was, Percy could only see his back, but he had a small build for a soldier, and looked completely helpless against the huge man he was

confronting. And yet –

“What I said was completely obvious. What part did you not get?”

What surprised Percy was that it wasn't just that he was small, but that it sounded from his voice like he was still a boy. The boy stretched out a swarthy arm and pointed at the men who seemed to be the giant's underlings.

“Those guys lined up three times and handed the food over to you. The rest of the bunch also took turns muscling in. Food is in limited supply. So I told you to stop. If you can't understand that much, then the beasts who can't speak in a human language would be you guys,” the boy valiantly fired back, but the men roared with laughter, their wide-open mouths revealing their filthy teeth.

The boy's speech had an atrocious accent. He placed his intonations in a way that Percy had never even heard before. At the very least, he probably wasn't from around here.

While he was being laughed at, the boy remained standing where he was, looking mostly confused. One of the men then stepped forward.

“Bumpkin brat. I bet you ran away from home after stealing from it. Anyway, when the fighting breaks out, a guy like you will be the first to die.”

He gave the boy's chest a powerful shove. As he was stumbling backwards, the man threw the bowl he was holding at the boy's face. The soup inside, with its small amount of meat and vegetables, splashed against him.

“If you want to eat, then eat,” he laughed again.

The very next moment though, the crowd's voices were ringing out in a different way.

The boy had swiftly rushed towards the man and struck his nose with the top of his head. Blood gushing from his nostrils, the man fell backwards.

“You... You brat!”

“Don't get full of yourself!”

Two others jumped at the boy. Both were far larger than he was. It looked as though it would be the end for him no matter where those fists landed, yet they did not hit him. The boy nimbly dodged them, moving left and right, and

slipping below them. With the same easy rhythm, he gave a sharp kick to one man's shin. The man collapsed with a groan. The other one tried to catch him from behind; the boy struck out behind him with the same foot that had just landed the other kick. The movement seemed almost nonchalant, but it hit the man right in the crotch.

"Wow," Percy exclaimed in unintentional admiration. Although the boy was young, he was clearly used to fighting. Percy's cause for surprise, however, was only just starting.

Finally enraged, the men swarmed him from all directions, but the boy continued dodging every one of them. Bending down as he sprinted, sometimes leaping up – one way or another, he never stopped moving. Neither did he miss the opportunity when his opponents were left floundering after they had thrown a punch or tried to ram him, and in that very same moment, with his fist, his elbow, or a kick, he would unerringly hit one of their vital spots.

*The wind... He's like wind and lightning,* Percy thought feelingly. No one could ever catch the wind. Even when a master wielded a blade, even with a spear that could drill holes through solid rock, the wind would always evade them. The boy's agile movements were exactly that. And when the moment came, he struck his opponents with the speed of lightning. However –

"He's just like a monkey."

Sarah, who was standing beside him, voiced a very different impression. And, now that she mentioned it... it was entirely accurate. Percy was about to smile in spite of himself, but just at that moment, the fight in front of them turned fiercer.

One of the men that the boy had kicked flailed back and fell against the pot of soup. The pot crashed to the ground and its contents went flying. They splashed onto the boss' face and his patience finally snapped. His face flushed bright red and twisted into an expression like a wild beast's as he drew the large sword from at his waist.

"That's it, brat. I'll slaughter you first before Allion's small fry soldiers!"

Perhaps encouraged by that, his fallen men each picked up their own scattered weapons.

*That's not...* but faster than Percy could step forward –

“Stop, enough!” Camus roared as he pushed through the crowd and dashed towards the centre of the fight. “Do not needlessly spill blood in the temple. You should direct that energy against Allion, who would set fire to these holy grounds. Now step back all of you. Step back!”

Impressive though he was, the over-excited men would not so easily back down. Since he looked as though he was going to get in their way, several among them seemed like they were going to start by dealing with him first.

“Fools!”

Camus spun the spear in his hand to bring up the tip – and jabbed the butt end into a ruffian’s stomach. He too moved with the speed of wind and lightning. His opponent collapsed without a murmur.

“Bastard!”

Another man swooped in to attack and was dealt with in the same way.

By that time, Percy had also rushing in, and he kicked back an opponent who was about to slice at the boy.

*You're helping me?* said the boy’s face as he watched was happening. It was the first time Percy saw him from close up, but just as his voice had indicated, he was young. His eyes held an expression just as sharp as Camus’s, but the expression he fleetingly showed in that instant was very young.

The boy was about to immediately kick at the ground and launch himself at another target of prey, when Percy caught him by the shoulder. Completely unprepared for that, the boy turned a startled face towards him. Percy hooked his leg around the boy’s knees and collapsed with him to the ground.

“What’re you doing!”

As the boy squirmed face downwards, Percy quickly pressed his knee against the centre of the boy’s back to stop him from moving.

Just as the ruffians, seeing their chance, started to gather around, he raised his voice to bring them under control.

“You lot cease as well!”

Camus, who had just finished toppling the other men, ran up to Percy's side and took up position as though to defend him. He once again spun his spear, and this time; it was the sharp tip that was pointed towards the men.

Either they had heard the commotion or someone had alerted them, but it was at that moment that monks from the temple came rushing up, their footsteps pounding. Even if the men were originally bandits or thieves, here and now, the temple monks were their employers. The man who seemed to be their chief gave a small click of his tongue.

"We're not going to lose work over this. We're off."

His large back heaving, he left with his men. The only ones left were Percy, Camus and the boy who was still shouting "Lemme go, lemme go!" He was the only one who was not about to stop kicking up a racket. Despite his slender frame, he was terrifically strong, and Percy, who was pressing down on him with his full body weight, felt as though he might be sent flying at any moment.

Because of how violently he was acting, the monks took out a rope and trussed him up.

Percy could somewhat sympathise and was about to tell the monks that the fight wasn't entirely his fault. Just then, laughter as clear as a bell rang out.

"Honestly, tied up like that, you really are just like a monkey," Sarah stood next to the boy who was lying prone on the ground.

For some reason or another, she started to take off one of her boots. Her appearance, as she lifted her foot and nimbly unfastened the laces, was most definitely not that of a lady. The young monks looked away from the slender white leg that was now exposed to full view.

The boy, meanwhile, was glaring at her.

"The hell, who's a monkey? Don't go making fun of a man, little girl."

"A man? Where's this man you speak of? Isn't there only a little monkey, screeching and squeaking?"

While speaking in a way that left Percy startled, Sarah went on to do something even more unthinkable. With her now naked foot, she stepped on

the boy's head. "You bitch!" as the boy growled, she trod on him once more.

"Don't talk as though you're an adult. Do you know what you just did? The meals that are distributed come from food that belonged to the people who live here. Everyone brought out their own provisions to help feed the soldiers. But you went and overturned the pot. Look at those children over there. Their stomachs are going to go empty until evening. You just go barging in without thinking ahead: how is that not exactly like a monkey?"

With her lovely face and the clerical robes she was wearing, Sarah's figure as she trampled on a ruffian's head was reminiscent of the legend of a saint who had once driven away a group of rowdy gnomes from a barn with nothing but her broom.

The boy gave a low groan but did not protest. Judging by his expression, he had only just realised that he had spilled the contents of the pot.

In the end, the boy, who was still tied up, was hauled away by the monks. Although Percy and Camus explained the circumstances, the rule about not fighting within the temple precincts had to be enforced. He was to be locked up in the temple cellars until the next morning.

"Honestly, what a needless fight," Camus sighed as he brushed clean the hem of his clerical robe.

Percy walked up to him. "Your skill with the spear is amazing. Where were you taught?"

"What are you saying," Camus modestly shook his head. "In the past, a wandering martial arts master happened to stay in the same place where I was. I learned from him as a way of passing the time. That was only for a month, and after that, I just trained by myself."

If what he said about being self-taught was true, then he must have put himself through ridiculously rigorous daily training. Moreover, from what Percy had observed, his movements were free from hesitation and belonged to someone who had actual combat experience.

"Your younger sister also seems to have quite a temperament."

"That's... well, that's how she is," his expression grim, Camus turned his face

away. The wild warrior monk seemed to have some trouble handling his little sister.

Sarah, meanwhile, had walked up to the children who had been among those watching the fight. The older ones were comforting a young child who was crying from hunger. Sarah handed each of them an empty bowl.

“Does everyone have one? Then let’s go.”

“Where to?” asked the children.

“We’re going to go around and ask everyone else to share a little bit each,” Sarah laughed.

*I see*, thought Percy. Although she was only a girl, her beauty was already like a flower in full bloom, so if she went with them to plead for food, the men in town would not be able to turn them down. Perhaps even the rough thugs would blushinglly offer the contents of their bowls.

“Where are the two of you from,” Percy asked casually.

“It doesn’t matter where we were born,” answered Camus, in a somewhat brusque tone. “This temple is where we are now studying, it’s our home, and it’s the temple the we must protect even at the cost of our own lives.”

Percy gave a nod.

“It hasn’t been seven years since the temple was rebuilt. So there wouldn’t be any monks who were born and raised here. Everyone has gathered here from different places and with their own circumstance. That rowdy boy must also have had his own reasons. And of course, Lord Shalling and the principality of Atall do to.”

Perhaps because Percy was harking back to the conversation they had been having before the boy put on that display, Camus pursed his stubborn-looking lips and stayed silent.

Percy continued,

“As far as I know, however, you can take it that the principality of Atall will not take action. Some whimsical noble rushing over here at the head of his private army... that will also only happen this once. To what extent does Bishop

Rogress have a plan for what comes next?”

“The bishop isn’t one to commit mistakes,” Camus said sullenly. “We only need to follow his instructions. If we do, the path will surely be opened before us.”

*You don’t even believe that yourself*, Percy almost blurted out, but he kept his mouth shut. Even so, Camus raised the thick eyebrows that revealed his violent temper better than anything else could, and launched into a counterattack.

“Sir Percy, although it may be rude of me to say this to someone who has taken the trouble to come running here, but I can’t rid myself of the feeling that you are looking at this from afar. After all, as far as you’re concerned, none of this has anything much to do with you. Compared to you, those who gathered here in search of a daily salary and meal are far more implicated in this fight. If you don’t have a good reason for putting your life on the line, then war is just meaningless mutual killing. You seem exactly like a sulky child who feels hard done by because you were sent here. You have my sympathy.”

*I don’t need it* – Percy stopped himself from saying while almost admiring Camus: he might be a little simplistic, but he was a good judge of people. Percy deliberately avoided thinking about how that was in line with his own bitter feelings.

## Part 3

The boy introduced himself as 'Kuon'.

It was a strange name. That the boy himself turned aside and almost spat it out was probably because he had been laughed at every time he had given it since he was here. In this area, 'kuon' was the sound used when imitating a dog's bark, and puppies especially might childishly be called "kuonkuons".

He said that he was from the mountainous region south of the Kesmai Plains.

*That place?*

Percy felt that things made sense now. He had never been there himself, but maps of the principality depicted a mountain range known as "the Fangs" beyond those plains. Because of how rugged and inaccessible they were, these mountains were cut off from the surrounding countries, and he had heard that they were inhabited by people with unique customs, commonly referred to simply as "the mountain people".

They made their living by hunting and by fishing in the bay that lay further south of the mountain range. The young men also had another task. Bandits, outlaws being chased by their countries, the occasional group belonging to fallen nobles... – exactly like Conscon Temple, there were plenty of people who tried to invade that land which lay apart from other countries. Every time, the young men would pick up their swords and guns. Because they had constructed a small harbour in the bay, they had their own independent trade routes, and so it was easy for them to obtain weapons. They were a tribe which did not accept being ruled by others: they had a strong sense of autonomy, and they would bravely oppose any group that threatened their way of life.

Kuon probably also had a history of taking arms and fighting invaders. The precision of his movements suddenly made sense if it had been honed through actual combat.

When he asked him his age, "Eighteen," was the answer he got back.

"That's a lie to make it easier to get yourself hired, isn't it?" Percy retorted as they walked alongside each other. "I'd put you at about sixteen."

Kuon didn't reply but, for a second, his eyes opened wide. *Bull's eye*, Percy decided.

It was the morning after the brawl. Percy Leegan had waited outside the temple for Kuon to be released. If he left him by himself, those bandits might aim for him. Although aware that he was meddling, Percy had paced around waiting for him since early in the morning, feeling that he was acting precious. Perhaps it was a way of refuting Camus's accusation that he looked on coldly at other people's affairs.

Kuon had appeared, escorted out by two warrior monks armed with spears. The second he had seen Percy, his eyes narrowed. He had not forgotten the previous day's grudge.

*Here I was, waiting in the same frame of mind as I would a lover, and you're being so cold...* Deciding not to say that, Percy lined himself up beside the boy and took a look at him.

His frame was small, but judging from yesterday's affair, those arms and legs concealed unexpected amounts of strength. He was still only a teenage boy. If he grew well, he would probably fill out impressively within two or three years.

Although his features still had a trace of childishness, his eyes smouldered with constant irritation and dissatisfaction. Be it Camus – the young monk that he had met the previous day – or Percy himself, there wasn't a single young man who would feel anything except displeased over the current situation, but Kuon's displeasure seemed particularly pronounced.

As they walked, Percy tossed him what he had been holding.

"Breakfast," he explained, and produced his own portion.

It was a kind of orange that grew on the mountain, commonly called 'Raya's fruit' in honour of a saint from the temple who had become famous in his own lifetime. The skin was comparatively cold and had a very sour taste, so children tended to spit it out as soon as they put it in their mouths.

They started to walk side-by-side.

“Raya’s fruit has hard skin,” Percy took out a knife and deftly peeled his orange. Just as he was about to offer to do Kuon’s too, the boy started to gnaw at the peel directly with his teeth, chomping as he rotated it.

*Cute*, thought Percy.

“What? Why are you grinning? It’s creepy,” Kuon said as he spat out the orange peel. Since earlier, he had been walking fast to try and leave Percy behind, but Percy had matched him and stuck with him.

“Heh. I was just thinking about my lover.”

“That so?”

Percy chuckled as he turned his eyes away from the boy who was glaring at him again. He understood perfectly well why he was interested in the kid.

Yesterday’s incident had surprised Percy, but at the same time, he had found it – *interesting*. At the very least, it wasn’t the sort of thing that could have happened in the normal course of Percy Leegan’s life up until then.

The Leegan family had, for generations, owned a residence in Tiwana, Atall’s capital city. Although they were a fairly prestigious family within the principality, they did not have a fixed territory. As the second son, Percy would neither inherit the residence nor become the head of the family, so instead, his father had recommended that he assist his older brother, who would one day inherit both.

“You could be a scholar. You have the eyes to bravely see to the bottom of things,” he told his son, but Percy was unable to meekly go along with it. Ever since he had been very young, he had been the sort of boy to prefer exhausting himself at martial arts rather than at studying. He could brag of being above average at the handling of sword, spear, horse and gun.

Seven years ago, he had taken part in his first military campaign. Both his body and soul had been throbbing with excitement. However, because it was his first campaign, he had been stationed on standby in the rear, and he was only entrusted with meaningless tasks such as conveying messages even further back, or scouting out areas that the enemy wasn’t anywhere near. In the end,

he had barely sniffed the air of the battlefield before Atall and Allion had reached a peace agreement.

Percy had cursed his bad luck. Thirteen was not too young to take part in his first campaign, but it was far too young to be able to take the head of an enemy general. Perhaps Atall's fighting spirit had been crushed in that war, but from then on, there had been no other opportunity to go to war. A year passed, and then another, and while his body grew sturdier, he was left with bitter feelings.

*If only I was given a place to shine, I would accomplish more for the country than anyone.*

His hazy longing for the battlefield wreaked havoc on his heart and mind. The few years of his mid-teens were a past Percy did not particularly want to look back on. He had gone to the pleasure quarters with several other youths who felt the same kind of gloominess as he did, got into fights, and paid frequent visits to the house of a prostitute who was more than twenty years older than him.

That prostitute had taught Percy a lot. People would probably have roared with laughter if they had known that she lived according to certain religious precepts. He had seen her laugh scornfully at herself for that very reason, yet among the many things that she had taught him, she had passed on a great many good-luck charms to him. Still, there was no denying that most of the things he had learned from her were related to night-time activities.

The pleasure of debauchery and the boundless self-confidence that came from wanting to believe that he was special: those two elements competed within him for three years, during his period of puberty.

It was also around about that time that he had met his now fiancée, Liana.

He had got to know her at a ball held by her father, who was one of the vassal lords. Her wisdom, her liveliness and, above all, her beauty caused mayhem among the young men of his age. As bad luck would have it, that day, Percy had gotten completely drunk. Egged on by his companions, he had written Liana a love letter as a joke. He had lined up magnificently intricate phrases, which were ostensibly quoting masterpieces from poetry of the ages, but which actually had been filled with hidden sexual metaphors. He and his companions had laughed uncontrollably as they passed it around.

He had not thought that they would actually convey the letter to her.

When he found out about it the next morning, Percy had turned pale. After thrashing the friend who had sent the letter, he had hurriedly requested to meet her. Kneeling before her, he had apologised for his rudeness. All the alcohol he had drunk the previous evening turned into a cold sweat that dissipated from his body. After this, he would have had no room to complain even if his house had disowned him. He would have brought it on himself.

“Please lift up your head,” Liana had said. “And first of all, please don’t worry. Since I’m a very lazy student, I really don’t know understand these ‘words of unparalleled vulgarity’ that you are apologising for. I was impressed by the person who had written such a difficult, fastidious and old-fashioned letter. Since I am so lacking in education, won’t you go over and explain your lines one-by-one?”

Although he couldn’t say that it had completely transformed him, that was definitely when something in him had changed.

Having reached twenty, he had managed a reconciliation with Lady Liana, with his parents – who had deplored his debauched ways –, and with his own childish inner turmoil, but the blood still boiled inside him.

Which was why he had been excited when he had received orders to “go to Conscon Temple as reinforcement”.

His position would be a platoon under the command of Lord Nauma Laumarl. In the Principality of Atall, only nobles had the right to lead troops. Percy was able to bring fifty men from the soldiers that his house had in its employ. Compared to other houses, which had hired soldiers temporarily, his men had honed their skills through training. He was certain that he would definitely be able to play an active role in the fighting.

But when he heard about things in detail, it appeared that the identity of Atall’s troops were to be concealed. He was given strict orders not to hoist the flag of the principality – naturally – but also to avoid flying any flag bearing the crest of the House of Leegan.

*Which means I won’t be able to increase either my military fame or my family honour.*

Percy's plans had fallen through. There was, of course, no splendid seeing off of the troops. The five hundred soldiers under Nauma Laumarl's command each left, concealing themselves from public view, and met up in a forest some way apart from the highway, before silently carrying on towards the temple. Most of the soldiers did not talk even when they stopped to take rest. Only their commander, Nauma, had cracked cheerful jokes.

"I wonder if we should also wear masks to hide our faces. That'll make us look much more mysterious and threatening," he had suggested to the retainers. The story about being descended from one of the noble families of the Magic Dynasty was also an idea that he had dreamed up during the march.

On top of all of that, what Percy was the most fed up with, was how Nauma Laumarl took every opportunity to summon him and give him chores to do. He would order him to gather firewood, to draw water from tiny brooks, or to do yet another head count of the soldiers.

From time immemorial, the people of Houses Laumarl and Leegan had been on bad terms. It was said that back in the days of Percy's grandfather, while heading together towards the same battlefield, they had been so zealous about tripping each other up that the sovereign-prince had eventually given them a direct reprimand.

Since they were both proud families, they had, in recent times, avoided letting things come to a head, but two years ago, at a horseback joust held in Atall's capital city, an unfortunate opportunity had arisen.

Crowds of representatives from each house, or their proxies, took part in that tournament. Percy, who had only just put the vices of his puberty behind him, had also been told to participate by his father.

He had always been confident in his own martial prowess, and he was proven right when he won in the quarterfinals against Nauma. There were many who knew about the relationship between the two families; the enthusiasm swelled to fever-pitch on the competition grounds, and that excitement had set young Percy's blood boiling.

The two armour-clad opponents drove their horses towards one another, carrying blunt spears. Contestants received a point if, after they struck them

with their spear, their opponent was either unseated from their horse or their posture was thrown too greatly off-balance. Whoever was the first to earn two points was the winner.

Percy brilliantly took the first point. If he had wanted to, he could easily have taken the second as well. However, Percy went through the motions of swinging his spear, but when Nauma flinched, he did not strike him, and instead, when they were passing by each other, he had plucked the feather attached to Nauma's helmet. He then brandished it towards the surroundings that burst into cheers and applause. What particularly appealed to them was that it could only have been done if there was a considerable difference in skill between the contestants.

Percy had absolutely not acted out of maliciousness towards Nauma or the Laumarl House. It was simply that he had wanted to respond to the excitement on the competition grounds, and that it was the perfect opportunity to dispel his own gloomy feelings. Naturally, however, the other party did not see it that way.

“That was obnoxious.”

With that declaration, Nauma had dismounted and left the competition grounds. It was not a gracious withdrawal, but Percy's attitude had not been praiseworthy either, and as a result, the verdict that was handed down was that both families were to be banned from the tournament for a year.

Since then, the relation between the two houses had grown stormy again.

For Nauma, who harboured a personal hatred towards Percy, this mission was an unexpectedly lucky opportunity. Even though his unhappiness at having to hide his family name was identical to Percy's, the main point was that the man he detested had been placed under him. The consequence of that was the above-mentioned treatment that Percy was receiving.

*If this continues throughout the war...* Percy bitterly resented the entire situation. To make matters worse, when they arrived at the temple, they found that its troops were lacking and were, to put it bluntly, a disorderly mob. Nor could they expect any further reinforcements.

*We're going to lose.*

That was his honest opinion. If Allion took up battle positions and advanced, forget a month, they wouldn't last ten days. It was true that the temple had positioned canons on the high ground and had deployed soldiers armed with guns by the main gates, so they did have something resembling a battle formation, but at the end of the day, because they had widely recruited mercenaries, there were plenty of people of dubious origin here, and among them there were probably – or rather, there were absolutely certainly – any number of spies from Allion.

Percy's cause for bitterness just kept growing deeper. Yesterday, Camus had told him that: "I feel that you are keeping your distance from other people's affairs, and that you have the attitude of a sulky child," but it was only natural that Percy's heart should be far from elated at the prospect of a basically useless battlefield, where he would have no chance of gaining fame, and where defeat was clear from the start.

*Still...*

Percy looked towards Kuon, who was eating an orange next to him. His clothes and the area around his mouth were covered in juice. Percy was seized by the impulse to personally wipe it off.

Could you call it paternal love? Smiling at his own ridiculous thoughts, he continued his conversation with Kuon.

"When did you leave the mountain?"

"Who knows."

Cold.

Considering that he didn't seem used to this area, though, Percy guessed that it couldn't even have been a month since he had left his native land.

"Why did you leave?"

"Who knows."

"Are you thinking of making your fortune with a sword?"

"Who knows," Kuon repeated again.

Percy did not give up.

“It doesn’t look like you have any weapons. Did you leave with nothing but yourself?”

“I brought a sword and a bow. But the bow got broken along the way, and the sword... I got so hungry, I sold it in a village while I was travelling.”

“You sold it? That not...” Percy shrugged, genuinely at a loss. “Stop by my unit later. I can give you a sword at least. I’ll lend you a bow, too, if you need it. And with that, you can forgive me for yesterday.”

“I really don’t get it.”

“What’s that?”

“The one who was wrong was that big guy who acting like an idiot. So why was I the only one caught like an escaped monkey... dog, and shoved into a cellar?”

Percy grinned in spite of himself. He felt like he knew why Kuon had corrected himself when he said “monkey”.

“Well, that, huh? If Camus and me hadn’t seized you back there, things would have gotten a lot worse.”

“I wouldn’t have lost.”

“That’s not what it was about.”

Percy’s smile was starting to get strained again when Kuon stopped.

Camus was in a grassy patch to the left of the mountain path that the two of them were walking along. He was swinging a spear by himself. He almost seemed to be soaring as he shifted the position of his feet, and he was repeatedly adjusting his grip and jabbing at the empty air. There was whistle of wind as he did so. He was stripped naked to the waist and sweat was flying from where his muscles were vigorously flexing and contracting. He stopped when he noticed them.

“Ah, Boy. Were you let out? That was quick. Oh, Sir Percy as well.”

“Even though I went out of my way to go and meet him, he’s been giving me nothing but indifference.”

Perhaps because of what had happened the previous day, both Percy and Camus had unbent a little. Incidentally, aside from Kuon being sixteen, Percy was twenty and Camus, according to what was said yesterday, was apparently nineteen. Probably because his eyebrows were constantly set at a stern angle, Camus tended to look five or six years older than his actual age.

Percy introduced the boy to Camus as 'Kuon'.

"Well then Kuon, you have us to thank. You came from the countryside so you probably don't know your way around at all. But if you let your instinct get you into fights, then sooner or later, some bandit or another will catch you napping and kill you. Or maybe you'll find yourself left with only the shirt on your back, and I wouldn't be surprised if two or three days after that, you didn't end up joining a band of ruffians and working as a robber yourself."

Kuon flushed red.

"Don't you call me a robber. I've already carved up any number of those bastards."

"In the case of enemies, obviously, killing them isn't a problem," said Percy. "But everyone here is, more or less, an ally. Since we're going to be facing a powerful foe, it's best not to quarrel with friends, you know?"

"As soon as he made fun of me and threw food at me, that guy became an enemy," Kuon erupted angrily. "He wouldn't have had any right to complain even if I'd killed him on the spot."

"That must be how things are done where you're from," Camus's spoke in a vaguely interested tone as he wiped away his sweat. "But when you go to a different place, the way of doing things is, naturally, also different. In your case, you probably have neither creed nor faith, so you need to learn how things are done here if you want to live long. With your way of doing things, you'll make ten new enemies in a day. In ten days, there'll be a hundred. Even you can't cut down a hundred or a thousand enemies."

"If I kill them on the day they become enemies, then there won't be a hundred after ten days."

"What's this? This guy has an answer to everything."

They traded retorts. By no means did Camus seem like a patient person, and his eyebrows were already starting to bristle. Sensing that fact, Kuon jumped backwards.

“You want to bring it on? You meddled with my fight yesterday, so that means that you’re also part of the enemies I made yesterday.”

“Aha, ha, ha, ha,” Camus bent his head backwards and laughed heartily. That was probably because Kuon’s taunts sounded completely wrong in his high-pitched voice. No doubt Camus found it cute.

Kuon, however, was sensitive to being laughed at after yesterday. His expression changed entirely and he leaped towards Camus.

“Oh!”

Camus avoided the fist at the last second, but his expression had changed. He spun the spear he was holding and aimed its handle at the bridge of Kuon’s nose. The way Kuon suddenly drew back his head and avoided it looked, just as Sarah had said, more like the movement of a wild beast than of a warrior.

“Don’t mess with me, boy. Next time, I won't miss.”

“You didn’t miss, I dodged. But same here, next time, I’ll bloody your face for you.”

“This guy’s always got more to say,” Camus, half-wrathful, half-astounded, seemed genuinely fascinated by this almost feral boy. His expression changed once more.

“You really seem like a lost cause, but it is to ignorant men like you that we need to preach God’s teachings. Kuon, would you not receive baptism and the revelation of God? Your hardened heart may find some comfort from them. Through that comfort, your heart will be nourished and, with an enriched heart and mind, you will be able to find meaning to your life. If you continue on in this situation, biting anyone around you, only the life of a stray dog awaits you.”

His appeal at least had the effect of leaving Percy flabbergasted.

“God, huh? The mountain had a mountain god,” for some reason, Kuon’s tone grew even more vicious and he shook off the hand that Camus was about to

touch his shoulder with. “Even though God uses people to carry out the punishments that he hands down, he never grants the desperate prayers that people send up.”

“It is not for God to grant prayers, Kuon. To love God is first to face oneself. Once your heart is filled with modesty, it will be emptied and, in every phenomenon that you encounter, you will be able to find God.”

On the evening of the day that strange exchange took place, another incident occurred. One that again involved Kuon, Camus and Percy.

Percy had returned to his unit for a while to check on the soldiers. Nauma, his superior officer, had been summoned to the temple. It was for a council of war, but Percy did not know what exactly they were meeting to talk about. Broadly speaking, it was Bishop Rogress who was in full command: the warrior monks were certainly full of spirit, but they were amateurs in actual military affairs.

Once Percy returned to town, he found that Kuon and Camus were still together.

*Oh? Is really is trying to make Kuon into a servant of God?*

A brand-new sword was hanging at the boy's back: Percy had given it to him, just as he had promised. Camus, a book in one hand, was about to launch into some sort of impassioned speech, whereas Kuon had was resting his chin in his hands and was staring absentmindedly at where children were playing in front of the houses.

*You can preach, but he isn't listening to a single word.*

Percy's lips formed into a smile. Still, when he was daydreaming, Kuon looked defenceless and very young. The irritation and displeasure that were constantly blazing in his gaze seemed to lose some of their intensity. Percy could remember: young people sometimes didn't know what to do with the forcefulness of their emotions, and would go as still as a cat sleeping in the sun.

Percy was about to call out to the two of them but swallowed his words before he could do so. The people walking along the street had stepped back to either side of it, making way for the band of ruffians who were swaggering

boldly down the centre. It was the same bunch that had stirred up trouble with Kuon the previous day.

*Rigaund, wasn't it?*

After what had happened yesterday, Percy had been gathering information. Their chief was called Rigaund, and he had previously been a mercenary in a different country. However, when it had come to light that he was secretly receiving funds from the enemy, he had promptly escaped over the border. There, he had joined a group of bandits and, in barely a year, he had gathered two hundred subordinates.

More than half of them, though, had originally belonged to a different band; Rigaund had killed their chief and absorbed the rest of them into his own group. The bald man who was currently sauntering at his side had once been an underling in that other gang, and it was said that he had been the one to help Rigaund. Perhaps in recognition of that service, he had been appointed as his vice-chief.

Kuon eyed them with hatred. He clearly couldn't stomach yielding the road to them.

"Humans intent on serious matters do not concern themselves with trifles," Camus grasped him by the shoulder and pulled him back.

Noticing Kuon's presence, Rigaund's lips curved into a supercilious smile.

"Oh-ho, yesterday's monkey? That was a lot of fun. Don't you want to play today?"

Kuon didn't answer. He seemed to think that the previous day's uproar might have been a bit overboard.

"Lost your nerve, I see," this time, Rigaund laughed out loud. "The beast is chained up and howling from its cage."

Just as he was about to go past Kuon, someone stepped out into the middle of the road from among the crowd of people on either side.

"Oi!" Camus raised his voice.

Since they were right in front of him, Rigaund had no choice but to stop.

“What?” yet although his expression was threatening as he asked that question, he did not appear particularly angry. Which was understandable, given that the person who had stepped out was a woman – or rather, it would be more appropriate to call her a girl.

It was Sarah, Camus’s younger sister. She was smiling, and her smile was resplendent enough to turn the darkness into light.

Rigaund responded with a vulgar smirk. “Little miss nun, why don’t you come play with us instead? You’ll have a way better time than with that ball-less brat.”

Camus’ expression started to darken. That was hardly surprising since his little sister was being treated like a prostitute. Sarah, however, continued smiling with her hands clasped behind her back.

“Isn’t there someone else you should be playing with before me?” she spoke teasingly. Who knew what she was thinking.

Rigaund was still smirking but the mouth hidden beneath his black beard soon shut when Sarah leaped towards his chest with startling agility and whispered something in his ear.

“... she’s called. You get on well with her, don’t you?”

It looked like she had given the name of someone he knew. While Rigaund remained silent, Sarah once again seemed to jump lightly, this time away from him.

“The place you’re lodging at is a convent, right? Apart from the servants, the sisters also take it in turns to go and help do the cleaning and the laundry, right?”

Rigaund looked away. The fifteen or sixteen men following behind him exchanged glances.

There was a convent a little way away from the temple grounds. Normally, it was where the nuns and novices lived, but currently, as Sarah had just said, it was being used as a lodging house for soldiers.

“Is that how you came to have an eye on her? That girl is still only a novice,

but before that, she used to be the wife of a blacksmith who lived at the foot of the mountain. She came here after losing her husband when she was young. Maybe that's why she's unusually sexy, even though she doesn't wear any makeup. It's no wonder she caught the eye of a man like you."

Kuon, Camus and Percy watched with suspicion as the conversation unfolded. Only Sarah was still smiling brightly.

"We're friends, her and me."

"Yeah? That's nice. Oi, we're leaving," Rigaund called out to his men, clearly unhappy with this conversation. Sarah, however, stood directly in his way.

"I wanted to thank you for getting along so well with her. To thank you for using the excuse that your clothes were torn, then pushing her down as soon as you got her alone."

"Shut up, nun," Rigaund finally barred his teeth. "Move it. Or do you want me to make it so that you can't stand on your legs either?"

Rigaund's men were getting noisy. It didn't look as though they were enjoying his joke. Percy watched them carefully. Rigaund had pretty much admitted that he had raped the woman. They were originally bandits, and that kind of group wasn't likely to censure him for something like that. They had come here as mercenaries, however. The fighting had not yet begun, and so they had not yet been paid. Percy noticed that a somewhat fed up expression flitted across the men's faces.

*Something similar has probably happened before. And more than once. That Rigaund's caused a mess and they've had to look for work elsewhere without getting paid,* Percy felt an instantaneous conviction.

"Oh, no. Here..."

Sarah suddenly brought forward her hands which had been clasped behind her waist. She was grasping a gun. It was small compared to the weapons that infantrymen usually carried, and was the kind of short-barrelled gun that could be used from horseback, although its accuracy was also proportionality reduced. Which was why Sarah had placed herself right in front Rigaund.

"...have my *thanks*."

“W-Wait,” fear coloured Rigaund’s expression.

Percy felt that it served him right, but he certainly did not expect her to unhesitatingly pull the trigger.

Amidst the wind that carried the colours of dusk, the gun roared. A hole opened in Rigaund’s forehead, and his huge body toppled backwards.

Amidst the wind that carried the colours of dusk, the gun roared. A hole opened in Rigaund’s forehead, and his huge body toppled backwards.

The atmosphere in the streets changed completely: noise erupted, some thought it was an enemy attack, women screamed. And among that commotion

—

“Y-You bitch!”

“Now you’ve done it!”

Two of Rigaund’s men who seemed especially hot-headed were about to lunge at Sarah with their broad blades drawn.

Faster than Sarah could react, a whirlwind blew behind her. Just before the wind could hit her in the back, it parted in two.

The right gust turned into Kuon. Unsheathing the sword at his back, he slashed straight through the arm of the man who was brandishing his blade overhead. In a gush of blood, the arm, severed at the elbow, went flying in the sky.



The second gust of wind was Camus. He jabbed the butt end of his spear at the chest of the other man who had sprung towards Sarah.

The men collapsed on either side of her. It happened so fast there was no time even to blink. For a moment, the other men stood there blankly, as though they thought they were hallucinating, and even Percy caught his breath.

*I thought Camus was good, but I didn't think he was that good. And Kuon...*

His earlier stillness, like that of a cat sleeping in the sun, had vanished who knew where, and with his naked steel blade at the ready, Kuon seemed as energised as though a fire had surged up from within him.

The flames of irritation and displeasure that had been flickering in his eyes had suddenly dissolved, and those eyes were now simply gazing at enemies. Was that what a warrior looked like? For Percy, who was dragging along his regrets over his first campaign, it was an almost divine sight.

He quickly tore his away from Kuon. This was no time to be lost in admiration: if things went on like this, allies on the same side would end up killing one another.

Looking towards them, he saw that the men were still in shock.

There it is – this time, it was Percy who stepped forward. He was headed for the men who were belatedly reaching for the weapons hanging at their waists or from their backs.

“Wait, waitwait,” just like Camus had yesterday, he shouted loudly. He spread both his hands out, indicating that he was not going to go for a weapon. “Rigaund went too far. Don't you agree, Matthew?” he called out.

Matthew was the afore-mentioned vice-chief. The bald man blinked in confusion.

“H-How do you know my name?”

“Because everyone in your group's been talking about it. Saying that Rigaund guy is too hot-blooded whereas everything seems to go a lot smoother with Matthew. You guys there think so too, no? If you fight to avenge Rigaund here and now, it won't just be us you'll be facing, but all the monks at the temple.”

Making use of his momentum, Percy talked as though his words represented the opinion of the entire temple. And in any case, both Camus and Sarah were wearing clerical robes. The men's expressions, Matthew's included, turned hesitant. Rigaund hadn't been their chief for very long, and there was basically not a single one of them who was willing to risk their life to get revenge for him. For the rest, it was a question of honour.

"Setting that aside – Matthew, if you could gather up the men and talk to them. The temple too would rather have you as their leader than a rapist like Rigaund. I and Camus here will negotiate with the top brass."

Percy didn't give the other side time to question anything. As a result, Matthew put away his weapon.

"That'd better not be a lie."

"I don't want to make enemies out of you."

Matthew walked up to the man whose right arm had been sliced through and who was faint with agony, dragged him up by the shoulders, and forced him to stand. He had set look in his eyes. He was a man who had only ever followed and obeyed others, but this was probably the decisive turning point for him. As he was leaving, he spat on Rigaund's corpse.

"The cur caused far too much trouble."

Matthew called out to the men and, one after another, they crossed the street, following after him. Only the corpse and the crowd about to break into a commotion were left. Among them –

"Sarah, what were you planning?" infuriated, Camus walked up to his sister. "Were you even thinking? What would have happened if we hadn't been there?"

"I'm sorry," even while apologising, Sarah was laughing breathlessly. "But of course I was thinking. After firing once, I was planning to run and hide behind that building, then pick off the guys who gave chase one by one."

"You wouldn't have been able to keep up that level of shooting. You'd have been caught in no time."

“I hid guns all over the place. So I *could* have kept up rapid fire.”

The argument seemed to be veering off in a somewhat strange direction. Percy watched the two siblings, his heart throbbing. He had helped to carry corpses and seriously wounded soldiers from the battlefields during his first campaign, but this was definitely his first time actually witnessing a woman shoot someone down.

And yet, what left him dumbfounded was Sarah’s smile and insouciance. Thin trails of gunpowder smoke wafted through the surrounding air, and the smell of blood started to assail his nostrils. A point in Percy’s chest burned hot. It was partly also because of having witnessed Kuon and Camus’s martial prowess right before his eyes. For a second, Percy felt dizzy from the strange sensation that all his different, jumbled-up emotions were melting into that heat and being boiled together in it.

No, it wasn’t just the feelings coursing through his blood that were cast into that heat, but all of those days that he had spent as the second son of the Leegan House. All that time during which he had been protected by stone walls, during which he had read, trained, taken part in jousting tournaments, played pranks with other youths his age, and burned with regrets that were appropriate to his age, all of those experiences, seemed about to turn into bubbles and burst.

Meanwhile, Kuon, who had been silent until he had wiped the gore from his sword and returned it to its scabbard, now started muttering just deliberately loud enough to be heard.

“Makes sense,” he carefully enunciated each word, probably conscious of how thick his accent was, “Is this what you guys mean about thinking ahead before you act? Is she acting like how things are done here, and is that god’s way of doing things? At the end of the day, it’s not a bit different from how I do things.”

Camus grimaced at the obvious sarcasm.

“My younger sister is still only partway there. Just like you, she needs to spend time from here on studying God’s teachings and...”

“Yesterday, that one who’s ‘partway there’ called me a monkey and stepped

on my face.”

Camus had nothing he could say in response to that. Percy’s instincts were telling him that for all this boy called Kuon had been brought up differently than he would have been in a town, he was no fool.

“What’s this,” Sarah’s always slightly slanted eyebrows tilted at a sharper angle than usual. “And here I was planning to thank you. Are you never happy unless you’re kicking up a fuss?”

“What your big brother said was right. If you’d been alone, you’d be dead. Tortured to death at that. If you want to live long, you need to change the way you live.”

“...”

They had only met the day before, but Percy reflected that people who were able to shut both siblings up were probably rare.

Just like yesterday, a stream of monks came running. Percy and Camus were pressed into explaining the situation to them. As though to say this had nothing to do with him, Kuon was slipping away by himself, out from the ring of people. Sarah, who should have been the main person concerned by it all, also stole quickly away from the group.

“Kuon,” she called out to him.

The boy looked back, startled. The girl dressed like a nun gave him a broad grin. “I heard your name from my big brother. Anyway, this is just to say thanks. Thank you for earlier.”

“Don’t need it. They were pissing me off too. So much, I wanted to kill the big guy myself.”

“You really seem offended,” Sarah’s smile was replaced with an irritated expression. “If you’re saying that I’m the same today as you were yesterday, then please, by all means, you should drag me down and trample all over my head and neck,” she stuck out her chest with a challenging attitude. She was probably unyielding by nature.

“I’d be stupid to do the same thing as a little girl,” was all that Kuon said

before walking away down the street and disappearing from sight.

Sarah stood standing there in silence for a moment, but, after a few seconds, a torrent of insults that were incredible coming from the servant of a god started spilling at terrific speed from her plump, shapely lips.

# Chapter 3: Raising the Curtain

## Part 1

Although the violence Rigaund had committed had come to light – the name of his victim was kept concealed as much as possible however – Sarah could not escape censure, and she was locked away in the same cellar where Kuon had been kept overnight.

Even so, it was an exception for wartime. Normally, a trial would have been held at the temple. Since Conscon did not fall under any country's jurisdiction, its laws originated from the temple. She could have been stripped of her position as a nun, but, in all honesty, the temple could not currently afford to be fussy over one criminal. In fact, since Sarah had demonstrated her skill with a gun, she actually became sought-after as a soldier.

She was probably not going to be shut away for long. During that time, the group which was now headed by Matthew remained quiet; which was partly because the monks kept a strict eye on them. Their weapons were to remain confiscated unless an emergency arose.

With that, Conscon Temple returned to calm for the time being – but just as that seemed to be the case, things suddenly started moving.

It had been three days since Sarah had been imprisoned. Early that evening, just when it would soon be time for the night watchmen to go on duty, a man came rushing up, gasping for breath. He was from a unit which had been scouting out the area around the mountain.

“Troops from Allion have been sighted!” he shouted out loud.

According to what he said, there were twenty or thirty cavalrymen, followed by about twice that many ordinary soldiers. It looked as though they were a large reconnaissance force.

The mountain erupted into action. The clang of swords and armour rang like the drums of war, with the men's deep voices acting as the chorus. Then, without waiting for instructions from the temple, the mercenaries wilfully advanced down the mountain paths. Since there was no set organisation of troops apart from the lookouts and the scouting units, those who could take action did so with enthusiasm. It wasn't that there was absolutely no chain of command, but it was a fact that it took time for the higher-ups at the temple to respond, and it was made clear that both those handing down the orders and those receiving them were novices at this.

Although Percy Leegan did worry fleetingly about that fact, his youthful blood thrilled with wild excitement. He issued commands to his own platoon and chose no more than twenty as an attack force. There was no time to pull on armour. Each soldier held a lantern aloft as they raced down, and the enemy troops were detected in a village near the foot of the mountain. In their unit, only Percy was on horseback.

“Go!”

With just one word, they plunged towards the enemy group. His heart was beating wildly, and he had the illusion that it was doing so in step with the way his entire body was jolted up and down on horseback. The instant he saw an enemy face appear in sight within the red light of the flames, Percy thrust his spear at them.

The enemy weren't wearing armour either, perhaps because they wanted to be able to move lightly while on reconnaissance. When the spearhead was swallowed away out of Percy's field of vision, he felt a heavy resistance, and, from his elbow to his shoulder, and then by way of his chest, the sound of a thud reverberated down to the pit of his stomach. That was the moment in which he took an enemy's life for the first time.

He did not shout out that he had done it, and it was only within his own heart that Percy yelled for joy.

*I won't slip up when I'm grasping a spear. I can do it. I'm strong. I can slaughter my enemies. I can survive.*

Camus and Kuon's warrior-like appearance were vividly in his mind. He felt that he hadn't lost to them.

There was no leeway afterwards to think of anything. There was nothing but blindly jabbing at the enemy and desperately parrying the swords or spears with which the enemy lunged at him. Time and again, he felt the enemy's breath on his face. He saw endless scenes of steel striking down heads or limbs. Amidst it all, he repeatedly heard something that sounded like gunshots ringing in the distance.

*Allies, probably. They can shoot at fleeing enemies, but they're holding back from firing into those fighting because of the confusion,* he thought in the one small corner of his brain that was still capable of rational thinking.

"Retreat, retreat!"

He heard from afar a voice that seemed to belong to an Allian soldier, and the rough fight came to an end.

The result of it was that Percy had killed two enemies. The first was the mounted soldier from right at the start, and the other had been a foot soldier wielding a halberd. Apart from that, he had also wounded several, but not fatally.

"You fight well."

He suddenly realised that Camus was standing by his horse, which was snorting roughly, and stroking its neck. His clerical garb and the chainmail he wore beneath it were stained red. That of victims, no doubt; the person himself was smiling and seemed entirely healthy.

"Despite how you look, your way of fighting is impressive. Your way of handling your spear and horse is still a bit rough, but with some more experience, you'll be taking plenty of enemy heads."

He spoke just like a general. His expression was filled with even more energy and self-confidence than usual, which was proof that he too had brought down several enemies. It really was a shame that he was a monk. And then there was

—

*What about Kuon?* He wondered about the boy who hid a wild pride within his heart. Turning his head this way and that from horseback, he could not catch sight of him. He was sure that Kuon must have been among the first to come rushing as soon as he heard that there were enemies.

*He can't possibly...* just as he was looking towards the figures that had fallen to the ground, Camus exclaimed, "over there!" and started to run.

It was the same direction as the one the enemy had fled in. Urging his horse forward, Percy overtook him and caught up with Kuon, who was running at terrifying speed. Sure enough, his sword was drenched in blood.

"Chasing too far is forbidden, Kuon. The enemy might have set up camp."

With Percy blocking him from horseback and Camus also having caught up and restraining him, Kuon reluctantly came to a halt. His breathing was uneven, but he did not seem particularly worn out.

"How many did you kill?"

"Three or four. And I injured a guy who looked like a commander. If I'd caught with him, I could've finished him off," Kuon looked thoroughly annoyed as he spoke. His fighting spirit was practically pouring out of his pair of shining eyes.

"There's no point if you end up having the tables turned on you. Are you injured?"

At Percy's questions, Kuon looked over his own arms and legs. His nose wrinkled up as though in dislike from the smell of blood, but his answer was a simple "no". Percy smiled, thinking that this guy was really just adorable.

"If you want to rake up achievements, why don't you fight with my unit from now on? It would be more efficient than fighting at random by yourself," he invited him.

After pondering for a moment, Kuon replied, "I'm fine wherever. As long as you don't go on about too much annoying stuff."

"It's a deal, then. Camus, how about you? I'm still new at this, so would you help me to accumulate experience?"

“It is the duty of the faithful to guide young people down the right path,” Camus spoke with solemn reverence, although he was, in fact, a year younger than Percy.

That day, in the temple that was drunk on victory, Percy announced that he had incorporated Kuon and Camus into his unit. The temple was unused to organising military formations, which also meant that it was not very strict about it. In that sense, it was very flexible.

Although Nauma Laumarl had not taken part in the fighting, he was absolutely delighted that his ‘subordinate’ had accomplished such a feat.

“At my command, they...” he commented at length to the bishops about the battlefield that he had not personally witnessed.

Of course, while it was a victory, they had done no more than repel a single enemy reconnaissance unit. Since this proved that Allion had started to take military action, the mountain, separate from its ecstatic atmosphere, was also increasingly starting to fill with nervous tension. Percy Leegan had prepared himself in body and mind for the attack that was sure to come in the near future.

And yet –

While everyone expected Allion to advance in force, from the next day onward, they chose a completely different course of action. One after another, they pillaged the villages that were dotted around the base of Mount Conscon.

From out of nowhere, armed groups suddenly appeared, laying waste to the fields and stealing the harvest and the livestock. The men who tried to oppose them were run through with spears thrust from horseback, or were pierced with arrows through the chest. When they ran out, the defenceless wives and daughters of the farmers were also snatched away.

The villagers speculated that it was the work of bandits, or perhaps of marauding soldiers.

Although these ‘marauders’ were sometimes also soldiers employed by the local domain lords, their salaries were low compared to those stationed at the castles. In compensation for that, in the border areas where it was difficult to

extend any country's authority, they were allowed to demand a toll from merchants and wayfarers, in the name of "providing a secure escort during your travels". The rulers tacitly consented to this. In practice, the merchants could indeed travel safely under their escort. Moreover, the marauders occasionally proceeded to neighbouring countries and attacked the villages there. They pillaged, set fire, murdered and kidnapped. They hid where they came from, pretending to be outlaws or armed fishermen. These raids that earned them both profit and combat training could be carried out on the orders of their ruler. The military aim behind them included such things as attacking a foreign power, provoking them or providing a distraction.

In Atall, the local domain lords frequently hired marauders to ravage other territories within their same country. Among them was a man whose infamy struck fear even in the House of the sovereign-prince, but those details can be left for later.

In this current case, there was no doubt that these were Allion's forces. Either it was their troops disguising themselves as bandits, or they were employing local marauders. Since the villages around the temple did not belong to any country, once they were attacked, the only place the villagers could escape to in search of protection was the temple. The provisions which were sent from the villages to the mountain's markets were cut off, and on top of that, the temple had to care for a great deal more people.

"Stamp out the thieves," Bishop Rogress ordered.

By then, as was to be expected, the arrangement of units had been set. Every one of them were sent out to intercept them.

Most of the marauders fled immediately when they encountered the temple's soldiers. The speed of their movements proved that they had good leadership. That made things difficult when the situation turned into a battle. While the warrior monks would protect the temple at all cost, the mish-mash groups of ruffians would, on the other hand, be the ones to first to flee if the opponents showed any resistance. And those opponents did not miss those signs of weakness.

"Now, give chase. Pursue, pursue!" They tore through those weak links and,

as a result, instead of protecting the villages, the temple suffered a number of defeats.

Percy's platoon was frequently sent out to clean up after these fights. Perhaps Nauma Laumarl found it the perfect way to get satisfaction since he touted him as 'a reliable commander', and sent him off into successive battles. Although unhappy about it, Percy could not go against orders. It was also a fact that nobody obtained better results than they did.

Day and night Percy was pressed into service and made to ride out. As soon as the marauders decided that this was a strong opponent, they would flee. They seemed to scatter in every direction, yet next time they appeared, their movements once again displayed that they had leadership. Thinking they were about to press forward, the temple's side prepared to fight back, only to have them pull back again. It was a constant repetition of wasted effort.

"Damn them," Camus ground his teeth in frustration. "They act like cowards. It should be more dignified."

*What should?* Percy wondered silently. War was not only about powerful forces mutually colliding. There were plenty of cases that started and ended with nothing but diversions. This too was war. Yet at the same time, he could not help thinking that Allion's troops were behaving strangely.

*Perhaps they don't have the manpower to encircle the area around Mount Conscon. Or else, maybe their supply train doesn't have much leeway? Both are possible,* he considered.

He remembered what Bishop Rogress had once said: that Allion was not necessarily eager to suppress the temple. Perhaps only one portion within the country was fervently in favour of doing so. In which case, they would certainly not have any large amount of troops. It was doubtful that they even amounted to a thousand.

Still, the temple was undeniably being made to endure hardship.

*If we stay on the defensive like this, the temple will continue suffer. Sooner or later, the food will run out and the mercenaries will be quick to turn traitor.*

On Bishop Rogress' orders, troops were to be stationed immediately within

the villages. Again at Nauma's command, Percy's unit was to be among them. It was the same harsh workload as ever, but, for now, Percy had no objections. It wasn't just about preventing further damage to the villages: if the villagers grew weary of the fighting and surrendered to Allion, the foot of the mountain would instantly turn into an advance base from which to capture the temple. Going directly to the villages to offer the inhabitants peace of mind was part of the soldiers' duties.

The village was surrounded by forest and numbered a few hundred households.

Percy had a watchtower built, and sent scouts out to survey the area with greater secrecy than before. Before his departure for the front, the Leegan House had provided him with war funds which he now made free use of, buying a number of horses as well as various other things he wanted, which brought profit to the village blacksmiths and harness makers.

Occasionally, he allowed the soldiers to go to the village's only tavern. Since they were forbidden from brawling with the villagers, a few people always had to remain sober. Camus was one of those who took on that responsibility. He had never had any great affinity for liquor. If some of the soldiers got too drunk and seemed about to cause trouble, his stout arms would remove them to the outside one after another.

Then there was his other boon companion, Kuon, who even when he didn't have any ale in him was always at the centre of every fight.

It was great that he had joined the unit but, at first, whenever Kuon caused a ruckus, Percy had to come rushing. The reasons for the fights were trivial. Things like: he had gotten laughed at for his name or for his accent, he had been cheated when gambling at dice, or, conversely, it could be because his careless manner of speaking earned him the antipathy of some of the younger soldiers.

"Nobody is particularly making fun of you," Camus lectured him every time, "it's just that you're unusual for them. If you leave it be, they'll soon get used to you. Unless you get upset at every little thing and swing your fists." Kuon, flushed red from belligerence, stayed silent.

“Kuon, a man of ambition doesn’t care who laughs at him. You left your home with sword in hand, so there must be something that your heart is set on. If you keep getting yourself involved in trifling quarrels, you won’t accomplish anything.”

“Ambition or not accomplishing anything has sod all to do with me,” when Kuon occasionally opened his mouth, it was only to let it pour out abuse. “If I can get something good to eat today, then it’s all good. That’s it. What’s wrong about that?”

“If you’re driven out from where you’ve finally found work, then they’ll be no question of getting something good to eat,” Percy felt a bit like laughing at himself for using that kind of persuasion.

Looking at Kuon was exactly like looking at his own past self. Without even understanding his own worth, he hated above all else to have other people look down on him. Everyone around him was laughing at the man who had not been able to do anything during his first campaign, and who practiced with the spear while boasting that he would one day achieve great things – that was how he had felt.

Looking at the boy who was so exactly like him, he felt that he had been given the role of an old man, and felt like laughing again.

Anyway, this was how, at the start, Kuon had Percy running all over the place. However, when he stood on the battlefield, Kuon changed entirely. Since the boy was usually a hothead, Percy worried about whether he would actually move according to orders, but during actual combat, he was unexpectedly obedient and went about his work quickly and efficiently.

After being on the battlefield with him, the way his surroundings looked at him started to change.

“That guy’s still only small, but his way with the sword is terrifying.”

“He’s got nerve. He runs straight towards the enemy without any fear.”

As the attitude of those around him transformed, Kuon also change somewhat.

Perhaps because he had grown up in the mountains, he had sharp night-

vision, so he often volunteered for night watch duty. Also, occasionally, he would seem to go wandering off alone all day in the mountains, but when he came back, he would be carrying huge quantities of herbs in both hands. He would then line them up on the ground and divide them up into those that could be eaten, and those that could be used as medicine. He personally mashed those latter ones and handed the medicine to the wounded soldiers.

“Oh, the boy’s changed, hasn’t he?”

The soldiers, who had long served the Leegan House, were impressed. Nowadays, they would chase away the village children who gathered around the watchtower, telling them “Kuon’s dangerous.” The children thought both his accent and his name, which sounded like a dog’s bark, were funny, so they took every chance they got to incessantly call out “Kuonkuon, Kuonkuon” to him.

“I wonder... Rather than saying he’s changed,” Percy tilted his head, “Given that he’s now on the stage of battle, there’s no need for him to go looking for fights.”

Originally, Kuon had spent each day fighting against invaders alongside his companions in the land of his birth. It was obvious that they didn’t each fight individually against the advancing enemy but that they had their own tactics and traps, and Kuon must have learned from birth about the strict rules of fighting as part of a group. Do not leave your post whatever what happens; do not so much as take a single useless breath; once the order has been given, charge at the enemy troops without hesitation...

Thinking about it, it was only natural that Kuon should prove himself to be a capable soldier. He was probably bewildered because of being in an unfamiliar culture, yet right now it wasn’t that he had “changed” but that this was how he had always been.

One evening, Percy spotted him among his men, who were in a cheerful ring around the fire. One of them, who was good at telling jokes, was telling stories about his past woes with women while everyone else roared with laughter. Kuon was also holding his sides with mirth. Percy was relieved to see his boyish side but, the next day, Kuon was polishing a sword some distance away from

everyone else, his expression sullen.

He was a difficult man to please. Or perhaps it was better to say that he was at a difficult age?

Percy felt that he would like to hear from Kuon about his time in the mountains and about his experiences when he left them. In other words, he was starting to harbour the hope that – *if he survives, maybe we could become lifelong friends.*

After taking up his station, Percy Leegan was not simply waiting for the enemy to strike.

He asked people from the village to get him maps of the surroundings. Since these, however, were made for those from the area, Percy and his men, who were strangers there, found them hard to read. Accordingly, he sent out several of his subordinates on horseback to investigate the terrain. More and more lines were added to the maps and once the features of the landscape were revealed, Percy marked with a cross the places where the marauders frequently appeared.

The enemy seemed to be appearing at random and scattering haphazardly when they fled, but in fact, their actions were orderly. Which meant that they must have built bases around the mountain where they could keep their horses, even though those bases wouldn't be anything as big as fortresses or castles. And judging by how frequently this village was being attacked, there were definitely one or two nearby.

Percy asked Camus to go around the neighbouring villages. As a monk from the temple, Camus's presence was helpful for gaining the villagers' trust and, when he made the appeal, people from all over gathered to help. Percy had them cut down trees from the nearby forest.

With the lumber, he had them build a simple watchtower in each village, as well as fences. Referencing a book he had once read, Percy drove the sharpened tips of the stakes into the ground, and fastened several of these together with ropes. He had them set up at various points to create what was essentially a horse-repelling barrier. It didn't need to be particularly high, since,

by nature, the horses would not want to cross the low fence.

Moreover, Percy had pits dug in the surroundings and had them covered with straw. He also used the soil that had been dug up to plug the gaps in the anti-horse palisades, creating a defensive wall in wattle-and-daube.

Since most of the enemy's raids occurred at night, the fences, the improvised walls and the traps should prove quite effective.

Percy naturally also mobilised his own soldiers for cutting down the trees, building the fences and walls, and digging the pits. All of them worked all day long, covered in dirt and drenched in sweat. This too was only second-hand knowledge from books, but Percy understood that in war, the great majority of time was spent in engineering works.

He had arrows made from the wood left over from constructing the fences. Women also helped out with that work, and Percy was surprised to see Sarah joining in, as bold as could be. She had been released and some point and, upon learning of her brother's whereabouts, she had gone down the mountain to them.

Predictably, she and Camus quarrelled over trifling things and – equally predictably – Sarah came out the winner. Besides that, she was a sociable creature and very soon gained the villagers' affection. For the children especially, she became a favourite playmate.

"Let's all train together so that we're ready for when the time comes!" she said, then gathered up the youngest villagers and went galloping off – and even the naughtiest children, who usually gave their parents a hard time, would join in. Sarah also took part, and the girl who ran about with her breath uneven and the hem of her clerical robes fluttering was watched by all of the villagers.

"I'm first!" she panted, as she reached the goal that she herself had decided on.

Her eyes suddenly met Kuon's, who was polishing his sword under the eaves of a house. For a moment, they were enveloped in a strange mood.

Kuon was the first to look away. "You run just like a man," his tone held neither criticism nor praise.

Facing him, Sarah looked as though she wasn't sure what to say.

"Won't you come and run too? Since you're from the mountains, you should have good legs, right? In that case, why don't we compete against each other and bet tonight's dinner?" she suggested, provokingly.

The edge of Kuon's lips curled and he stood up. His face was reflected in the surface of the sword he had just polished as he started to leave.

"What, are you running away?"

"I don't compete against women," said Kuon, and Sarah's cheeks puffed into a pout. The next moment, it turned into a smile.

"You're scared of losing. Listen up, everyone, Kuonkuon's a coward!" Sarah incited the children to make fun of him.

Kuon aspired to be a 'man', but he wasn't able to keep up the right attitude for long. A few seconds later, he was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Sarah and, once the command was given, they both started to run.

The result went without saying.

"I ran just before," Sarah scowled at Kuon, her shoulders heaving. "One more time... No, since it'd just be the same, after a break."

"You're so annoying!"

Percy pretended not to understand the plea for help that Kuon's gaze was sending his way. Just then, Sarah noticed his presence and her expression, seen from over Kuon's shoulder, changed. The childish impression vanished, and she became entirely ladylike. She was a girl whose expression was constantly changing.

A few days later, Kuon spotted enemies at around about the time when the sun was setting. Normally, he would have called out loud to alert everyone, but this time, he quickly climbed down the watchtower and went to inform Percy, just as he had been ordered to do.

Percy nodded. He had been thinking that *it will soon be time*.

Erecting a fence and digging traps had of course been done to strengthen the village's defences, but it had also been so that they could cope with an attack

with fewer soldiers than before. And as for what they would be doing with the soldiers than had been subtracted from the usual number –

“We’ll launch ourselves out from here.”

– Right, they would be used to attack.

Percy issued his commands, thirty riders following behind him. Kuon was among them; he was well used to horses. Camus and Sarah, meanwhile, were helping defend the village.

Percy and the others departed in the direction opposite from where the enemy was expected to attack, and rode out into the dusk. To assail the enemy from behind... was not the plan.

The noise from the village faded. Percy’s aim was to go closer to the root and to strike one of the enemy bases. He had surmised its location from the places and times that the enemy had appeared at up until then.

As expected, the base was on the other side of a narrow stream, hidden amongst densely-growing trees. With the mounted soldiers having gone out to attack, there were not many people there.

Percy’s heart pounded with excitement. During those seven years in Atall’s capital, there had not been a single night when he had not hoped against hope to shine on the battlefield. And the scenes he had pictured inside his head on every one of those nightmarish nights when his blood had been burning, was exactly the one that was now unfolding before his eyes.

“Now!” Percy bellowed and had the men stoke huge fires.

When the soldiers at the base noticed those flames, the first to come out to see what was happening were mowed down by twenty riders, led by Percy.

“Enemy attack, enemy attack!”

As the foot soldiers came crawling out, Percy and the others took up position to intercept them. At the same time, ten hand-picked and especially skilled men, Kuon among them, raided the simple, log-built building from the side. They took control of the base, which was now even shorter on hands than it had been earlier since the soldiers were all out.

Chasing away the soldiers, they set themselves up within the base. They waited for the unit that had gone to raid the village to return, then attacked it ferociously.

It was a one-sided slaughter.

The outcome of the battle was that Percy Leegan obtained large amounts of food, weapons – including guns – and seven prisoners of war, all without losing a single allied soldier.

## Part 2

These results earned high praise from the temple. For a while, Percy was extolled as a minor hero. And with that, Nauma Laumarl, his superior officer, once again strutted around triumphantly. He spent several busy days explaining how he himself had taught Percy tactics, and was showered with acclaim and expectations for the future.

Percy himself was also in high spirits. It felt as though the regrets over his first campaign which had accumulated in his chest for the past seven years had cleared a little. With that said, Percy Leegan's military fame would not resound far and wide from this, and nor did he believe that they would win just because of this. The seven prisoners they had taken were, after all, no more than marauding soldiers who had been hired for a pittance, and although one of the men had been acting as a liaison with another base, whose location they had gotten him to cough up, their overall situation did not improve even after they had seized that one too.

From then on, the enemy's actions changed again.

Allion's regular soldiers finally started to move. Firstly, their armaments changed: they were fully equipped and had a great number of guns. More importantly, the echo of the clattering sound of wheels indicated that they had even brought cannons.

On the temple side, they had carried in the contents from the second enemy base, and were in the process of remodelling it into one of their own fortifications, but it was recaptured before they had time to blink. They had of course guessed that the enemy would try to reclaim the base, so they had planned to strengthen its defences and to use the moment when their opponents had been lured out to deploy an attack force and to capture them in a pincer movement, but the enemy acted too quickly for them.

Before anyone knew what was going on, Allion's main forces, armed with cannons, had arrived at the foot of the mountain. Although the temple also sent out rapid waves of clean-up troops, the opponents were different from the marauders they had faced up until then. By dint of repeated three-way charges down the paths and the side of the hill, they were just barely able to push them back, but it was the temple's side which sustained the greatest number of casualties.

Each day was a series of fierce battles. Percy's unit was also temporarily recalled from where it had been stationed, and they were sent out to those battles time and time again. Most of the soldiers could no longer move because of their wounds. Although Percy himself, as well as Kuon and Camus, all remained unharmed, they could not hide the exhaustion in their faces every time the unit returned.

Atall's soldiers and the temple's armed monks continued to fight hard, but the worry that Percy had long held had become reality: once they saw that the situation was turning unfavourable, the mercenaries, who were mostly outlaws, lost their nerve. In the middle of battle, they would abandon their allies and flee without a qualm. There was nothing tactical about it, and they were no use in a head-on fight.

"Damn cowards," Camus barked one evening, the light from the nearby bonfires casting its bright glow on his face. The bowl of thin wheat gruel in his hands was shaking. Apart from a few slices of turnip, there was nothing else in the broth. "This is God's holy crusade to extinguish evil. From now on, we need to gather everyone at the temple to explain God's teachings to them. If everyone here fights without fear and uses their bodies as shields in our holy cause, we could annihilate that bunch in no time."

"So those teachings will cure everyone of their fear of death if you preach them for one night?" Percy knew full well that this wasn't the case, but he felt like making fun of this virtuous fellow. "Those are some really handy teachings. But then, the priests who spend their every day disciplining themselves sure are bad at gaining wisdom. Forget one night, it looks like they can't achieve the right state of mind in ten or even twenty years."

"What?" his ire roused, Camus glared at Percy, but right then even Kuon, who

was lying near the fire, wrapped up in a blanket, chimed in.

“I agree. I’ve seen plenty of priests tremble just from hearing the sound of gunshots, then scampering away at the same time as those bandits,” he said.

Camus gritted his teeth before raising his voice compellingly.

“Anyway! We’re more or less even. So that means whoever shows the most spirit, wins!”

*I wonder...* Percy was doubtful, but this time, he did not say anything.

Each day, their side got battered bloody, but it didn’t feel as though the enemy was taking any real damage. The enemy pulled back when pushed, pulled forward and was pushed back, and repeat. That was probably because they still had plentiful supplies of food, bullets, arrows and so on. To misquote Camus: *Allion’s side doesn’t need to show spirit.*

Whether they had come to that conclusion through crossing blades with them, or through information obtained by the spies that had slipped into the temple, Allion’s forces seemed to have decided that there was no need to run any risks. Their repeated advances and retreats were enough to drive the temple to exhaustion, and it would soon destroy itself.

On top of that, rumours that Allion was advancing with cannons was having a bad effect on the villages at the foot of the mountain. Fearing that their houses might be burned down, the villagers all fled to the temple. The cost of supplying food increased, and the temple’s situation would, of course, only get worse. Percy looked down into his own wooden bowl: up until a few days ago, the thin gruel had also contained meat.

Fortunately, he had been correct in his assessment that the enemy did not have sufficient numbers to lay siege to the mountain. Bishop Rogress had horses sent out to the towns and villages to buy provisions, but even then, their funds were not limitless. Besides, they could not travel under heavy guard, so when they were spotted by marauders – be they Allion’s patrols or not – money and food were both stolen.

Soon, there wouldn’t even be turnips floating in the gruel. Once that happened, and given the number of violent-tempered people around, quarrels

were sure to erupt over the distribution of food. People would start to run away one after another.

“They say that Heaven helps those who help themselves. If we demonstrate that we will not yield to injustice, then naturally, we will walk the path of righteousness that God’s teachings have granted us.” Camus’s enthusiasm, however, remained undiminished.

Although Percy was beginning to think that he was half saying that to convince himself, he couldn’t help but envy Camus’s ability to think that way. And also –

“What’s so difficult? What’s important is the enemy general. If we can hunt him down, we can win the fight.”

He also felt jealous of Kuon’s simple way of looking at things. On this violent field, those beliefs might be like a blade that cleaved through adversity.

Percy’s superior officer, Nauma Laumarl, on the other hand, was trembling in terror. As though his bragging only a few days ago had never happened, he secluded himself indoors and had Atall’s soldiers keep a tight watch around the building.

“Will it soon be time?” he asked when he summoned Percy, his tone almost that of one beseeching permission.

Nauma was so mentally cornered that he even sought advice from Percy – whom he hated – as though he were an expert about the battlefield.

“We’ve fought enough. We’ve sufficiently accomplished our duty as reinforcements. Perhaps we should send our lord sovereign-prince a messenger asking for permission to withdraw,” he added.

He could not necessarily be blamed. Percy himself had thought time and again that *this is after all a fight with no hope of victory and which won’t even bring military fame*. It was not worth risking their lives for. He knew what was meant by it “soon being time”. Yet even so, his heart could not immediately let go.

*Isn’t there something... some kind of plan?*

The enemy's formation was not spread out before them like some impregnable iron wall. Allion was Allion, but it seemed that for some reason, they had not been able to bring a large number of troops here. Which was why Percy could not just give up. In a way, it would have been preferable if they had brought an army so huge that even Percy would be forced to think *any more than this and we will lose our soldiers for nothing*.

Right now, there should still be something that they could do. But the man carrying the responsibility of command was acting weak-kneed.

"How can you be so cowardly!" Percy tried rebuking him.

He hit the table hard. Nauma Laumarl stared open-mouthed at him for a moment, then an angry crimson flush started to come over his face. He was about to stand up, but Percy forestalled him by taking a step forward to stand right in front of him. Nauma, apparently thinking he might really be about to cut him down, backed away with a panicked cry.

"If you leave here now, the temple will be just like a building which has lost its supporting pillar and which is about to collapse into rubble at any moment. For everyone here, it's because Lord Nauma *Shalling* is with them, and because they're bathing in his brilliant military renown, that they're able to remain cheerful and full of courage."

"O-Oh... Is that right? No... I mean, that's right!" Nauma Laumarl had been blinking in confusion from beginning to end.

"Then pardon me," was all Percy said before leaving the room.

*Honestly... Talking so grandly – am I being influenced by Camus?* He had a hard time preventing himself from smiling.

On the evening of the same day, a messenger came from Allion's side. A single horseman, who came galloping right up to the gate as soon as he had raised his flag.

"I request an audience with His Excellency the Bishop," he proclaimed in a loud voice.

Bishop Rogress agreed to the meeting. He did not, however, prepare for them to talk alone, and their encounter took place in the public square in front of the

temple. As the two faced each other, they were, of course, surrounded by a crowd of people. Percy, Camus and Sarah were all among them.

Percy could easily guess what the messenger would say. And just as expected, he advised them to surrender. He said that if Bishop Rogress alone surrendered to their general, no further damage would be inflicted upon the mountain.

“This is the royal decision, Your Excellency.”

More than his words, what impressed Percy was the messenger’s dignified attitude and the deep, reverberating timbre of his voice. In appearance, he looked exactly like a bandit chief, but judging from his calm and collected manner, there was no doubt that he must be a renowned military commander.



*That's surprising... And just by himself.*

There was nothing unusual about choosing someone of some standing to deliver the suggestion of surrender. Conscon Temple, however, was not a country. Yet even so, and even knowing that it had employed outlaws as mercenaries, this messenger was showing the utmost courtesy to those opposite him.

Nevertheless, the bishop's response was not favourable. That too was only to be expected. It had been predictable from the very fact that he had decided to meet the messenger before a large crowd.

"I thank you for your exceptional concern. I can tell that you are a decent man, and I honour you for that. However, with justice and righteousness on my side, I will stand firm against the evildoers who repeat those vile, slanderous rumours that I spoke curses. The wise already understand who it is who really wishes for this fight, and what their designs are."

This time, it was the bishop's words which made a deep impression on the faithful. Each of them raised the swords or spears that they held in their hands.

"Allion savages, go back to your country!"

"Do you think you can fool us by promising peace in exchange of His Excellency, the Bishop?"

They all raised rousing cries. The bishop lifted his hand to have them quieten back down while the messenger looked mortified.

"It seems that there is a misunderstanding between Your Excellency and ourselves. Which is why, Bishop Rogress, if you would come back to Allion and explain things in your own words..."

"My chapel was set alight, and innocent worshippers who were pursuing their work as servants of God perished in the flames. Their souls have received no lack of prayers to guide them safely over the horizon, but I do not wish to set foot in the place where the criminal who lit the fire is allowed to unconcernedly live his life."

There was no trace of violent emotion in either the bishop's expression or in his voice, but being stared at with those eyes that were like cut glass must have

been a nerve-wracking experience for the messenger. It was even for Percy Leegan, who was watching from the side.

It was solely thanks to Bishop Rogress that Conscon Temple had become a power strong enough to worry even Allion and, at the same time, he had achieved that with Allion's help.

– It had been about seven years ago.

A prince was born in the Kingdom of Allion. Before the king had been crowned, a woman from a merchant house had borne him a bastard, but this was his first child from his legitimate wife. But the baby was premature, and immediately after birth, he hovered between life and death. Although he managed to pull through after a few days, he often fell sick afterwards and he gradually grew so weak that it became difficult even to give him milk.

The king and his wife were distraught. Although, naturally, that was partly out of love for their child, it was also because in Allion, it was considered an evil omen for the eldest son of the legal wife to die young. In the very worst case, other members of the royal family, who had previously given up on their ambition for the throne, might even claim that “our current king has incurred the hatred of the spirits, and we fear that the country might fall into chaos because of it”, and use that as a righteous pretext to raise armies.

The king gathered doctors from throughout the land and mobilised every sorcerer in the country. He even summoned before him shamans rumoured among the common people to have ‘spiritual abilities’, or priestess serving gods that no one had ever heard of.

Rogress was also among them. In those days, he had been employed as a chaplain to a castle lord within Allion. In the past, he had instantaneously cured the castle lord's wife, who had been confined to her bed because of illness and so, although Allion's royalty had no relation with the Cross Faith, the king had clutched at this fact.

“I have never had anything more than a superficial knowledge of medicine. It is entirely thanks to God's gracious revelation that one such as I was able to heal the castle lord's lady,” Rogress had announced in a clear voice before the king. “Charity, unselfish love and selfless devotion to God are needed to receive

divine revelation.”

Rogress went on to talk about an old temple that was falling in ruin beyond Allion’s territory.

The king no longer had any more straws to clutch at; for the time being, he sent just enough money and people to rebuild the chapel within the temple. A mere seven days later, Rogress was praying without sleep or rest within that chapel. A further seven days later, he returned carrying “a miracle drug which was made in accordance with the divine revelation”. Although it was first tasted for poison, there was no reluctance to having the baby suckle on it. In fact, because the child had already reached the last extremities of weakness, the king personally fed him the medicine.

Whereupon, as though by miracle, the prince’s health rapidly improved. He regained the strength to suck at his mother’s breast, his body started to grow plump, and he cried so lustily at night that those taking care of him didn’t know what to do with him.

The king was overjoyed.

Just as Rogress had requested, he sent money to continue rebuilding the temple. He had an impressive temple built within the capital city, and allowed Rogress to proselytise on a large scale. That close relationship with the royal family lasted for almost seven years.

As the number of faithful within the kingdom increased, Rogress took on the role of an advisor to the royal family and frequently made politically-loaded remarks. He criticised how Allion was constantly in a state of war with the neighbouring powers, and he also condemned the aristocracy for their dissolute way of life. His presence started to be seen as an annoyance, and, at court, movements opposing him were born. These banded together and claimed firstly that Conscon Temple was gathering merchants to make money, and secondly that they were providing foreign enemies with weapons.

They spread rumours that, “Within our lands, Rogress preaches divine love, but outside of them, he is training armed groups. He is taking advantage of the king’s affection for him and plans to take over both Allion’s military and its politics.”

Even so, Rogress had the support of countless faithful and the king's backing, but when he opposed those voices, the aforementioned fire occurred, and he had no choice but to flee to the temple.

Which brings us to the current situation.

– That was Bishop Rogress. The attitude towards the messenger was that of someone who was dignified and measured in both his manner and his actions. His expression showed no emotion, but behind, it was easy to see that he was determined not to flee anymore.

Percy couldn't help wondering again whether the bishop could somehow see the future, or whether it was simply that he felt no fear in dying for his god.

The warrior monks' spirits were roused to such fervour that steam was practically rising from them. Not far from him, Camus was moved to tears. To a man, they would undoubtedly wield their spears at the bishop's side and would continue to fight against Allion until their chests were pierced through with bullets.

The messenger probably shared that impression; he left a few polite words to the bishop then jumped back on his horse. As he was leaving, the soldiers hurled violent insults at his retreating back.

*As rude as was to be expected*, thought Percy and he ran up to the messenger, took his horse's bit, and offered to lead him out. The messenger smiled atop his horse.

"I beg your pardon, but I did not catch your name. May I ask you what it is?"

"It's nothing grand, but I am called Claude Anglett."

*Wait... that Claude?*

Percy was surprised but, at the same time, he had no difficulty believing it given the man's dignified demeanour.

There was a link between Claude and the Principality of Atall, or perhaps better said, a fated connection. Percy had heard that in the war, it was this man who had earned the greatest achievements.

At the very end, as he was leaving through the temple gates, Percy called out

to him:

“You did a fine job of carrying out your duty as a messenger.”

Claude gave a sincere smile and a single nod, then whipped his horse and galloped away.

*I heard that he rose through the ranks from a simple soldier. At all probably can't breed that kind of man.*

It was because of his own youthfulness that he could think that way of the warriors from his own country.

A certain restlessness made itself felt within his heart, and the regrets over his first campaign were not far from him. It occurred to him that the other side might not even recognise them as ‘enemies’, and the feelings that immediately starting churning inside him at the thought were like black rainclouds.

And it was just after he had reprimanded Nauma, too.

*We'll win. ...I can't go as far as saying that, but at least... At least...* Percy's feelings shook within him.

Behind him, the warrior monks were still roaring all together. Sarah stepped away from that crowd. She kept turning her head to look back.

“I sometimes wonder, do men see things that women don't? Or is that men don't see what women do?”

“That's been a puzzle since the dawn of time,” Percy replied with a studiously grave face.

What Sarah basically wanted to say was that: *men are fools*. No doubt she saw things somewhat more realistically than her older brother, which made Percy curious about one thing:

“But, Miss, even though you see this war differently from men, you don't seem to want to run away from it.”

“Miss? You are being very distant, *Lord* Percy. You may address me simply as Sarah,” she said in deliberately formal language. Yet when she said her own name, the expression in her eyes was slightly bashful.

She was a thoroughly mysterious girl. When she was bickering with Kuon, she was exactly like a child, but when it was just the two of them talking, he caught glimpses of a young woman, and there was also that time when she had fired straight at the forehead of a man who had injured a friend of hers. Needless to say, she was hardly the kind of girl that could be found at court.

Sarah kept glancing around her and patting down her hair, looking agitated. She seemed to want to say something more, but Percy deliberately refrained from tossing her a line and stayed silent. So after prefixing her next words with an unnatural-sounding “speaking of which...” –

“Where did that idiot go?” she asked, unable to bear it any longer. This time, Percy had a hard time stopping himself from smiling.

“That idiot? There’s no one I know who deserves to be called that so mercilessly.”

“Right, I apologise for calling him an idiot. A more usual way of talking about him would be to call him a wild monkey and a country bumpkin. I haven’t seen him around recently, has been any chance been killed? No... if he had, my brother would have said something, but I don’t remember hearing anything like that. Or did maybe get scared of the fighting and go scurrying back to his mountain?”

“Are you talking about Kuon?” Although the answer was obvious, Percy asked the question in a quiet voice as he looked down towards the ground. Sarah gave a sudden gasp at the sight of that and he glanced towards her. “He... Right, he... truly, a brave man.”

“It can’t be... Are you serious?”

“It’s because of that courage...”

“Don’t... Don’t say anymore,” Sarah’s long hair swayed as she fiercely shook her head. “I made fun of him and called him an idiot and a wild monkey. But Percy, I would never have believed that he could die so easily.”

“Oi”

“If something like this was going to happen, I should have been kinder. That regret will never leave me. And to think that I had always hoped that this

temple could be like a warm fire for children who are shivering from cold and from hunger. Kuon too... Right, he was just like a child. If I'd been able to clearly see him as such from the start, maybe I could even have loved him like a child..."

"Oi"

"Kuon... His soul must be at peace. Now that the filthy earth is holding him in its embrace, I can only hope that this prayer offered to God will be enough."

As Sarah recited the words of a prayer, her long eyelashes sweeping downwards, she looked like the very image of a saint, but a voice kept calling out "oi" with far too much insistence.

"What?" The saintly image vanished to who knew where and she looked up with eyes like those of a snarling wolf.

Then –

"I told you to move it. You're standing right in the middle of the road. You want to be trampled to death?" Kuon repeated harshly from on horseback.

"Heya," said Percy nonchalantly as he raised a hand, while the blood drained from Sarah's face. "You were faster than expected. What's the result? The enemy didn't see you, right?"

"I passed by several scouting parties, but it's like those guys are as blind as bats in the dark. They don't think and just raise their torches, and they only look at the parts that are lit up."

"No surprises, then. My eye for choosing you was completely unerring."

Percy puffed out his chest just like Kuon on horseback was doing, but a something kept poking him on the shoulder. He didn't need to turn around. A presence like that of roaring flames was flaring behind him.

"Say, Mr Percy, Sir Percy, Lord Percy?" Sarah's expressionless face was right next to his. "Please, won't you continue with your story from earlier? 'A brave man. And because of that courage...' what were you going to say next?"

"No... Well, I wanted to say that because he was brave, I was giving him a special mission."

*Did I joke around a bit too much?* This time, it was the bit on Kuon's horse that Percy hurriedly grabbed hold of before hastily starting to walk away.

"Now then, tell me the whole story. But not here. I've given it some thought, and I don't want too many other people hearing this."

"Got it," Kuon followed him obediently. It would have been nice if he had continued being that docile, but he turned back towards Sarah, who was standing ramrod straight, and deliberately called out to her with another "oi".

"I heard you, you know. If it's to be loved like a child by you, I'd a hundred times rather jump straight at enemies armed with guns."

"Huh? Huh, right, that's right," instead of glaring at Kuon, Sarah grinned defiantly, displaying her white teeth. "By all means, please do so in the next fight. And if you nonchalantly survive and come back, I'll happily fire through your forehead."

## Part 3

Kuon had started to add things on the map that was spread out before him. Percy and Camus, who had been called over, stared intently at what he was doing.

The reason why Kuon had been absent from the temple for the past few days was because Percy had given him instructions to conduct independent reconnaissance action, on the grounds that he had been raised in the mountains and forests, and had sharp night vision. From the location of the enemy bases that they had found up until then, Percy wanted to work out where Allion had set up its headquarters. Kuon's mission had been to verify that location and to investigate its surrounding terrain.

*As expected*, Percy's eyes crinkled as he smiled. The thick lines that Kuon was drawing roughly matched the place that he himself had guessed at. Mountains stretched out along the whole area northwest of the temple, and there was only place that was open plain. Kuon had not been able to observe it from close up, but that was probably where Allion had erected its stronghold.

They were close to Allion's territory; which had expanded into this land in the war, seven years ago. Consequently, the north was dotted with keeps meant to ensure the borders' safety, but the routes leading south to those castles were all but barricaded by the steep mountains and deep valleys. Therefore, they were probably having things like provisions and materials be transported to them from further west. It would be a different story if they had air carriers prepared but, at least while Kuon had been watching, he had not been able to confirm the presence of even a single ship.

*Further proof that Allion hasn't gone all out with this.*

Using air carriers was costly for two reasons: because the technology was still

developing, and because ether, its source of power, was drying up worldwide.

*If we could attack them there...*

With their supply route cut off, the frontline troops would have no choice but to pull back. No... even if they didn't actually capture the headquarters, the fact that it had been attacked would definitely have an effect on the frontlines.

Emotion blazed within Percy's eyes. He had not yet made his decision when he had given Kuon orders to go on reconnaissance and had only wanted any extra information they could get about the enemy to help defend the temple. However...

"Oh, are we going to attack them there?" peering at Percy's face, Camus seemed surprised.

His intentions having apparently been seen through, Percy outwardly returned to calm.

"Kuon is good at getting around in the mountains and at night. He's investigated the terrain beforehand. Kuon, going through the mountains, how long would I take to get to the enemy stronghold?"

On level ground, it was a distance that galloping horses could cover in three days, but after thinking for a moment, Kuon declared, "You'd have to count ten days."

"No, we could take the horses as far as where these two rivers meet," said Camus. "Leave them at the fishing village there, and take the mountain path that veers off to the north."

"It would take a day to get there, then five more days from there."

"Three days at a flat march."

Percy checked with Kuon. "Would that work?"

"It'd work. But there would be guys who'd fall by the wayside. And we'd have to abandon any heavy equipment."

"That's fine."

Percy gazed down at the map and above his head, Kuon and Camus

exchanged glances filled with an unusual mutual understanding. *Is he serious?* – That feeling connected them. Percy raised his head and smiled.

“I’m not saying we should do it just by ourselves. Obviously, we’ll need the numbers. A hundred... no, two hundred. Thereabouts. More than that would just slow down the march.”

“Two hundred? But how many enemy soldiers are there at their headquarters?”

“We’ll lure them away.”

*Oh?* This time, it was Camus who smiled as he realised that Percy had already drawn up a plan in his mind.

“Luckily, the enemy has offered us a chance to surrender at just the right time. Allion was turned down and they’ll be sore about it, so if we send them bait, there’s a very high probability that they will go and attack it in force.”

“And we’ll attack from behind?”

Percy nodded. They sank into silence. Percy was somewhat surprised by it: although Camus and Kuon were different in many ways, one thing they both had in common was they were both excitable. He had been sure that as soon as he explained even just one part of his plan, they would jump on board, happy that – *with this, we don’t just have to wait for the enemy to attack us*. And yet, for some reason, the two of them seemed to be hesitating. Impatience welled up within him.

“What, have you gotten cold feet at *this* point?” In spite of himself, anger had crept into his voice. “This is a one in a million opportunity. If we let it slip away, the only one of two things can happen: either the temple will be overwhelmed, or it will gradually waste away from the inside until it collapses in on itself. I would never have believed that the bravest pair in Conscon’s army would resign themselves to that kind of fate!”

“No, nono,” Camus hurriedly shook his head at Percy’s fiery expression and tone.

Kuon carried on, “We’ll do it if *you* say to. But... is it alright for *you* to be saying that?”

“What? Your problem is with me? If you doubt whether I’m serious, then...”

On the verge of getting even angrier, Percy suddenly shut his mouth. He had realised that the other two were staring at him wide-eyed.

Laughter bubbled up next. The other two’s expression changed quickly, becoming serious.

“Is it alright?”

“Things might get hairy in the next few battles.”

“Idiots,” said Percy, laughter rumbling in his throat. “D-Don’t be so stupid.”

At that moment, Percy understood the real reason why he was so intent on staying here, even to the point of sharply reprimanding Nauma, his superior officer.

Regrets over his first campaign? That wasn’t it. Those had already vanished at some point without his realising it.

Then... anger towards Allion for their violence towards the temple? Not that either.

This land of Conscon was where he had fought his first battle, where he had first killed an enemy soldier, where he had captured his first enemy base, where he had first seen allies die close to him. He remembered how a nun had fired a gun, how a warrior monk skilfully wielded a spear, and how a boy swung a sword. After the fire was lit and when he went to sleep by it, wrapped up in a blanket, he did so accompanied by the chattering voices of innumerable men and their beast-like odour. Percy felt an almost painful connection to that atmosphere of savagery and chaos that he would not have experienced at the Leegan family’s mansion, and to the many people – enemies included – that he had met. You could also call it affection.

It was as simple as that.

He found himself ridiculous. Bundling his current self with his past self, who had set his heart on achieving great feats and becoming the greatest hero in Atall, he laughed them all away. He was no longer thinking of earning fame in this land. Now, Percy only had one single thought: *Just one blow. Just one blow*

*hard enough to make them regret turning their blades against the temple.* It was, in the end, just a childish and foolish thought, born from being unable to stomach the difference in power, from being unable to strike them. He just wanted to punch Allion in the nose.

Although he found himself ridiculous, he was filled with laughter at the sight of how Kuon and Percy opened their eyes wide when he suggested giving that punch.

*Originally, I might not have cared about you guys, but now I'm the one who can't just stand by and watch indifferently* – that was how he now truly felt about the situation.

Under the influence of the two people who were in a radically different position from him, Percy had reformed.

“Then if you’re doing it, I’m doing it,” Camus suddenly made up his mind. “I believe in God’s divine protection, but I don’t believe that we simply have to pray and wait for divine punishment to smite our enemies from the heavens. God grants protection to the braves who fight without regard for their own lives.”

“Right, exactly right, Camus. How about you, Kuon? You might be able to catch the enemy general at their headquarters. You wanted an achievement and you won’t be able to get one any greater than that,” Percy said, face flushed with more excitement than he had ever shown before then.

“I’ll do it,” nodded Kuon. His words were terse but his eyes were sparkling. Then –

“Honestly, there’s something wrong here,” he grinned, showing his teeth. “You’re making me forget the time the two of you tied me up. Maybe you civilised people and devout believers have changed this mountain monkey a bit.”

First was getting soldiers. Including Kuon and Camus, there were only twenty people who were still mobile in Percy’s unit and if it came to a route march through the mountains, then only ten would be able to keep up. Because of

that, they decided that Percy would sound out Nauma Laumarl.

Nauma's attitude was already indecisive, so he was unable to hide how startled he felt, but Percy patiently explained that "this is the perfect chance to accomplish something impressive." It was only natural though that the commander's blood was not roused in this situation where he had to hide both his name and his origins. However –

"If Lord Shalling's fame starts to resound, our lord, the sovereign-prince, will of course hear about it too. There will probably be a reward. Besides, once the situation has calmed down, the real identity of the mysterious hero will be talked about throughout this land. If, by any chance, everyone started to whisper that his real name was Nauma Laumarl, they will look at you with even more respect for not having spoken about until then."

As Percy patiently worked to persuade him, Nauma was gradually won over. He had loathed Percy but, ever since leaving their country, the latter had always worked well and with a meek attitude. He allowed Percy to take the unit he was already commanding, as well as a number of men from the other troops.

Even while ardently imploring Nauma, Percy did not, in fact, reveal the entire plan to him. He had only given him a general outline, saying that: *we will leave the temple for a while and conceal the troops in the mountains to the northwest then, when the enemy is busy attacking, we will strike them from behind.* To add persuasiveness to his words, he had also woven in some deliberate misinformation. That also served as a safeguard against the spies from Allion who were almost certainly within the temple.

Besides which, Nauma had not given Percy command of the troops. No matter how many indirect achievements he might earn from it, there was, after all, no way that he would want to make things easy for a young man from the Leegan House.

*Even now...* thought Percy, but still, at least for now he did not have to worry about getting enough men.

After having left some orders to the soldiers from his unit that Percy judged unable to withstand the mountain march, and who were therefore to stay at the temple, they finally arrived at the day of their departure. The man who had

been appointed as the commander enthusiastically seized his horse's reins. He was a platoon leader under Nauma's direct command, but, actually, he had only been in charge for about half a day.

When they took their first short break, Camus drew water from the river and, after boiling it, he offered a kind of tea to the commander, saying: "This is a secret elixir handed down among those at the temple. Just one sip and you will immediately be overflowing with energy. We priests often drink it on nights when we have ascetic training or when we have holy tasks to accomplish."

The commander happily drank it all up. The story of the "secret elixir" however was a complete and utter lie: in actual fact, it was made from a decoction that Kuon had boiled using leaves and plant roots that he had gathered while in the mountains. Kuon was knowledgeable about both the mountains and medicinal plants, and knowledge about medicine went hand-in-hand with knowledge of its opposite: poison.

Having finished the tea, the exultant commander once more got back on horseback, yet not even half an hour later, his face was ashen, with drops of sweat clinging to it. Finally unable to endure any longer, he jumped down from his horse so fast that he almost seemed to fall off, and rushed towards some nearby bushes.

"This isn't good," Camus diagnosed with a straight face. "Legend has it that when a person without faith drinks the elixir, God's wrath will immediately strike them down. They will suffer from diarrhoea, they won't stop sweating and urinating, and if they aren't better after two or three days of complete bedrest, then there are even those who will continue to lose all their bodily fluids, leaving behind a dry and mummified corpse."

"Y-You're joking. W-Wh-What should I do?"

"Divine protection will counteract divine wrath. Return at once to the temple's holy grounds. Since it's Conscon, God's compassion will surely shield you."

Just like that, the frantic commander retraced his steps back to the temple, taking only two or three men with him.

"I'm worried about that gentleman's health, but time is precious. We

continue forward,” said Percy Leegan, and he continued onwards, taking everyone with him.

When he glanced backwards, he caught a glare from Camus which seemed to be saying: *You owe me for that farce*, but his lips were parted in a smile. Percy gradually took command of the entire unit. Which had naturally been the plan from the start; including Kuon, who had mixed the poison, a strange partnership was forming between the three of them.

For the time being, they were on schedule. ...It was as they were driving their horses onwards that something happened which none of the three had expected. Noticing the sounds of horses’ hooves coming from behind them, Kuon turned to look back. He didn’t just have good night vision; his hearing was also sharp. Just as Percy was about to call out a word of caution, an indescribable expression appeared on Kuon’s face. Camus’s was next.

The rider’s captivating smile jolted up and down with the horse’s movements. The hem of her novice robes fluttered, a gun was attached to her saddle – the one approaching them was Sarah.

Meanwhile, once the unit had departed, the soldiers that Percy had left behind started to put into action the orders he had given them. First of all, he had wanted them to strengthen the defence at the main temple gate. Moreover, with Nauma’s cooperation, the soldiers from Atall were to maintain strict watch both night and day on the various other gates around the mountain.

“There might be spies on the mountain. If information about us leaks out, the feats we’ve waited so long to achieve will be dashed from our hands.” Having been thus persuaded by Percy, Nauma was anxious to deploy soldiers, but the ones who were the most bothered by it were not the spies from Allion, but the ruffians who wanted to flee from there as quickly as possible.

Since it was clear to anyone that the war was progressing unfavourably, it was only a question of figuring what the best time to escape would be, but with such a strict watch being kept, it was not so easy to make a move. Moreover –

“Last night, a man was about to run from the mountain, but he was spotted

and caught by the gatekeepers. Originally, he was just a small-time thief. There was obviously no way he could be a spy, but the warrior monks decided that he was, and they say that they're tormenting him every night with sticks and whips and water torture, and that they're calling it 'questioning'..."

The rumour spread. In other words, it was being said that in order to prevent any more people from running away, the temple was making an example of the thieves who had been the first to flee, claiming that they were spies and torturing them.

A man called Kenny shuddered at the rumour. Just like the tortured man, he claimed to have been no more than a petty thief but, in reality, he had worked as a marauder along the border between Atall and Allion. In exchange for a small sum of money from Allion, he had slipped into the temple as an ordinary soldier.

He was, so to speak, a spy, but actually, several 'professional' spies had also infiltrated the temple, although Kenny did not know about them. In other words, he was a decoy. He was of use only to attract suspicion and to make it easier for others to do their work while all eyes were on him. Another use for him was that since the other spies knew of Kenny's existence, should they every be suspected, they could buy trust for themselves by selling him out.

*It's gotten ugly.*

There were also rumours that Allion would be launching a huge offensive, and Kenny couldn't help but want to leave the mountain as soon as possible. However, the main gate was under tight watch so it was no longer easy to come and go, and then there was also that uproar about the spies. If he was caught and his real identity came to light, he wouldn't just be beaten as a warning. He would be tortured.

While Kenny continued to shudder, a man who used to be a bandit came up to him.

"It's gotten ugly," said the man.

Surprisingly, it seemed that he too was a spy sent by Allion.

"I was told about you beforehand," the man revealed, paying close attention

to their surroundings. “I’ve gotten hold of some good information, but it looks like the warrior monks suspect me. I won’t be able to get through the gates and deliver it to Allion’s army.”

“Would you do it?” he continued. “Around dawn tomorrow, go to and hide near the main south gate. At the appointed time, me and a pal will kick up a commotion to attract their attention. All you need to do is to take this letter to Allion’s west base. I’m sure there’ll be money in it for you.”

He even handed over a map with the location of the base written down. A horse and provisions would be prepared in advance near the gate.

It was a good deal for Kenny; he would have to cross a slightly dangerous bridge, but it was much better than staying here, shivering and trembling while waiting for Allion to attack. He made his decision and they put the plan in practice.

Near dawn, he was hiding in the hillside forest and observing the situation at the gate when a gunshot rang out overhead. “What’s going on?” the warrior monks shouted out to one another as, one after another, they climbed up the path. The diversion had been a success. Riding the horse which had been tied to a tree, Kenny swiftly raced down the mountain road.

Conscon Temple was afraid that the villages at the foot of the mountain might soon be occupied. For that reason, they had apparently temporarily dismantled artillery positions that were near the summit, and had brought three canons closer to the base of the mountain.

Such was the information received by the commander of Allion’s forces. His name was Hayden Swift.

When the relations between Allion and the temple had taken a turn for the worse, he had been one of those sent to mediate with Bishop Rogress, who was remaining secluded within the temple. The negotiations, however, broke down. There was also the story that the bishop had “cursed the royal family”, which had led to the current situation of warfare.

Yet, just as Percy Leegan and Bishop Rogress himself believed, this was by no

means a fight that all of Allion was united in supporting. In fact, when the attempt at mediation had ended in failure, the king of Allion had nonchalantly suggested, “How about leaving it for a while?”

It was only afterwards that the rumours about Bishop Rogress cursing the royal family had first begun to spread. And Hayden had been the very first to react.

He was a relative of the king’s, as well as a close personal friend of his. They were hunting companions and competitors in seizing pawns on a board. While they were in the middle of playing one such a game:

“If we remain indifferent to those who have cursed the royal family, it will damage the royal family’s prestige. That damage will turn into an open hole, and in no time at all, it will be a crack running in all directions. I believe that we should, without loss of time, make a show of power,” he urged the king.

This was a man who had an atmosphere of having matured young, so the king was surprised at how passionately he spoke. Perhaps Hayden felt humiliated because he had met directly with the bishop as one of the mediators.

The king was only in his thirties and he was generous with the relatives he was close to.

“There are many followers of the Cross Faith in the country. Including even among my close advisors. Settle things while the rumour about having cursed the royal family is still going strong. And if the temple offers some kind of conciliation – like surrendering up the bishop or giving up their weapons – immediately cease hostilities.”

With just that warning, he gathered soldiers from within the country and placed eight hundred of them at Hayden’s disposal.

But, again as Percy had thought, this was an insufficient number to encircle the mountain entirely. The king had probably been taking Rogress lightly, believing that it would only take a small threat for him to immediately fear a fight and surrender.

Perhaps Hayden had also made that same mistake.

He moved his troops with caution. He manoeuvred in secret, deliberately

hired marauding soldiers and even sent a messenger to give them the chance to surrender. He seemed to be trying to avoid there being any victims in his own army.

However, there was still no sign of the temple surrendering.

Just like the king, it seemed that Hayden's expectations had been off the mark.

If, at this point in time, someone was to claim that Hayden Swift had spurred on the king with the aim of moving the troops, who on earth would believe them? And yet – the rumours about the curses and whatnot had been spread by people hired by Hayden himself.

Hayden chuckled privately to himself as he thought of the rumours that were now flying throughout the country, and as he remembered the expression on Claude Anglatt's face when he had ordered him to "go to Mount Conscon as a messenger."

For all that he was an upstart, Claude was a man who had deservedly gained some fame during the last war. Although it wasn't much, he did hold territory along with a castle that served to maintain security at the border. Hayden had appointed that man to the mortally dangerous task of messenger, correctly judging that Claude would not refuse the order.

At this point in time, Hayden had achieved most of his goals.

*Now then, next is...*

He would not have minded in the slightest if all the soldiers were to pull back right now but, given his position of having deployed troops, he wanted at least one tangible military success.

However, his opponents were just armed priests and a collection of outlaws. While victory was assured, if there any more victims than necessary on his side, he was worried that he might be branded an 'incompetent' commander.

*Well, it'll be easy enough once we get an opening.*

Hayden killed time by moving pieces on a board game by himself in the temporarily-erected fortress. It then that news arrived from one of the bases.

Having firmly refused the offer made by Allion's messenger, the temple believed that their opponents would be mounting a large-scale offensive. They had brought down their guns and pointed them towards the villages at the foot of the mountain. According to a spy who had infiltrated the temple:

"Thanks to that, there's now a place which is completely defenceless. My companions and I will arrange to light fires to guide you so even if you attack at night, you will have no difficulty capturing the temple."

The opportunity that Hayden had been waiting for had arrived.

"Good. First, we'll create a diversion using two hundred of the soldiers. We'll draw the enemy guns by pretending to occupy the villages at the foot of the mountain; and while that's going on, we'll have twice that number be guided by the spies to storm the mountain. No need to penetrate too far if their resistance is tougher than expected. If we set fire everywhere, the enemy won't be fighting back any more."

Hayden intended that to be his final orders. Even though he had the authority to command soldiers, and although he had studied the military arts to some extent, he had hardly ever stood on the frontlines. It might have been a different matter if he had been facing a national army, but his skill at command was not going to be outdone by this bunch of amateurs. Even though that had been obvious from the start, still, *I'd hoped to get excitement out of it*, Hayden could not stop himself from sighing.

Be it hunting, board games, scholarly studies or casually taking up painting, poetry or love-making, Hayden had what it took to be above average at everything. And once he understood that, no matter what the activity was, he no longer found any pleasure in it.

*My birth was misfortunate.*

Hayden Swift frequently cursed his own self.

*This halfway position of being born just a distant relative to the royal family... With nothing higher to aim for, nor any need to fear a downfall. If I were a hunter, I would search for ways of hunting and would polish my skills every day. If I were an ordinary soldier, my heart would burn with the ambition of climbing the ranks thanks to my glorious achievements; if I were a merchant, I would put*

*every effort into expanding my business, even if only by a little. I have nothing. As long as Allion's royal family continues to prosper, I don't need to do anything and can just live my life as a noble. Just what on earth is expected from me? What do I have to hope for?*

I was because of that, because of that misfortune, that he had realised that his heart was throbbing at least a little when he had first been in command of a large number of soldiers. Could it be that his blood, which was as cold as water in midwinter, might, for a short time, be able to boil and seethe?

But he had sat at the rear of the army, where neither the sound of battle nor even a single gunshot could be heard, and everything had unfolded exactly as he had anticipated. In the end, even the battlefield, where so many warriors risked their lives for fame, was no more than a stale and dull playground from the past.

*Well, it's fine.*

After handing out his orders, Hayden closed his eyes in the room where he was now alone.

A silhouette emerged from the darkness behind his eyelids. A graceful appearance and skin glowing in a honey colour under the light of the lanterns as she nervously and falteringly sang at the top of her voice. Although who knew how many days had passed since then, he could remember it as vividly as though she was still in front of him. Hayden's pulse quickened.

Even at Allion's royal court, he had never seen such a beautiful girl. No, if one was talking simply of gorgeousness, then there were countless women who surpassed her, but, when it came to her, you could take any one of her features, and Hayden would not be able to imagine anything more beautiful. It was as though the myriad spirits that dwelt within Allion had diligently moulded her to suit him.

Reason no longer came into it. It was his blood. His heart. Hayden's very soul was entranced. He who had been on the very verge of losing interest in everything, ached with a unbearable lust and burned with passion.

Most important of all, she was young. She had not yet been sullied by the ways of the world. In all honesty, it would have suited Hayden's tastes better if

she had been a little older, but he had to protect his bud while she was still young and tender, or else she might attract the attention of vulgar lechers who did not understand the true meaning of beauty – did not even think of it – and who would pluck her for fun. Or perhaps she might be taken away by some country-bumpkin noble who would try to claim that theirs was a destined love simply because they had spent a little time together.

Just imagining it left him enraged. He felt that every man, no matter who they were, who went near her should die. He fervently longed to shelter her somewhere within his reach and watch over her growth.

He had not spent more than a few hours in that house before meeting her, but time no longer held any relevance to him. Which was why he had immediately opened negotiations with Claude Anglatt.

The result had not been favourable. Hayden felt angry and suspicious towards Claude, and even after not having seen him for a long time, his body still seemed to seethe from those emotions.

Nevertheless, Hayden was still someone at the edge of Allion's high nobility. When needs be, he could demonstrate steely self-control, so, back then, he had taken his leave with an unconcerned expression.

From the day he returned home, he had started tirelessly working out a plan. After which, he had gotten in touch with scores of people, from those he was already acquainted with to those he could summon him thanks to his bloodline. He was so immersed in his work that he had even turned down an invitation from the king to go hunting, claiming that his health was not good. It was as though during those few days, all the passion that he had lost had been condensed before exploding, and it had been such an intense period that even looking back on it now made him feel dizzy.

Hayden finally wrenched open his eyes. When he did so, the vivid image of Florrie Anglatt was mercilessly extinguished, as though blown out by the wind, and all that lay before him was a bleak room made out of wooden planks. A sigh mingling anger and grief escaped from his lips.

*Just a little more*, he thought to himself, looking as though he was almost grinding his teeth.

*Just a little more, and I'll be able to bring you back to where you belong...*

However, on the day after Hayden Swift had his soldiers depart, an incident occurred that not even he, with his above-average talent, could have predicted.

At that same time, the two hundred led by Percy were climbing the steep mountain paths and were approaching Allion's headquarters. It had been four days since their departure. They were on a route march so harsh that they did not even pause to sleep, stopping instead only for a few short breaks.

Among Atall's soldiers, there were some who had ignored Percy's advice and who had put on armour but, by now, most of them had already thrown it away. Even so, all of them were out of breath, and were covered in mud and in sweat. Only Kuon, who was leading the way, had any energy left in his face.

*Amazing* – as the commanding officer, Percy did not express a word of complaint, but the one he was inwardly praising was Sarah. Camus had scolded his little sister for chasing after them, but Sarah clearly had no intention of listening to him. In the end, Camus had suddenly stopped talking, perhaps believing that she would give up halfway, anyway. And besides, time was precious.

Yet, contrary to expectation, Sarah had not made a single complaint and, clenching her teeth, she had followed the march that was enough to make even the men collapse.

Not long before the sun sank on the fourth day, Kuon, who was in the lead, stopped.

"C-Can you see it? The enemy fortress?" asked Percy, gasping for breath after desperately having caught up with him from behind.

"Shh!" Kuon ordered sharply, and, as though telling those behind him to lie low, he hid himself behind a tree.

Percy used up the last remaining breath in his lungs to quickly go stand beside Kuon. He peered forward from the shadow of the same tree.

Beneath the steep cliff to the left of the path a shadow that seemed to be the

enemy fortress could be seen in the pitch darkness thanks to the lights around it. But that was not the only place where fires blazed: the mountain road should have been shrouded in darkness, but a number of lights were crawling along it like just like some glowing insect.

It could only be soldiers. And there were too many of them for this to be an ordinary patrol. It was obvious that something unusual had happened, and that they were moving in response to that.

*Have they noticed something?*

A cold shiver ran down Percy's spine.

# Chapter 4: A Night of Encounter

## Part 1

After four full days, they had finally arrived before the enemy encampment. It was only on the first day, when they had been galloping on horseback, that they had exchanged frivolous small talk with their companions – which was also a sign that they were feeling tense about the fighting to come. Afterwards, it been nothing but an accumulation of hunger and exhaustion. Whenever they had one of their breaks, everyone would simply sink down without saying a word. When they next stood up, their feet were even heavier than before. What awaited them at the end of the path was only more exhaustion. Yet somehow, while sometimes encouraging, and sometimes scolding friends who had stopped walking, they had reached their destination according to schedule.

Yet just like that, those efforts of theirs which had almost been torture turned to nothing.

The enemy was prowling the mountain with raised torches. *Have they gotten wind of our attack?* wondered Percy. For a moment, his entire body was paralysed. The unit which was supposed to strike at the enemy and bravely lead their allies to victory, was now no more than a platoon in enemy territory that could do nothing except wait to be tortured to death.

Kuon smoothly and nimbly climbed a nearby tree to get a wider view of the line of lights. Just as he was narrowing his eyes to try to make how many they were, he spotted another group which has descending further down the very slope that they themselves were on. This group did not yet seem to have noticed them, but they were all shouting something at the same time. Kuon's

ears caught a single word:

“Prince”

Kuon hastily dropped from the tree and reported to Percy. They numbered about twenty or thirty and, from the looks of things –

*They aren't preparing for an attack?* thought Percy, but it would be all the same if they noticed them. It was thanks to Kuon's swift actions that Percy had broken out of his paralysis. Even if it had just been for a moment, he was ashamed of how he had been able to think of nothing except waiting for death.

Coming to a quick decision, he waved his hand to order his men to descend the hill.

*The first thing to do is to get past that group and find somewhere to hide while Kuon scouts out what the situation is...* such was the plan that Percy's mind was formulating, but it was shortly to be rendered useless.

One of Atall's soldiers who was hurrying towards the front caught his foot in a tree root and tumbled downwards. Because he took the soldiers in front of him with him, the noise was deafening. All at once, shouts erupted from overhead.

“Who are you?”

“The prince?”

“No... I...”

*Quickly!* – while grabbing the hands of the fallen soldiers to help them get up, Percy was waving his other hand more furiously than ever before. His allies ran down the hill as though flying down it, but Allion's soldiers were coming after them from overhead at roughly the same speed.

“Wait! If you don't wait, we'll use our arrows on you!”

“We have guns, too.”

As Allion's soldiers joined up, there were more and more lights overhead. Percy could no longer hide his voice.

“Run, run!” he urged his allies while he himself stopped. He intended to let the enemy get close enough to see him, then run in a different direction from

his allies, and he was slowing down to divert the enemy's attention. His head and heart were filled with cold dread, but his fear for his own safety was nothing compared to the terror of seeing his allies annihilated. For the inexperienced Percy, that latter pain would be unbearable.

At that point, Camus came racing back. With a: "What are you doing?" he was about to pull Percy by the shoulder, but Percy instead grabbed the warrior monk's arm.

"Please get everyone down the mountain," he begged him.

Camus's eyes wavered before suddenly flaring sharply, and he knocked Percy down. A moment later, an arrow had pierced the ground where Percy had just been standing. It had not come from overhead, but from the side.

*We're surrounded* – Percy bit his lips in despair as he stood up. Apparently, the enemy had split into two groups to chase them. And needless to say, Allion had the advantage of terrain.

It was in that instant that a gunshot rang out in retaliation nearby.

It had come from Sarah. She too had come back at some point. Her aim was true, and the Allian soldier who was readying his next arrow collapsed forward. But now twice as many arrows again were being released from overhead and from the right. Now that it was clear that the opponent had the means to counterattack, Allion's troops no longer had any mercy.

Percy, Camus and Sarah hid behind trees to avoid the arrows, but, at the same time, they could not make the slightest move. The net around them tightened. Percy's heart was pounding furiously, when he suddenly looked up. The stars were starting to appear.

Then, from the corner of his eyes, he noticed something crawling. Although he couldn't clearly distinguish the figure, Percy knew instinctively that it was Kuon. He was probably hiding up a tree, waiting for a opening to fire an arrow before jumping down and causing confusion among the enemy.

*Idiot. You should have just escaped* – Percy inwardly cursed at him. It was impossible to overturn the situation with Kuon alone attacking the enemy.

*So this is all there is to the second son of the Leegan House.*

If there was one miracle cure for the dread that was freezing his body and soul, then that was resignation. Percy once again felt something like despondence.

*I wasn't able to return them a single blow.*

So in the end, was the heat that he had felt in his blood when he had been thinking up these tactics no more than the recklessness of youth? A chill struck Percy's heart and soul. The faces of his parents and older brother ran through his mind. Next was his fiancée, Liana's, smile.

At that moment, he shook himself like a wet dog and threw off his lethargy.

*Wait. I can't let them find out that I'm a noble from Atall.*

If his identity was uncovered, he would be bringing danger not only to the temple, but also to his native country. That was a fear of a different nature and a different magnitude than his previous dread. Whatever death he was to die, there was no way it would be one that brought shame to his loved ones.

His hesitation disappeared in an instant. Within his heart, the narcissistic longing that was his craving for heroic deeds resonated perfectly with his desire not to feel the fear of death any more than this.

"God's hand rest over my head. You bastards, praise the name of the Lord!" shouting what few prayers he knew, Percy leaped out alone.

The sound of an arrow grazed past his ear, and the next one struck just a few millimetres from the tip of his boots. Just as he was about to charge at the enemies with his spear in hand –

"You idiot!"

A voice came from overhead. Kuon sprang down from the tree, cutting down one of the bowmen as he did so. He then killed another. But they were outnumbered. Pressed back by the enemies' spears, he drew back towards Percy.

"You idiot," Kuon yelled again as he swung his sword and knocked away an enemy arrow.

*The idiot here is you. Why didn't you run away?* Percy was about the shout

back despite himself. But Kuon's strong hand grabbed him and brought him back once more to the shadow of the tree. Meanwhile, Sarah had starting shooting again.

There seemed to be slightly fewer arrows piercing the trees. Yet this was not because the enemy was daunted, but rather because they had guessed that their opponents were few in number and so were moving rapidly to tighten the net.

His breath ragged, Percy looked in turns at Kuon, who was right next to him, grasping a sword, at Camus, who was hiding behind a different tree, then at Sarah, who had her gun in her hand. Each of them wore desperate expressions. And any second now, he might never be able to see their faces again.

When he realised that, his chest was filled with a burning emotion that was different from fear. It hadn't even been two months since they had first met. Yet as they faced death together, shoulder to shoulder, it felt as though they had been together their entire lives.

"Shit!" a very uncharacteristic swear word spilled from Percy's lips.

*The idiot is probably me.*

His spear could not save his home country, nor could it even protect his irreplaceable friends. Percy's hands shook. If it were possible, he would have wanted to carry out a charge and give them a way to escape. But he did not believe that Camus, Sarah or Kuon would go along with that.

In that case – *how about if we all move at the same time?* How about if all four of them simultaneously started running in different directions? Even if one person was shot, that would still leave three, if a second person was shot, that would leave two, and if a third person was killed, at least the last remaining one should be able to escape.

All he could do was hope for the best. Percy made eye contact with his friends. Had Camus understood his intention? He had turned to his younger sister and seemed to be telling her something.

And then –

"Wait, stay your arrows!"

From overhead, a voice tore through the night air just as though it was itself a huge arrow. The attack suddenly ceased. Out of reflex, Percy looked up the hill and saw a figure on horseback. It was approaching towards them, handling the horse with almost outrageous skill down the steep path.

He recognised that imposing figure.

The rider received a light from one of the bowmen and raised it to his own eye level.

“Oh, I see. If it isn’t the gentleman who helped me by taking my horse’s bit.”

With the light shining on him, Claude Anglatt smiled broadly.

Percy, Camus, Kuon and Sarah were captured by Allion’s forces.

When Claude had called for their surrender, saying that: “I promise you will be treated with courtesy,” Camus had barred his teeth, growling “What!”, but there had been no other choice.

The next action that Percy took was not taken because he had resigned himself to dying, but because he wanted to save the lives of the other three. Faster than anyone, he had left the shadow of the trees and had thrown down his weapon. He had then asked the others to do the same.

Sarah and Kuon complied, and, in the end, Camus had thrust his spear into the ground, his voice raw with anger.

Even though they were captured, they were not tied up. With Allion’s soldiers in front and behind them, they walked along the mountain path.

“Let go, don’t touch me!” yelled Kuon. Percy managed to sooth him by pointing out that, forget not being touched, it was already unusual for prisoners not to be bound hand and foot.

“Honestly, this is why I told you not to follow us,” Camus said to his younger sister in a serious voice. “Have I ever told you anything that didn’t turn out to be true? Look, it’s the same thing this time, too.”

“What are you bragging about when you’ve been captured by the enemy? I don’t remember having been any kind of burden. Which means, Big Brother,

that this is your mistake.”

“What mistake did I make? This plan was impossible from the start. I followed that impossible path, grasping my spear even while knowing that it was hopeless. That is a man’s resolve, and something that you cannot understand.”

Walking in front, Percy’s ears were burning. In their current predicament, he had prepared himself more than once for death, but he was far from having done so with the mental fortitude of a valiant warrior. It was simply because he couldn’t bear the fear that was squeezing his neck tighter and tighter. Percy Leegan was made sharply aware of his own inexperience.

Looking up at Claude’s back as he guided them from the front, Percy let out a quiet sigh.

*Were the other soldiers able to escape? If so, then it was still worth risking death.*

He expected that they would be taken to the fortress, but for some reason, Claude did not choose the road leading to it, and instead continued to climb upwards, leading the four of them to a clearing in the trees.

Watchfires were burning and an encampment had been hastily set up. Upon seeing Claude, soldiers holding guns stood to attention. This was probably somewhere that Claude had been supervising until he had gone to deal with them. Percy was wondering if they had set up a camp away from the fortress because they suspected that there would be a surprise attack, when just then, another rider came racing back from a different direction.

“Oh – Father?” the newcomer opened his eyes wide when he saw Claude, who was likewise on horseback. “Where did you go?”

“Just some minor business,” Claude glanced towards Percy and the others, grinning. He was not looking at them as you would at prisoners. Percy was startled to realise that it was instead exactly as though he was looking at a group of mischievous brats who had been caught red-handed.

“More importantly, did you find them?”

“There was neither hide nor hair of them on the immediate surroundings. Hayden’s soldiers appeared to the north, so we couldn't get close.”

“Damn Hayden. He’s so caught up in this, he’s forgotten he’s supposed to be in command,” Claude barred his teeth. “He’s the man who deliberately spread rumours in the country about soldiers from Atall, and now he’s gone and decided that the prince kidnapped my daughter – he’ll probably be aiming for the prince’s life.”

“He’s also the man who sent you off as messenger, Father. I won’t show him any mercy if he does anything to hurt Florrie...”

“Don’t do anything rash. Sorry, but would you go investigate the surroundings again?”

“Aye,” Claude’s son pulled on his reins and immediately galloped out of the camp again.

For a moment, Claude remained on horseback, glaring towards the north, then jumped down. “We have a bit of a situation of our own, here,” he noted, with a somewhat bitter smile.

Percy could not stop himself from speaking up. “May I ask you what it is? Wasn’t it because you were expecting our attack that you set up this camp?”

“Not at all,” Claude admitted with startling frankness. “A problem’s cropped up. And it’s a problem I can’t get involved in. If my men so much as approach, that Hayden guy will start up the rumours again.”

Percy did not understand what the circumstances were, and it was his first time hearing the name ‘Hayden’. However, he had remembered something when he had heard the word ‘prince’ earlier.

*Claude Anglatt... and the prince. Right, Lord Leo, the second-born prince of Atall, was sent to Allion as a hostage. And if I’m not mistake, he was placed in Claude’s territory.*

Percy experienced a shock that was completely unrelated to his own current situation. Earlier, Claude had also said that “he’ll probably be aiming for the prince’s life” – just what on earth had happened here? Although he did not fully understand, it was certain that whatever it was, it was connected to his own country.

As though he had only just noticed the existence of the four of them, Claude

Anglatt swept his gaze over each of them in turn.

“A warrior monk from the temple, a nun and a mercenary... is it?”

“Even if you torture me, I won’t reveal a thing,” Camus glared fiercely. “Besides that, it’s fine if I’m the only one to experience the shame of being taken prisoner. Surely a general from Allion wouldn’t lay hands on woman, right?”

Claude ignored Camus and turned his gaze towards Percy last.

“Were those rumours actually true? I see, I did think that for a mercenary, you... You’re a soldier from Atall, aren’t you?”

“A-Absolutely not. That I... I couldn’t possibly...” Almost giddy from his memories, Percy was about to deny his own origins, but –

“It’d be better not to hide it. If you’re from Atall then, in a way, your goals coincide with ours.”

Claude stopped him quickly, looking as though he had absolutely no patience to listen. Then, he made a proposal that startled all four of them.

“Would you save the life of Atall’s prince, Lord Leo Attiel?”

## Part 2

“Leo, you need to run away quickly.”

It was only a little past noon when Florrie Anglatt said that to Leo, her expression anxious.

Leo had been in a parlour, reading. The swaying curtains were embroidered with reproductions of famous paintings depicting the spirits in human form.

*Run away?*

At first, he thought it was a joke, but Florrie’s usually rosy cheeks were pale and the blood also seemed to have drained from her lips.

“If you don’t run away quickly, Leo, you’ll be killed.”

The tears that were pooling in her eyes seemed about to slide down her ashen cheeks.

At present, Claude Anglatt was not at the residence.

– It had all started when relations with Conscon Temple had deteriorated. Leo would not easily forget how a group that included the high noble, Hayden Swift, had gone to the temple but had failed in bringing about a reconciliation. When a punitive force was raised with Hayden at the helm, Leo had felt considerable surprise.

They had only sat together for a single meal, so Leo himself didn’t know why he felt that *it’s not like him*.

“It won’t drag on too long,” Claude had said, looking uninterested. It was obvious that he was opposed to attacking the temple by force. However, as an upstart general, he could not say anything against the plan that Hayden, a distant relative to the royal family, was pushing forward. Claude seemed to be hoping that at least this would be over soon, given that the temple was recruiting soldiers but was unlikely to have an organised plan of resistance.

Yet the fighting went on for longer than expected. And Claude could not remain uninvolved.

A few days earlier, a messenger had arrived at the Anglatt mansion. He carried directives from Hayden, "Send soldiers to the highway to help escort the provisions of goods. Claude is to command them in person."

Hayden Swift had established his headquarters at a location just south of Claude's territory. The distance between the two was not very large, but the way was obstructed by steep mountains and deep valleys. Passing through them required having the right equipment and skill, as well as courage verging on recklessness. Horses could not be used to transport either goods or people, so, naturally, the route was inefficient unless one had an air carrier capable of high-altitude flying. Because of that, Hayden's army was relying on the route from the west for its supplies. That was the highway that they were to protect.

"Even though I've been tasked with guarding the border, I've got to send soldiers to the highway?"

Claude was unable to hide his indignation, but Hayden had received the king's consent for his military operations. So Claude had grudgingly ridden from his fortress to go and carry out his task.

Another few days had passed when a disturbing rumour reached Leo, who was at the Anglatt mansion. It was being whispered that the main reason why this battle was dragging on was because: *The Principality of Atall is sending reinforcements to the temple.*

The Principality of Atall was a neighbouring country with which Allion had crossed spears seven years ago. Not knowing its place, Atall had joined up with Shazarn to pick a fight, but once it had been made to realise the overwhelming difference in power with Allion, it had all at once lost heart and had accepted a reconciliation. Afterwards, they had handed over Lord Leo Attiel as a hostage.

Yet in spite of this, it was sending reinforcements to a force which was hostile to Allion. In other words, this was a betrayal.

"Oi, it looks like your country has abandoned you," Jack, Claude's second son, harshly pointed out to Leo at the breakfast table.

These past two or three years, his spite towards Leo had died down considerably, but he was apparently unhappy that his father had only taken Walter along with him to accomplish his duties, and although Jack's expression had been starting to mellow, irritation was now creeping into it. At the same time, his attitude towards Leo was reverting back to what it had been when they were children.

"Once things are settled at the temple, Atall will be next. Since you've no more use as a hostage, the first thing that'll happen is probably that you'll be hanged as a warning to them."

"Stop it, Jack," again just as in their childhood, Florrie, who was sitting with them, defended Leo while tears were pooling in her doe-like eyes.

"Humph," snorted Jack, biting into the bread he had soaked in his soup. "If you don't like being called a traitor, you should take up a spear too. If you want to survive, you've no choice but to kill other Atallese and demonstrate your loyalty to Allion."

He was able to make fun of Leo like that because the rumour had not yet grown beyond the point of being a mere rumour.

"Damned Atall, even though we showed them compassion seven years ago."

"They're pretty full of themselves for such a small country. We should've just conquered them back then."

"We're in charge of the hostage, right? Take this brat and throw him in a cell. If Atall doesn't cease its aid to the temple, we'll hang him. They will, of course, have been prepared for that."

It seemed that the situation that Jack was describing, half in joke, might become reality. As previously mentioned, there were many adherents influenced by the Cross Faith within Allion. Consequently, while the country had not risen as one in support of subjugating the temple, the despondent feelings that had emerged in that situation found an outlet in 'Atall's betrayal'. Hatred started to swell against Atall, rather than against the temple.

*It's impossible, right?* At first, Leo had been dubious about Atall sending reinforcements to the temple.

There was of course the fact that he himself was a hostage, but also, because of the influence of the vassal lords, who governed the southern half of the country, the sovereign-prince could not move large numbers of soldiers any way he wanted. In other words, he would never have been able to send enough soldiers to overturn the difference in strength between Allion and the temple.

Yet every day, the rumours gained more credibility, and Leo started to feel a little anxious as he began to wonder if he had no worth as a hostage.

*From the start, I was never sent to be a hostage. Back then, I had already been abandoned.*

Leo chased away the feelings of bitterness and the memory of his mother's voice just before they had time to graze the surface of his consciousness. The skill he had grown most proficient with during these six years was not using the sword or the bow; it was the strange ability he had gained to detach inconvenient emotions from his mind. It was being able to gaze from a distance at those dark emotions which had turned into a *sludge*, and which had then taken on a form that looked vaguely like Leo Attiel.

Thus, setting his own problem completely aside and thinking about the situation, he felt that there was definitely something unnatural about his father's actions and about how Hayden had taken the initiative to lead soldiers.

Deliberately thinking things through to the end, he could only conclude that: *it's as though everything is conspiring towards my death. Conscon Temple, Hayden, Father – absolutely everything.*

He unintentionally gave a bitter smile.

"I see – I'm going to be killed, aren't I?" he groaned out loud, causing Florrie Anglatt to become frantic.

"No, no! You won't be put to death, Leo! I won't let them!"

Leo came back to himself when he heard a voice sobbing. The feelings, the stagnant *sludge*, that he had temporarily sent far from him now returned, and with them, it was as though the blood slowly started flowing again through his limbs which had gone numb.

According to the story he heard once Florrie had calmed down, she had heard

women gossiping when she had gone down to the small town close to the castle. They said that Hayden had apparently sent envoys to the Anglatt residence, and those envoys consisted of several dozen men, all of whom were armed. Thinking about why they would go to the Anglatt mansion now that Claude, the head of the family, was away, it seemed that they had received orders to bring Leo Attiel to Hayden's encampment.

Leo opened his eyes wide. "But what kind of business could he possibly have with me?"

"I don't know. But those rumours – there are those wicked, untrue rumours," what Florrie was saying became hard to follow. "I also talked about this to Jack. I wanted him to promise that he wouldn't hand you over, Leo, if those envoys came for you."

Perhaps because she was still so worked up, Florrie's eyes once again started to fill with tears as she talked.

"But Jack had nothing to say except cowardly excuses! He's always throwing his weight around, but when it comes down to it, he doesn't have any backbone!"

"I can understand Jack's situation. Right now, he's the acting head of the family, here in this castle. He can't cause any unnecessary trouble on just his own authority."

"What unnecessary trouble! Your very life is on the line!"

As for that, well... Leo mumbled something that sounded like he excuses.

Perhaps irritated by that, Florrie suddenly raised her tear-filled eyes and grabbed him by the hand.

"Let's run away, right now. I'll come with you."

Her slender arms held surprising strength. She had already changed what she was saying from "run away" to "let's run away together". Leo remained silent but just then –

"Miss Florrie!"

A plump, middle-aged woman came barging in. She was a servant employed

by the Anglatt family, and right now, she had an air of urgency around her. Worried that she might have misunderstood something, Leo was about to shake off the girl's hands, but:

"I sent Milius from the stables to keep watch on the highway and just got a message from him. The envoys from the army will soon be here!"

"Leo," Florrie's hands gripped his with increasingly unusual strength.

While Leo almost had the impression that he was being burned by the fervent emotions surging in her eyes, he went along with Florrie's actions and started walking.

*Run... Should I run? But where, and how?* He asked himself as they left the mansion and continued to the stables that located by the walls.

His heart was being tossed about on a wave of conflicting thoughts, but separate from that, Leo found it surprising that the maid, Milius who had gone to keep watch, and another elderly stable hand who had already saddled Leo's horse, were all helping him like this.

*No, it's not me. It's thanks to Florrie,* he thought darkly.

If the hostage entrusted into the care of his house were to escape, then Claude, as head of the family, would naturally not let these servants go unpunished. The reason why they were willing to help even though it might mean losing their jobs, or even being charged with a capital crime, was probably because Florrie had begged them in tears. The daughter of the Anglatt family was loved by everyone in that house.

With help from the elderly stable hand, he climbed onto the horse's back. As thought it was completely natural, Florrie sat behind him.

"They're here, they're here! Lord Leo, Miss Florrie, hurry!" shouted the maid from a window on the second floor. She was craning her neck as far as she could, keeping watch on the highway.

Leo whipped the horse and it broke into a run. The back gate was open. The gate-keeper, a pimply-faced youth, raised his hand and watched as the horse passed him by and galloped out of sight.

They raced along a alley lined with trees. Leo had the impression that he could feel the cold shadow of the guillotine drawing up right behind them. Cold though it was, it also felt as though, wherever he drove his horse to – no matter where that was – that shadow would be calmly awaiting, its gleaming blade ready to chop off the head of the criminal's head.

The sun had set.

After pretending to travel west from the mansion's rear gate, Leo had left the horse in the forest and, carrying nothing but the saddle bag, had changed course and had taken a mountain path that headed south. Having spent more than six years there, Leo had some familiarity with the lay of the land.

The saddle bag contained a little bread and cheese, a pine torch as well as the flints and the metal fittings that went with it. When night had fallen, he lit the torch and they carried on. Walking through the dark mountains, he thought back to the time when he had clung to Claude's waist as they rode through the darkness.

Back then, after being mocked as a "boy who is as good as dead", he had run after Claude, his face flushed red. Although physically he had grown since then, the situation he now found himself in was not so very different from that time.

Leo continued walking in silence. For now, he had no purpose in mind; he could only keep on walking, relying on his senses. Florrie frequently looked back behind them. They continued along the narrow path, pushing their way through leaves and branches, until these suddenly opened before them.

It was a grassy clearing. That too reminded him of the place where he had lain, spread-eagled, six years earlier. A huge tree towered from the top of a gentle slope, and the dark, star-studded night sky spread out behind it. The space had opened so abruptly that, for a second, Leo felt dizzy.

"Leo!" at that moment, Florrie suddenly cried out.

Looking back, he realised that they could see the foot of the hill from this position. Rows of glittering lights stretched out in the distance.

"Are they from the army?"

“Yeah. The lights you can see on the left will be the ones who came to fetch me from the Anglatt mansion. The ones on the right are probably coming from the encampment that Sir Hayden set up. The road in that direction is supposed to be incredibly steep; he must really not want me to get away.”

“You’re still speaking in such a carefree way. Come on, let’s hurry.”

“Going beyond this point is the same as mountain climbing. So let’s rest, instead. You must be tired too, Florrie.”

“No, I...” Florrie wanted to protest, but she was gasping for breath.

Which was no wonder: it had already been four or five hours since they had abandoned their horse, and since then, they had kept walking. Florrie was drenched in sweat, and the clothes that were clinging to her were covered in dirt, so that she was already unrecognisable as the young lady from the mansion. She had admirably come this far without uttering a single complaint.

While Florrie was fretting, Leo dropped down by the tree and leaned against it.

“I remember doing something like this when I had just arrived here,” he spoke as nonchalantly as he could while feeling the cold evening breeze against him. “You know, back then, fires were also burning bright at the foot of the mountains, waiting to welcome Lord Claude and me. It was the proof that a great many people had gone out looking for me. And that was because I was none other than Leo Attiel. It’s the same, even now. Even though I’ve started to forget my parents’ faces, even now, I’m still the second son of the House of Attiel. That fact follows me around everywhere, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Florrie stared at Leo, finding it strange how he was able to so nonchalantly string his words together at a time like this. It was as though he wasn’t afraid of anything.

It was natural, though, since Leo had never believed that they would succeed in escaping. First of all, it would create a huge problem for the Anglatt House if they disappeared. Florrie and the servants who had helped her would of course be blamed, but Claude, as head of the house, would also be made to bear responsibility. Since he had originally climbed up from nothing, it was very

possible that his lands would be taken from him.

That he had gone along with escaping with Florrie even knowing that was because when she had said *Let's escape*, when she had taken his hand and gazed at him fervently, not even Leo was able to keep away and ignore the single, almost burning feeling that remained in his chest. He had decided to go with her, even if only for a short while.

And that "short while" would now soon be over. Leo closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he said, "Florrie, won't you sing for me?"

"Leo, at a time like this," Florrie stood on tiptoes, turning her gaze in every direction and completely unable to calm down. Crying out in a panic that the line of fire was approaching, she desperately tried to convince Leo to leave at once, but every time, he smiled gently and replied, "If you sing for me, Florrie."

They repeated that several times over.

After Leo had sat without budging for about ten minutes, Florrie finally gave in.

*Escaping any further now...* was impossible – perhaps it was because she had acknowledged that on some level that for a moment, she hung her head, looking heartbroken.

She then raised it back up and, at first slowly and hesitantly, started singing. Leo watched the young songstress. He was smiling but Florrie's attention was focused on the line of flames that was approaching them from below, until she seemed to sternly order herself to 'concentrate'.

Florrie's voice gradually grew in volume and in flexibility. Realising that her mind had begun to focus on her song, Leo once again closed his eyes.

It was a song that he had sometimes listened to at the mansion. It spoke about a young child innocently at play, and there were various interpretations to it. One was that, "if children can play cheerfully and without a care, it proves that the society which is raising them is in good shape." Another was that, "adults who work tirelessly to earn the food to survive with miss the days when they could run around playing." Yet another was that, "Life is after all but one long children's game, so no matter what difficulties or crisis I find myself in, I

will live with a clear heart and will never lose my sense of fun.”

As she sung, Florrie would occasionally imitate a child’s breathing. It was so accurate that listening with his eyes closed, he could almost believe that it was a little girl of six or seven who was singing merrily. Florrie’s singing voice overlapped with memories of Claude, of his wife, Ellen, and even of Walter and Jack forgetting to eat as they listened to her sing at dinnertime. The warm fire in the hearth flickered.

Before he had realised it, the back of Leo’s eyelids had grown hot.

Was it Florrie’s song that was piercing his chest so painfully? Was it her voice, her breath, her warmth that he could feel close to him that were enveloping him in such kindness, such gentleness, yet at the same time, in such violent emotions? I will not cry, Leo ground his teeth hard.

The singing suddenly stopped. The warm fire went out with it. Because he had been on the verge of immersing himself in his emotions, Leo wrenched open his eyes, feeling nothing but anger towards Florrie. As he did so, the young songstress buried her face in her hands and her slender shoulders shook.

“Leo, I’m so sorry for you,’ she said, sobbing convulsively where she stood. “If you wanted me to sing, I would have sung for you anytime you wanted. If it’s your request, anytime. But the very first time you’ve asked me to sing, why is it at a time like this?”

Leo was about to say something, but he stayed quiet instead.

“I wanted you to smile. Because when you first came to us, you always looked sad and brooding. I wanted you to learn to like Allion. Even though you must have been feeling lonely separated from your family, I hoped that you would get along with my beloved father, and mother, and brothers, that you would listen to my songs, and that you would say that you were glad that you came here. But... Leo, it would have been better if you’d never come to Allion. Then this wouldn’t have happened. I’m so very, very sorry for you...”

Finally unable to bear it any longer, Florrie crouched down, hunching her back as she sobbed. Her voice and words were enough to gouge out the heart of a listener, but, just as with the rough voices of the soldiers below them, the night was probably swiftly carrying them away.

“I should never have come,” at Leo’s muttered words, Florrie’s back shook even more violently than before. Leo looked down at bright lights crawling below them.

“Or rather... I wasn’t originally supposed to come here,” he said. “It wasn’t me but the third prince – in other words, it was my younger brother, Roy Attiel, who was supposed to be given as hostage. Roy was eight at the time. He was young, but he was old enough to take on the role of hostage. Even so, at the very last minute, I was the one who was sent instead of Roy. Why do you think that is?”

Florrie could not answer.

*Speaking of which, why am I talking about this now?* As Leo inwardly asked himself that in a calm voice, he continued with his story without waiting for an answer.

“Mother doted on Roy. She said that if he was going to be taken from her, then she would rather go with him to Allion. She was so frantic that it was as though she might kill herself and take Roy with her the second someone tried to separate them. I had never seen her like that before. And then, with an expression that I had never seen her wear before, in a voice that I had never heard her use before, Mother said: ‘You should make Leo go. If it’s for a hostage, can’t it just be Leo?’”

“...”

“I’m not saying that she turned to me and hurled at me that ‘since it’s just you, it’s fine, even if you die’. But to me of back then, it was probably pretty much the same. Anyway, even though I was already ten at the time, I really was a pampered child.”

*Are you trying to say that it’s different, ‘now’?* A voice whispered again inside his heart. It was the stagnant *sludge*, which had existed at a place a little separate from Leo’s heart and which, at some point, had peeled itself away, slowly and surreptitiously, to be near Leo.

Leo ignored it and carried on.

“I didn’t want my mother to be tormented any more than she already was –

or rather, I hated the thought of being with this mother that I didn't recognise, so I volunteered to be the hostage. I pretended to be an adult, you know, saying 'This is a good opportunity to broaden my perspective'."

*You're still pretending to be an adult. Are you going to start forcing yourself to believe what you can't bring yourself to think? Do you want to play the adult in front of Florrie?*

More than six years.

In the end, it was his mother who had stuck firmly in his mind. Even when he wanted to forget her or keep her away from his conscious thoughts, that face of his mother's, that voice of hers, had always, constantly been by his side.

When Claude had found him, in a place not so far removed from here, and told him, "Until you've amassed power equal to the family name 'Attiel', why don't you mentally lean on it for a while?", he had felt as though he had woken up. He had worked hard in both his studies and at his military drills. He believed that carrying the name 'Attiel' was not his only possible path in life. Or at the very least, by concentrating on grappling with what was right before him, he believed that he would not feel as though he was rotting away.

Yet for all that –

*You can't become someone else. You're just the same as when your mother abandoned you. Nothing has changed, you've simply stopped yourself from thinking about it. Back then, you lost your future; you've even lost the will to think about the future.*

He understood it clearly now. When the man called Hayden Swift had visited the Anglatt mansion, Leo had been fascinated by his somewhat pessimistic atmosphere, and had believed that here was definitely someone who was similar to him. They had both lost their enthusiasm for the future.

*No, that man and you, you're just spoiled children. Didn't you say it yourself, earlier? The two of you have left both the past and the future to others, and simply bemoan the present. During these six years, you have been nothing but a crying, spoiled child.*

"Yeah." Florrie could not understand why Leo nodded his head. Still

answering the voice inside his heart, he continued, “that’s exactly right. But the time I’ve spent in Allion was not completely meaningless to me.”

Perhaps attracted by how bright his voice was, Florrie lowered her hands behind which she had been hiding her face. Upon doing so, she noticed that Leo was gazing straight at her, and her cheeks along which tears were trickling instantly turned bright red.

“Because you were there,” said Leo. “You were there, as well as Lord Claude and your mother. Even though Walter and Jack were sometimes mean, there were also times when they were older friends to me. And they were good rivals in studies and in martial training.”

Although Florrie looked pure and innocent, in reality, she had time and again shown a talent for skilfully tricking those closest to her. On days when she invited Walter and Jack to “go for a long ride, just the three of us,” she would actually also invite Leo, and kept it a secret from both sides until the day. When the three of them met at the stables, their expressions turned sour, but a cheerful voice would pipe up from behind Leo, saying “Right, let’s go. The weather is beautiful today,” as though it were the most normal thing in the world.

Having been tricked, Walter and Jack would be sulky for a while, but at the end of the day, the three of them – counting Leo – were children. In the exhilaration of riding their horses fast through the wind, they soon forgot to be upset. Later, at the riverside, they would compete at fishing, throwing stones and climbing trees. Although Florrie cheered them all on equally, in actual fact, she was just a little biased towards Leo.

There were many of those bright days that Leo could look back on with a smile.

“I’m glad I came to Allion. Because I got to meet you... all of you. So you don’t have to cry. You don’t need to feel sorry for me. Please smile, Florrie. And sing. There’s neither Atall nor Allion – wherever it is that you’re smiling and singing, that’s where I’ll be able to smile happily.”

Leo stretched out his hand as he spoke. As Florrie was timidly reaching out to take it, they heard the sound of innumerable footsteps reverberating along the

ground. Startled, Florrie remained petrified.

Looking around, there were lights swaying along on the other side of the bushes.

“Oi, someone’s here!”

“Whaat? Lend me a light.”

Several soldiers from Allion made their way through the bushes and came into sight.

Leo quickly stood up.

## Part 3

Claude Anglatt held grave doubts about the dispatch of troops towards Conscon. He also found it suspicious that it was Hayden Swift who had urged the king to send the soldiers. At the time, however, the way he saw it was that: *The fool just wants to vent his resentment and blame the temple for his failure at mediating. It's just a childish revenge,* and so he viewed Hayden with contempt.

However, the situation began to change after he had been ordered by Hayden to guard the highway. Rumours that “Atall is aiding the temple” started to run rampant.

Claude did not think it was possible, but apparently, Hayden had already captured and interrogated an enemy soldier, and he had learned from him that a force of thousand men had come from Atall, concealing their identities.

“It looks like the hostage, Lord Leo, is sending information about us to the temple.”

No sooner had that and other similarly groundless rumours started circulating, than embellishments were added. It even began to be whispered that:

“Wouldn't it be Sir Claude who's pulling the strings from behind the scene? He's just a upstart, after all, and he'll have gotten big money from Atall or from the temple.”

At that point, Claude began to harbour some nasty doubts.

*Impossible. Right, it's impossible but what with the relationship with the temple going downhill, with the fight being dragged on, with Atall's sending troops... isn't it just like everything is moving just to drive me into a corner?*

His impression about it was roughly the same as Leo's was. But whereas Leo

had smiled bitterly and decided that “It really is impossible”, Claude could faintly discern who might be behind it.

He did not have any means of proving it, however.

Therefore, when Hayden assigned him to the dangerous task of messenger, he could not do anything but agree to undertake it so as to demonstrate his loyalty to Allion. At the same time, however, if he returned after safely completing his mission, it would result in fanning rumours such as, “He made it back because he has ties to Atall and to the temple.”

The shame he felt only grew stronger.

And then, a few days after the invitation to surrender had been refused, Hayden mounted an all-out offensive. Claiming that he had been able to obtain information about the temple, he had most of the soldiers leave from the headquarters. Just as Claude was thinking that this unproductive fight was finally coming to an end, he received some unexpected information:

“Hayden is going to have Lord Leo hauled to his camp.”

Claude, who had returned to command the highway guards, was astounded. He could not understand what Hayden’s intentions were. Even though he was a close friend to the king, and even if Atall was planning betrayal, Claude did not believe that Hayden would, on his own authority, order Leo to be punished. But he still he hurried to the headquarters with his son and a few soldiers. He had wanted to find out what Hayden was intending to do, but the man was nowhere to be found within the camp. Even the soldiers who had been left behind were clattering about and could be seen heading off in all directions.

Something unexpected must have happened.

Claude caught hold of an attendant to the Swift family to ask him about it, but the attendant, who was the youngest son of a prestigious aristocratic family, looked down on him from the start.

“A skilled commander does not carelessly reveal his movements, even to his allies,” he said.

Claude seized him by the collar.

“T-T-This is coercion...”

“I’ve received information that the enemy will be attacking the headquarters while the soldiers are all away. Now speak: where is this esteemed ‘skilled commander’?”

He just said whatever came to mind, but the attendant went pale and revealed the whole story. Whereupon, Claude also went white.

*Leo Attiel fled from the mansion? And with my daughter?*

Claude was astonished, but when Hayden had heard the news a few hours earlier, he had apparently, and for reasons known only to himself, received an even greater shock than the general, and had completely lost his composure. He had taken about half of the soldiers who had remained stationed at the headquarters, and had them board the precious air carriers that the base had been equipped with as a precaution.

It was abnormal. Who had ever heard of a commander leaving headquarters during an assault to go conduct a manhunt in the mountains?

*That man is as incomprehensible as ever.*

Claude was inwardly exasperated but, at the same time, his blood ran cold. Just who was that man’s obsession focused on? Was it on Lord Leo, whom he had wanted to summon to the camp, or was it on Claude’s daughter, whom he had pleaded to take with him when he had only just met her? Either way, he was dangerous.

Claude had his men search the headquarters’ surroundings. While he did not know when Leo had run away, and although the possibility was slim, he decided to start from the beginning. Steep mountains and precipitous valleys separated Claude’s castle from the headquarters, and with his daughter in tow, it would be impossible to cross them on foot.

It was while they were searching that, by chance, they came across the attack unit led by Percy Leegan. For Claude, the lie that he had told Hayden’s attendant had apparently become reality. As a result, he captured Percy’s group of four, but he inwardly considered that:

*They’re brave men. Well, no, there’s also a woman among them. Warrior*

*monks are nothing to look down on.*

However, when he looked again at their leader, Percy, he found himself feeling suspicious. Claude had invited a priest of the Cross Faith to his mansion as a teacher for his sons, and he did not sense the same kind of aura from Percy. And he certainly did not look like a mercenary or a bandit. Putting together his manner when he had taken the bit to guide Claude's horse, and the way he had been willing even to sacrifice himself to allow the soldiers to escape...

*I see. Maybe the rumours that Hayden spread weren't necessarily lies.*

He realised that Percy was a soldier from Atall, and, moreover, that he was from a noble family. While he was angry that the matter of the 'reinforcements from Atall' had brought about this current difficult situation, at the moment, he had no time to waste on blaming them. Instead, a solution which surprised even him flashed through his mind.

"Would you save the life of Atall's prince, Lord Leo Attiel?"

Once he actually said it, he felt that it wasn't a bad idea.

Hayden was searching on the north side of the mountain, which meant that he was not far from Claude's castle, but if Claude had offered to help, given that he was under suspicion, it was unlikely that his soldiers would be allowed to approach. But Atall's soldiers and the warrior monks were, from the start, enemies of Allion.

"You were travelling along these paths after sundown; you must be used to the mountains. Even so, it's a gamble whether or not you'll be able to find the prince, but how about it: won't you try out your luck?"

Claude offered his suggestion after giving them a brief rundown of Lord Leo's situation.

Percy remained silent throughout but, inwardly, he was bitterly regretful: to think that not only had Allion gotten wind of Atall's participation, but that on top of that, it had driven the hostage Lord Leo into danger.

"Are you planning on using us as a decoy?" Kuon spat out, at which point Camus looked as though understanding had dawned on him, and he nodded in

agreement.

“Are you perhaps saying that just as we approach this Hayden person and his troops, you will deliberately let them find us and create a commotion, during which time, you will go and rescue the prince?”

“That’s not a bad idea, either,” Claude grinned. “Naturally, we’ll also be sending as many people as we possibly can, so if you do get found by Hayden, we’ll go with that method.”

Both Kuon and Camus sullenly fell silent. They had nothing to answer back. Besides which, they both had a favourable impression of this very honest man. Given the situation, however, they did not want to show it openly.

“Well then,” standing next to her brother, who had been talked down, Sarah interposed. “How about if we find Lord Leo first? Should we bring him to you?”

Claude was surprised that a woman could speak up like that in this kind of situation, but he realised that he quite liked these four people. For one thing, they guts to attempt a surprise attack on the headquarters with only so few soldiers. Considering that they had timed it perfectly to be right after the soldiers had left camp, Hayden had probably been tricked by the enemy.

Thinking so, Claude felt hugely relieved, and his mood lifted considerably.

“Naturally, I would hope for you to bring the prince back to me, but... who knows what might next.”

Huh? The four made the same expression. There was something quite innocent about it.

“Well yeah, my orders are to defend the border, so there’s no way I could be talking with enemy warrior monks and soldiers from Atall. And in the first place, how would I even meet them if they don’t do something as unthinkably outrageous as try to attack the headquarters? So whatever it is that people I couldn’t possibly meet get up to, there’s no reason for me to take part in it.”

Percy gulped. What Claude was basically saying was: *Give up on attacking the headquarters. In exchange, if you find Lord Leo, it’s fine for you to take him back to your own country.*

Those words were unthinkable, but returning the prince to Claude's care would not solve the situation. For one thing, it was still unclear what Hayden intended to do with him, but given that he had run away, things would probably be very bad indeed for Leo. If Claude were to protect him, it would lend credibility to the completely unfounded rumour that he was connected to the principality and had betrayed his own country, which would spell catastrophe for the Anglatt family.

In which case, to Claude's way of thinking, *it's better if he manages to escape out of the country.*

The way Percy saw it, however, *that's still plenty dangerous.* Having allowed a hostage to escape from his territory, there was no way that Claude would be able to avoid blame. Rumours that he had deliberately let Leo flee were bound to spread. Yet despite that, and although Leo's existence was dangerous, caught between the prince and getting into trouble with his own country, Claude had chosen to let him go.

Percy's chest felt hot.

*This man is truly compassionate.*

From Claude's point of view, there should be no issue with delivering Leo to Hayden. Or rather, that was the obvious course of action. Yet even so, he had looked after Leo for six years, and he could not bring himself to simply send him to die.

Besides, it was not only Claude who was in danger. In actual fact, even if Lord Leo managed to safely make it back to his own country, his situation would still be uncertain. Allion was already aware that Atall had sent reinforcements, and if the hostage escaped on top of that, there was a good chance that the next place Allion would dispatch troops against would be Atall.

*Even so...*

Still, from Percy's point of view, Claude's compassion was deeply impressive and to release Leo was... at which point, Percy gave a wry smile.

"What's making you laugh?"

Percy shook his head at Claude's question.

“Nothing. I forgot for a moment that we were prisoners. If it’s possible for the four of us to survive, and also to save the prince, then there was never any reason for us to decline,” he declared cheerfully.

## Part 4

Leo Attiel was cornered. Soldiers from Allion were getting close. There were about seven of them. Leo had already decided on his course of action, but there remained the problem of Florrie, Claude and the people of the Anglatt House. Leo stood up, his eyes fixed on the approaching lights.

“Florrie, after I’m captured, when you’re being questioned, tell them that you escaped with me because I threatened you,” was what he was about to say, but Florrie didn’t let him. Instead, she pulled the dagger she kept at her waist for self-protection.

“Leo, when they get here, please take me as hostage and run away,” she held out the dagger for him to take.

Unable to say anything, Leo was about to accept the dagger out of reflex, but the lights had already almost drawn up to them. Steel armour appeared in sight, reflecting the colour of the flames from the torches. Leo pushed back Florrie’s hand, and the dagger with it.

“Are you Lord Leo Attiel?”

The one who stepped forward brought the light closer to peer at Leo’s face. Leo could Florrie about to come flying from behind him at any moment, and held her back.

“...That’s right,” he nodded.

Another soldier nodded in return. Having already resigned himself, Leo took a step forward.

“Leo!”

The only thing that was painful to him was the sound of Florrie’s sobbing voice striking him from behind. It was only then that his hands and legs started to shake.

Even though he was supposed to have resigned himself.

No, he couldn't really tell himself whether or not he was 'resigned', but, at the very least, he had to prevent trouble from falling on Florrie and Claude because of him.

Because that was the last display of honour that 'Leo Attiel' could show.

At the moment, because of the darkness, Leo failed to realise something. The soldiers naturally took hold of him but, although one would have expected them to descend back down the mountain with him, the one in the lead was smiling strangely beneath his helmet.

"Would the young lady please come over here."

"Wait, please wait..."

Yet another soldier forcefully dragged Florrie by the hand, and started to climb down the path a little ahead of the rest of the group.

Once Leo and Florrie were separated, the soldiers who were with Leo reached to unsheathe their swords.

Just then –

"Have you found the prince?"

A different group emerged from behind them. Three soldiers, also wearing armour from Allion.

"We found him first. The reward from Lord Hayden is ours."

"Who cares? As long as the prince was found," one of the young men from the newly-arrived group said easily. "But why have you got your hands to your swords? They said that the prince was unarmed."

Lord Leo noticed then for the first time that the soldiers in front of him seemed about to take out their weapons.

Meanwhile, Florrie continued to be dragged further and further away. Waiting for her to be gone, the first soldier gave a low, scornful laugh.

"What, didn't you hear about it? Our mission changed when the prince escaped."

“What do you mean?”

“After the prince fled from us and escaped into the mountains, nobody knows how he met his end. Maybe he was attacked by a ravenous beast, or maybe he slipped and fell to the bottom of a ravine.”

Beneath their helmets, the soldiers from the new group exchanged glances. The young man who had spoken first nodded.

“In other words, your saying that Lord Hayden is using the fact of the prince’s escape to secretly get rid of him.”

He spoke loudly, clearly enunciating every word. Leo gasped and took a step backwards. Florrie, who still being taken away, apparently also heard, and started to shout something in their direction as she struggled with the soldier who had hold of her.

“You idiot, saying that so loud!” groaned one of the soldiers who was about to draw his sword.

This time, it was the young man who chuckled scornfully.

“Were you planning on taking care of things once the young lady was far enough away? You guys aren’t very smart. I guess those were your orders, but you started showed bloodlust too soon. Looks like you’re not used to fighting.”

“What!”

The mood within the first of group of seven turned dangerous. But... Leo could not clearly make out what happened next. It was that fast, and that bewildering.

The first thing was that the man who brought his hand to his waist was, in the end, unable to draw his sword. The young man who had mocked them as ‘not very smart’ casually thrust his spear at him. The tip unerringly pierced his throat, and while Leo was staring in surprise at the red blood that came gushing out, the other two from the new group had already started to move.

One of them likewise started to quickly attack the nearby soldiers with his spear. The one lowered his stance and charged into the group of soldiers, drawing his sword as he moved. He was the fastest of all. He leaped like a wild

beast, twice jumping off the ground, smashing through one soldier's helmet, and striking the legs of another one. As both of them fell to their knees, screaming in pain, the 'beast' was already flying towards a third soldier.

Leo could only stand there in amazement. He did not even notice that blood from the first victim had splashed onto his face.

– The three of them were, of course, not soldiers from Allion. The first to go for his spear had been Camus, the warrior monk from Conscon Temple; the second spearman was Percy, the noble from Atall; and the one who moved like an animal as he sprang at the enemy was Kuon, the mercenaries from the mountains.

A few hours earlier, having accepted Claude's request, the three of them, along with Camus's younger sister, Sarah, had entered the mountains. Their weapons had also been returned to them. Claude chose a few of the soldiers who were with him to act as their guides. They were originally hunters who were familiar with where the many small hunting cabins dotted around the mountain area had been built. For about half of the journey, they followed animal trails known only to these men, and things went relatively easily.

Everyone remained mostly silent. Percy felt guilty now that his identity as an Ataltese noble had been seen through, but Camus, who had seemed curious about the principality's movements, did not say anything.

They parted from the hunters when the lights carried by Hayden's soldiers started to come close. Once it was just them again, Sarah had whispered quietly:

"There's also the option of just escaping like this."

For her, Lord Leo's situation was of no importance whatsoever. The one who was fastest to shake his head, however, was not Percy, the Ataltese aristocrat, but Camus.

"God's faithful do not go back on their word. The general placed his trust in us. We must return him that trust."

"What you say sounds nice," Sarah spoke bitterly, "so, of course, you have some kind of plan, right? If you hadn't, you'd declare that 'God's faithful do not

take promises made with savages seriously.' Since the only thing that you're good at, Big Brother, is saying what's convenient for you."

"W-What did you say?" as Camus nearly raised his voice, Percy got between them.

While mediating between the siblings, he felt that he could guess at the contents of the 'plan' Sarah had spoken of. *If we rescue the prince, we'll earn a favour from the principality. In which case, the next thing to do is to urge them to openly send reinforcements to the temple.* Which was why he did not reproach Percy despite only finding out now that he was a noble from Atall.

Kuon, the only one who had remained silent, acted as their guide from then on. Along slopes so steep that it seemed you could not climb them without crawling with your knees close to your chest, over so terrain so complicated that there did not seem to be a single foothold, Kuon walked on as though it was nothing, then, just when they occasionally reached a part where it looked like a person could walk unhindered, he would scramble up a tree to check their surroundings.

Percy, Camus and Sarah desperately followed at his heels. Sarah, who was at the end of the line, had almost run out of strength but, just as when they had been they had been struggling to reach the enemy headquarters, she did not utter a word of protest. Instead, it was only the times when Kuon stopped and waited her for to catch up that she spoke.

"You're looking at me... like a wounded and pathetic pet dog... this time, it's between those eyes of yours... that I'll put a bullet," she threatened, gasping for breath.

Kuon's went wide for a second before narrowing into slits, after which he once more walked by himself, cursing under his breath. Although he felt sorry for Kuon, Percy could more or less understand Sarah's feelings. Kuon had never said anything like "you're slow" or "I'll leave you behind if you're any slower than this". Sarah persisted when even the average man would have collapsed by the side of the road, with the result that Kuon probably more than half acknowledged her, but realising that made Sarah even angrier at him, or, perhaps, angry at herself. Such was Sarah, but her presence was to prove

invaluable. And not because of her skill with a gun.

At that time, Kuon's eyes let him down. Focusing only on scouting out what was ahead, he failed to notice a group of six of Allion's soldiers approaching from behind. This group had lost their unit, and they were coming after them because they thought that the light Percy was holding belonged to their companions. When they heard the rustling sounds from someone coming through the underbrush behind them, Percy and the others exchanged startled glances.

There weren't so many enemies that they couldn't overcome them, but if those enemies fired guns, or even simply shouted out loud, in no time at all, their numbers could double or triple. At that moment, Sarah gave the men an order:

"Hide."

She personally shoved Kuon, who was staring at her blankly, to the ground. Then, for some reason, she started ripping up her own clothes. Once they were torn enough that skin was peeking through in some suggestive places, she took the light from Percy and went towards the approaching group.

Naturally, the soldiers were startled. They had been expecting to join up with their companions, yet the one walking unsteadily towards them was a woman whose naked skin was exposed.

"W-What the... Who are..."

"Those clothes... Are you a nun from Conscon?"

"Ye... Yes." No one was more surprised than Kuon at Sarah shedding tears. "I escaped to the mountains. I was afraid of the fighting... I wanted to go back home, but I got lost. I... some bandits happened to find me..."

"F-Found you?"

"It was shameful. I can't even say it..." Sarah suddenly started sobbing.

Although baffled and embarrassed, the soldiers from Allion could not tear their eyes away from Sarah's body. Illuminated by the light from the flames, Sarah's features were beautiful, and the bridge of her nose and the sharply

defined contours of her chin line displayed the elegance of a young noblewoman. Captivated by that beauty and by the skin which peeked through her torn clerical robes, the men's thoughts turned hazy.

Seizing that chance, Percy, Camus and Kuon scattered in three different directions. Synchronising their actions, they leapt out at Allion's soldiers. From the experience of past fights, they each trusted the other two's fighting skills. The way that even their breathing was in time with one another was simply splendid.

As a result, the ground was soaking up the blood of the enemy soldiers before they had even raised a cry.

At Percy's suggestion, the three men stripped out of their own equipment and put on Allion's armour. Camus also looted the tunic from one of the fallen and tossed it to his sister.

They continued on for a little over another hour. Just when even the men could no longer conceal their exhaustion, they heard a voice saying, "Someone's there". For a second, their blood ran cold, but it was the voice of the soldiers who had found Leo Attiel.

Sarah stayed back alone as the other three approached the group from behind, pretending to be allies.

– Which lead to the scene that Lord Leo Attiel was now staring at in utter amazement.

Partly thanks to the effect of surprise, they did not allow the enemy to so much as resist against them. Percy also jabbed his spear through the neck of the soldier who was taking Florrie away, and the man fell in the pool of blood from his companions. He was the last one.

At that moment -

"Leo... please get away!"

Florrie moved as though she had been released from a spell. She thrust the dagger that she had still been holding right in front of Percy's eyes. Both the tip of the dagger and her own eyes were trembling. It was the first time in her life that she had seen people die before her eyes.

“L-Leave. Please leave,” Florrie’s voice was also shaking. “Leo and I won’t go back to Allion. So... Please, let us go. Please just leave us be!”

“Oh,” Camus smiled, his face smeared in blood. “It looks like you have enough spirit to kill us if we refuse. As expected from Lord Anglatt’s daughter.”

“Father... My father... You – why...”

Realising that in her confusion, the light of reason had returned to Florrie’s eyes, Percy jabbed his spear into the ground. Startled, Florrie pointed the dagger towards him again.

“At Sir Claude Anglatt’s request, we have come to rescue the two of you,” he said. “We aren’t from Allion. We are soldiers from Atall and clerics from Conscon Temple.”

“From Atall?”

This time, it was Leo’s turn to raise his voice in surprise. Percy smiled, and lowered one knee slightly as he bowed towards him.

“It is my great pleasure to meet you, Your Highness and second-born prince, Lord Leo. My name is undeserving of being placed before you, but I am called Percy Leegan.”

“Leegan... Ah, Nordred Leegan’s....”

“Aye, Nordred is my father. Unworthy though we are, my family has pledged allegiance to sovereign-prince’s House for many generations.”

“Humph,” Camus snorted from behind him. *So you’re finally giving us your name* – it was probably because he was thinking that.

“And, why did Lord Claude request something of a soldier from Atall and warrior monks from the temple?”

“We will explain in detail afterwards. Please come with us.”

Percy was about to stretch his hand out towards Leo when – “No!” Florrie clung to Leo so suddenly that Percy’s hand was almost pushed aside.

“Because, because... Leo will be killed if he goes! You heard what those soldiers said earlier? Hayden Swift plans to kill him! “

*That right.*

Although realising that it was sudden, Percy was seized with serious doubts.

*That's what I don't understand. I get that Allion would pass judgement on the prince since they know about Atall sending reinforcements. But what was it those soldiers said? "Kill him in secret" ... that was definitely what they were saying. And that's something that only that man names Hayden is aiming for...*

There was something very strange about this fight. Percy started to share the doubts that Claude and Lord Leo had both felt. However, there was naturally no time to think about it at length.

"For the time being, we need to leave," Percy urged the prince in a firm tone. "Sir Claude's soldiers should be waiting for us if we climb down to the east of here."

Leo started to walk behind the three of them, soothing Florrie as they went. The prince himself was still confused. Though he had been aware that the guillotine was bearing down on him, Allion's soldiers had not been going to capture him and take him for execution, but had been intending to kill him in the mountains. And then just at that moment, a noble from Atall, his native country, had protected him at Claude's request.

When they climbed down the path, a woman was waiting for them. She was a beautiful girl who looked to be around the same age as Florrie, but she held a gun in her hand and was cautiously surveying the surroundings. Once she noticed Leo and the others approaching, she broke into a smile.

"Are you Lord Leo Attiel? It's lovely to meet you. I'm Sarah from Conscon Temple, where..."

"Save it for later, Sarah. We need to leave here at once."

"Buzz off, Big Brother. Don't disturb our predestined encounter. This is the crucial moment that will decide whether your little sister can marry a rich man in the future."

"D-Don't be ridiculous. Sarah, even as a joke, you can't say something like that."

“Don’t take her seriously, Camus. She’ll just play you for a fool. That girl’s never happy unless she’s shocking someone.”

“What’s that, Kuon? Since when did the lowly mountain monkey get smart enough to criticise other people?”

“Stop it, all of you. Lower your voices. We don’t want Allion’s soldiers to walk into us like earlier.”

While hearing Percy’s voice, Leo Attiel turned back once to look at the open space they were leaving behind. The sky was pitch-black. It felt as though just by looking at it, that sky could suck up your body and soul, and Leo reluctantly tore his gaze away from it.

Everyone walked in a group.

Percy glanced repeatedly at Lord Leo, who was leading Florrie by the hand. Despite the Leegan House’s high social standing, as the second son, Percy did not have much interaction with the princely House. Lord Leo was the current sovereign-prince’s second son, and because he had gone to Allion as a hostage six years ago, this was the first time that Percy had even seen him.

*Maybe it’s because of his age, but he’s kind of slender. His face looks like a girl’s too.*

Honestly speaking, apart from his position as prince, there was nothing about him that left much of an impression. Florrie Anglatt, who had faced them, dagger in hand, had been far more striking.

Of course, back then, Percy would never have imagined.

That it was not just himself, the second son of the Leegan House, but also Camus, the warrior monk of the Cross Faith, and Kuon, the mercenary from the mountain lands, whose fates were bound with irresistible force to Lord Leo Attiel, and that force would soon attract trouble for the principality of Atall.

None of them were omniscient gods, so none of them could ever have imagined.

That nothing could have been stranger or more wondrous than this one night.

All of those who were led by Lord Leo would remember this night again and

again.

# Chapter 5: The People of Atall

## Part 1

*I bet the lord sovereign-prince was completely astounded,* thought Leo Attiel.

Said sovereign-prince was, of course, Magrid Attiel, ruler of Atall – in other words, Leo's father.

When things had gotten heated between Conscon Temple and Allion, the sovereign-prince had sent five hundred soldiers in reinforcement. In a way, he had been earning a favour from the temple, but that would be completely meaningless if the temple were to fall. Leo did not know whether the sovereign-prince was satisfied with just that number of soldiers, or whether he had been preparing to send a next wave of reinforcements.

At any rate, Magrid had dispatched Nauma and had exchanged messengers with the temple, so he should have some level of understanding of the battle situation. He must have been pleased to hear that Allion was having an unexpectedly difficult time. With that, Atall's plan was successfully unfolding towards the situation described by the vassal-lord Oswell when he had first suggested sending reinforcements – namely, that the faithful within Allion would be worried about the fight and would speak up in the temple's defence.

Nevertheless, unexpectedly distressing news had reached Magrid that: "Lord Leo is to be executed within Allion."

When it was discovered that Atall had supported the temple, the army commander for Allion had flown into a rage and had Leo killed. That rumour came from the southwest border area, and slowly seeped out within the

territory, so that it reached the capital, Tiwana, a few days later. Magrid had been in the middle of eating, and the spoon he was holding fell to the floor.

It must have seemed impossible.

He had sent his troops with great caution this time. Even the temple's request for help had only been revealed to a few of the vassal-lords and a small number of his own retainers. The soldiers' preparations had also been kept entirely secret, and they had avoided using any piece of armour or weaponry that was characteristic of Atall. For example: Atall's regular soldiers frequently used curved blades, but these soldiers had been strictly forbidden from taking any with them. Moreover, when they had been choosing the men, one of the criteria had been to send only those who did not have an Ataltese accent, or those who could hide it.

Yet all that trouble had been in vain. Allion had discovered that Atall had sent reinforcements, and it was said that the hostage Leo had lost his life.

*I didn't receive any report from Nauma about anything like this.*

For a while, the sovereign-prince was badly shaken up, however, the story of Leo's execution was no more than a rumour. Magrid admonished the people at the castle who were starting to get worked up – “Why are you all running around like this over some groundless rumour?” He skilfully avoided specifying whether that “groundless rumour” referred to the reinforcements or to the story of Leo's execution, but he was going to send a messenger to verify its veracity. It was then that the sovereign-prince was “completely astounded” in the truest sense.

He was once again in the middle of eating when a steward came bursting in, his entire face beaming with joy.

“Lord Leo has safely returned to Tiwana!”

This time, it was a glass that fell from Magrid's hand.

The people of Tiwana had naturally heard the rumour that the prince had been executed. Although Atall had always been a small country compared to Allion, it had an equally long history and, over the generations, a deep affection for the princely house had taken root in that land. The people grieved over the

tragic news of the prince's execution, and raised their voices in anger.

It was then that they received the report that Leo had returned. It was said that although it was true that Allion had intended to execute him, but he had succeeded in escaping with the help of the soldiers secretly sent by the sovereign-prince. The people were in a frenzy, and voices all around rose in praise of their compassionate ruler.

In no time at all, a crowd of people was thronging the road along which Leo and his party was supposed to be arriving, and since the prince and his companions actually did happen to be going that way, the people raised cheers of joy, waved their hands, and shouted the names of the prince and sovereign-prince.

Magrid and his retainers came out of the palace to meet them. They had no choice but to do so. If, for example, Leo had been found near the border, the sovereign-prince would immediately have sent out riders with orders to keep him there, thus buying himself some time to check what the actual situation was.

At times like these, a statesman's duty was to give priority to the country's situation, rather than to the affection between father and child. If it had not been true that Allion was going to execute Leo, and if they had no intention of doing so in the future, then there would still have been the possibility of pretending not to know anything about things like reinforcements, and sending Leo back to Allion's domains.

However, Lord Leo, who had once been said to have been executed, had been rescued by the soldiers sent by the sovereign-prince, and had returned safely. When the people saw the young prince before them, they shouted and cheered; the sovereign-prince could not choose to ignore this.

*Those men called Percy and Camus... it's all going according to their plan.* Lord Leo forgot his own situation and almost smiled.

– Having safely left the mountains from the east, the party had been met by soldiers from Claude's camp.

On the way, he had heard from Percy that Claude apparently hoped to return Leo to Atall. When they had been climbing down the mountain, Leo had been

mostly expressionless, but when he had heard that, he had been unable to hold back his tears.

Moreover, Claude's daughter, Florrie Anglatt, had announced that she would accompany him out of the territory – “Until the prince has safely returned to his land.”

Naturally, Leo had refused, but he had been struck with an idea: *If it comes to it, wouldn't it be a good idea to say that I took her hostage and escaped?*

If they did, then this flight would not have been orchestrated by Claude, emphasis would be laid on how Leo had acted alone, and Claude's situation within Allion would not turn any worse than necessary.

Claude gave them horses and provisions, as well as a small amount of travel expenses. Florrie was again seated behind Leo and the entire group travelled east to cross the border.

Well, it was from that point that Percy Leegan and Camus the warrior monk revealed their plan. They were worried that the sovereign-prince would certainly act in the manner mentioned above. Therefore, even after they had entered Atall's territory, they did not immediately head for a town or a castle to ask for protection for the prince, but instead deliberately avoided the highway and aimed straight for the capital.

While hiding the prince's identity, they stayed at village inns and actively spread rumours about Leo's death. As though they were following after those rumours, they slowly took their time to arrive at the capital, and entered it after revealing for the first times their identities as “Leo Attiel and the ones who saved the prince.” This time, they intentionally chose the main streets so as to attract attention. Sarah, dressed up as a town girl, had first gone and spread the news that “Lord Leo has returned alive”, so there were crowds of people to greet them.

The scheme worked, and the sovereign-prince was forced to welcome his son.

– That, at any rate, was the public attitude that Magrid adopted, but, of course, his private thoughts were different. For the time being, he shut his son in a room, saying “you should have some rest”, after which he got Percy to give him the full details.

Just as he had been asked to, Percy told his story. He told the truth about their planned attack on the enemy headquarters, and about how this had failed and they had been captured by the enemy general, but from that point on, he added a few embellishments as he saw fit.

“We too have no way of knowing if the king of Allion was intending to execute the prince. However, there seemed to be some unrest among Allion’s troops when that rumour spread. The prince escaped to the mountains from the mansion where he was being taken care of, along with the young lady of the family. The enemy camp was in complete disarray because of the hunt in the mountains, so thanks to that, we found an opportunity to slip away and successfully met with the prince before anyone else. No matter how much the presence of our reinforcements may have angered Allion, leaving the prince to die would have been the height of disloyalty. That was why I brought the prince with us on nothing but my own judgement.”

“I thank you for the trouble you took.”

What could Sovereign-Prince Magrid say other than that?

Rather than trouble having been taken, however, it had only just started.

*Allion has realised that we supported the temple.*

If it had only been that, they could still have come up with some excuse.

*Leo, the hostage who had been given to them, escaped by himself.*

There was no getting away from that, however.

Rumours of Leo’s return had, by now, gone around the whole territory, and was causing ripples all over. At first, the people had welcomed his return, but currently, many shuddered with worry.

“What will happen to our relations with Allion after this?”

“A huge army could march on us at any moment!”

Having heard the rumours, the vassal-lords came running one after another to the capital.

As mentioned previously, these ‘vassal-lords’ were domain lords who ruled the southern half of Atall, which was divided between them. They had

considerable authority within Atall. Although they belonged to the same principality, they kept their personal military forces to protect their lands and assets, and, at times, they would also stand united when addressing the princely house.

An episode which perfectly illustrates that power relationship was an event which happened ten-odd years previously. Two nobles, both vassal-lords, quarrelled over a newly-discovered vein of dragonbone. Both hired mercenaries and there were even military clashes, but the ruling house did not intervene. Even if he had tried to, since there were militias in every vassal-lord's territory, the sovereign-prince, despite his position, could not mobilise all of the country's armed forces. It would, of course, have cost money to hire new troops and, at the time, an unusually long spell of rain had led to repeated flood damage in the northern part of the country, so what with providing aid to the villagers and having to undertake works for flood-control, there were also very few funds left at hand.

Magrid's father, who was the sovereign-prince at the time, made the token effort of sending a letter and envoy, then left things to die down naturally.

Half a year later, although they were still standing-off against each other and there were still the occasional skirmishes, the two sides had finally reached a reconciliation. However, the vassal-lords collectively criticised the sovereign-prince. "The sovereign-prince abandoned the domains and their people."

"His attitude risks being indecisive if the time comes to face off against another country."

"His Majesty is getting on in years. Wouldn't it be about time...?"

Rumours sprang up that soldiers were being gathered in each of the territories. So – "Rather than allow the country to split..." Magrid's father had no choice but to abdicate the throne.

He had not been mistaken in judging that his position was too weak to allow him to intervene in the dispute. Nevertheless, in doing so, he sowed the seeds of trouble. After all, it had set a precedent in which the vassal-lords were able to match House Attiel in strength – or rather, in which they had demonstrated even greater influence than the ruler.

They obeyed their liege, the sovereign-prince's, orders only if these served to protect the territories, people or assets of the vassal-lords, but there was no reason for them to follow orders which did not benefit them. And the recent reinforcements to Conscon Temple was definitely an example of an order which did not benefit the vassal-lords.

Magrid had invited several vassal-lords that he was comparatively close with to discuss the matter, but, apart from Oswell Taholin, all of them had opposed helping the temple. And even though Oswell had recommended sending reinforcements, he had not offered any of his own soldiers. Consequently, it was not merely because he had not wanted Allion to suspect anything that Magrid had not sent any more soldiers than necessary; from the start, he had never been in a position to be able to dispatch a large contingent of reinforcements.

Anyway, one after another, the vassal-lords turned up uninvited at the palace. There were seven of them.

Those who had not known about the reinforcements all expressed anger –

“Why did you send soldiers to the temple?”

“We didn't hear anything about this!”

As for those who had been informed about it –

“I told you so. This is why I was against it.”

They too were openly furious.

“This will rekindle the antagonism with Allion. Does the sovereign-prince have any kind of plan to deal with this situation?”

For all that he was their ruler, Magrid had no way to appease them when they pressed him like that one after another.

While his father was caught in that predicament, Leo Attiel had not once been seen in public since returning to the country. Nor had he met with his father except on that first day.

Afterwards, it was his older brother, Branton, who came to visit him. The brother who was two years older than Leo and whom he had not seen in about

six years hugged him so tightly he almost couldn't breathe.

"I'm glad you made it back," Branton whispered in tears in his younger brother's ear. "Right now, your situation has a lot about it that must be tough for you, but be patient. Now that you're home, nothing will happen to you, don't worry."

It was only when Leo started choking that he finally released him and took another look at his little brother.

"But you've grown up so fine while I couldn't see you! You'll soon be taller than me," he beamed with joy.

That one occasion was the only family affection that Leo got to experience during those few days. Both his other, younger brother as well as his mother merely had stewards bring him their perfunctory greetings, and did not meet with him.

Even Leo's meals were eaten in solitary silence in his own chambers. There, there was no unkind teasing coming from Walter and Jack, nor was there Claude's booming, bandit-like voice, nor his wife, Ellen, who liked attending to every small detail in the kitchen despite coming from a wealthy merchant family, nor Florrie's smiling face.

Florrie was apparently currently installed within Tiwana Palace. It seemed that she herself had wanted to remain here.

In a sense, the girl's presence could potentially turn into an even more dangerous burning ember than Lord Leo. Eager to avoid any more trouble than necessary, Sovereign-Prince Magrid had dispatched a messenger to Claude Anglatt's castle, bearing a letter, the gist of which was that, "Miss Florrie Anglatt is welcome as an honoured guest". He added that, "we will send her to you at once if you have made arrangements to receive her", but a few days later, a runner sent ahead of the messenger returned to say that the messenger had not been allowed to cross the border.

Leo thought it was only natural. Claude was not currently in a position where he could afford to be suspected of having any ties to the principality. If rumours spread that they were exchanging secret messengers, that position would become even worse.

Leo calmly surveyed the room in which he had spent his childhood, then went to stand by the window. When he opened the curtains with their slightly childish design, he could just make out the ridgeline of the mountains that lay on the other side of the castle town. He stared hard at them, wondering if they were the same line of mountains that could be seen from the Anglath territory, but he quickly realised that they were different.

Feeling utterly dejected, Leo roughly closed the curtains.

## Part 2

After returning to Tiwana, Percy Leegan had, naturally, gone to stay at his parents' residence. House Leegan had a mansion close to the palace, and compared to Leo Attiel, he received a warm welcome from his family. Even so –

“You did your duty well.” – His parents' expressions as they were congratulating him were a lot like Sovereign-Prince Magrid's when he had thanked for the trouble he had taken.

The palace had not yet decided how to assess his actions in helping the prince escape, and his parents and brother had likewise not yet decided what attitude to take. Even when listening with rapt attention to Percy's tales of the battlefield, they could not conceal the worry behind lurking behind their appreciative expressions.

“Will you be going back to the battlefield?” his father asked, trying to make his question seem offhanded.

“If I receive orders to, then I think I would like to head back to Conscon immediately,” Percy answered without a moment's hesitation, but he had yet to receive official notice about what was to happen to him next.

It felt a bit anti-climactic. He had imagined that bringing the hostage prince back would stir things up considerably within the country, but the only news was that the vassal-lords had descended onto the palace, and not a single concrete action had been taken.

It was as though both the country's position and Percy's own situation were hanging in mid-air.

*Isn't it the same for 'Lord Shalling'?*

Nauma Laumarl and his troops were still at Conscon Temple. Given that there were suspicions about Atall's participation, the sovereign-prince naturally very

much wanted to pull them out, but if several hundred soldiers were to travel to Atall, the spies at the temple would have their suspicions confirmed. Until the situation had calmed down, Nauma had no choice but to remain where he was as “Lord Shalling”.

Nauma must be pretty bewildered as well. Percy was supposed to lead the soldiers in an attack on the enemy headquarters, but instead of accomplishing that mission, he had returned to their own country before anyone else, taking the prince with him as a sort of small souvenir. Not just bewildered, either.

“T-That damn cub from House Leegan has gone and a fool of me all over again! He robbed me of my soldiers and grabbed all the glory!”

Percy could easily imagine that worthy gentleman working himself up into a towering rage.

“Given that it’s Lord Nauma, that does seem about right,” that pleasant laugh came from Percy’s fiancée, Liana. Her curly, raven-black hair danced lightly above her shoulders.

Her father was one of the vassal-lords, and she had travelled with him when he had come to meet with the sovereign-prince. Ever since arriving at Tiwana, Lord Gloucester, who would one day be his father-in-law, had remained at the palace, so Percy had not seen him once since returning.

Lord Gloucester had been one of those that the sovereign-prince had consulted about the matter of the temple, which meant that he was one of those who had opposed sending reinforcements. Not only had his daughter’s fiancé been part of the army that the sovereign-prince had sent – overriding those objections – but that fiancé had then brought back a dangerous source of trouble to the country. Percy wondered what Lord Gloucester’s expression had been when he had heard of all of that.

*The engagement might be broken off if I play my cards badly* – it was a danger that he dreaded, but Liana did not mention her father at all. Her manner was exactly the same as usual as she served Percy tea. Her tone was teasing as she continued,

“And since it’s Lord Nauma, he might very well tell everyone that you fled back to Atall by yourself.”

“Don’t say I fled back. If it were possible, I’d want to go back to Conscon as soon as...” Percy started to say, but held his tongue. Going to the battlefield to protect his childish dignity would help neither Atall nor Conscon Temple.

“This gentleman’s feelings seem to still be on the battlefield,” Liana noted with annoyance, seeing that the crease did not disappear from between Percy’s brows.

– It had been about five days since Percy and the others had returned to Tiwana.

He had invited Camus and Kuon to a tavern away from the city’s main streets. Both of them had been provided with a room in a high-class inn within the town as a reward for having rescued the Second-born Prince. Apparently, they had even been made the offer of having residences built for them, but both had declined.

Camus was a given, but Percy tried to persuade Kuon.

“You don’t have anywhere to go, right? It might not be a bad idea to set up house here.”

The boy from the mountains, however, only shook his head ambiguously. Sipping soup that held some meat on the bone, his eyes were as listless as usual. When that normally hot-headed boy was not given anything to do, he would either violently flare up in an instant, or, on the contrary, fall into lethargy.

Percy turned his attention towards Camus.

“Then what about you, Camus? What are you planning on doing from here on?”

“Is that something you should be asking me?” Camus threw a glare at Percy. It was easy to tell that he was irritated. Although he hadn’t touched anything to drink, his face was ruddy. “What on earth is Atall intending? The prince who was sent as a hostage was about to be murdered, you know? Now should be the time for the sovereign’s family and the people to unite and rise to smite Allion. Instead of which – just how much longer are they going to drag their feet?”

His tone was scathing. It wasn't difficult to imagine how this pious servant of God was getting more irritated by the day. And all the more so since he had expected the principality to take immediate action after the prince had been rescued.

*None of you bastards can be counted on. Rather than waiting for you to make a move...* it would better to grab a spear and rush back alone to the temple – it would hardly be surprising if he felt that way. No, actually, he might well have decided to do that several times already.

However, Camus was neither reckless nor foolish. What could he accomplish, heroically hurrying back to the temple all by himself? Percy could perfectly understand the monk's feelings.

Just as Liana had said, Percy still longed for the battlefield.

That fiery chaos had disappeared. The strain of never knowing when a cannonball might fall from overhead, or whether luck might finally abandon him, leaving him to be pierced through the chest by an enemy spear, had also vanished, and with it, the cold sense of danger lurking at every moment just beneath the surface of their daily lives, even though they were living in supposed safety, beneath a roof and within the protection of four stone walls.

Not having anything against which he could hurl a sword, a spear, or his own fighting spirit was more frustrating than anything.

Eating a meagre meal around a campfire, getting into wild conversations that somehow seemed like deeply meaningful discussions for the people involved, then falling asleep, exhausted, to be ready for the next day's battles – to Percy, those days had been so dazzling that it hurt.

*It's the same for you, isn't it? Then let's go back together* – he felt the impulse to grasp Camus's hands and to make him that offer.

Percy, however, was possessed of strong self-control.

"Sending soldiers to the temple was failure on our part," he said with a bitter expression.

"And that's exactly why. Now that they've seen through you, don't be surprised if a group of armed soldiers descends on Tiwana in the near future.

It's better if the people here make a move before that happens. Standing around with their arms crossed simply means waiting for Tiwana Palace to be burned to the ground," he said fiercely.

It was a simple way of looking at things, but there was some truth to it. Earlier, Percy had felt that the country's situation was suspended in mid-air, but it was only hanging there by the very thinnest of threads. And the very slightest of breezes would make it sway, cause chaos, and, if things were handled badly, would make it snap. A restlessness born from fear constantly held him in its grip.

*...Lord Leo. Maybe I really did bring something truly dangerous back to the country.*

Just as Percy was thinking that, Camus asked,

"The prince. What about Lord Leo?"

Percy had the feeling that Camus had read his mind.

"W-What do you mean, what about him?"

"That prince we rescued spent many years in Allion, right? Allion are criminals who would even turn their guns against God. He must have tasted untold hardship, and besides, they were going to murder him in secret. He must have a deep grudge against them. If he issues a command, soldiers might gather. We can set the prince up as our leader and declare war on Allion as quickly as possible."

"Well, as to that..." While measuring Camus's mood and expression, Percy found it strangely humorous that he was talking about 'we'. "I don't think that he does have a grudge against Allion. This is only my own impression, but... it was General Claude Anglatt who was left to take care of the prince. And he saved the prince's life even though it would plunge him into trouble. I don't think he has feelings of wanting revenge so much as he has feelings of gratitude towards the general."

"Right... that man, huh?" Camus hummed and crossed his arms. It looked as though Claude's personality had a profound effect on him. His tone of voice became somewhat subdued. "Hmm, Lord Leo... To start off with, does he even

have what it takes to be a leader?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m just going by his behaviour in the mountains, but he didn’t look like someone who leads soldiers.”

“Going by his build, he’s no fighter, either,” said Kuon. He sucked the bone from which most of the meat had already been picked off.

**You’re saying that...** Percy couldn’t help but think. After all, Kuon was still growing.

Camus nodded. “He definitely gave the impression of being a delicate aristocrat who’s only suited to scholarship. I’m not sure that anyone would gather if he issued a command,” he readily overruled his own earlier remark.

Percy was just going to give a strained laugh when Camus added something that Percy could not let slide, “But the men of Atall are pathetic.”

Looking at him closely, his eyes had gone redder than earlier. Perhaps at some point, without his realising it, Camus had emptied Percy’s tankard?

“We’ve been in Tiwana for several days and the men here only seem to be going around wondering what’s going to happen next. They shouldn’t just be thinking about what’s going to happen, but about what *they* should do. It’s not like it’s someone else’s problem; isn’t there a single one who is going to pick up a spear or a sword? At least we, God’s faithful, are bravely opposing Allion’s tyranny. So in the end, is there nothing that the godless believe in enough to risk their lives for?”

“Camus, you’re going too far in saying whatever you want. Everyone follows their own way of life. Saying that picking up a sword and fighting head-on is the only solution is...”

“No!” Camus banged his fist against the table. “That kind of sophistry is just superficial wisdom. At times like these, you want the guts to protect yourself and what’s important to you, and to defeat your enemy. That’s what the men of Atall are lacking!”

Percy was worried about how Camus’s voice was gradually getting louder.

Looking around them, there was a group of young men at a table a little apart from theirs. Some of them were repeatedly glancing towards them.

“I’m...” just then, Kuon, who had polished off most of the food but who had not had anything to drink, opened his mouth to speak. “... planning on going back to the temple soon.”

“What?”

Percy and Camus exclaimed together. Kuon seemed to be deliberately talking in a slow, leisurely tone.

“Instead of having a house built, I’ll be getting money. With that money, I can buy horses, guns and armour, and, if possible, hire some soldiers to go back to the temple.”

“O-Oh,” Camus looked deeply moved as his voice escaped from his lips. “Before I even realised it, did you awaken to the divine love that knows no fear of death? As your teacher, I am so happy.”

“I don’t remember seeing anyone as a teacher.” Kuon glared suspiciously at the priest. “But there’s no point staying here. Even if I had a house built, it wouldn’t earn me a living.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re a hero who saved the prince. If you wanted to, you could be hired as a soldier by any noble.”

“Even if I become a soldier, I won’t be earning any glory if there’s nowhere to fight.”

Whether consciously or not, Kuon seemed to be making a cynical statement about Atall, which was not going to take any kind of action despite the fact that the prince’s life had been targeted. He crunched on the bone that he still held in his mouth.

“I’m going to the temple. And this time, I’ll get the enemy general.”

*This guy* – Percy went pale. He knew perfectly well that it wasn’t in Kuon’s nature to make jokes. Which meant that he was being serious. Although he had said earlier that: “It’s fine as long as I can eat”, the fact that he was pursuing such reckless thoughts probably meant there was reason why he wanted to

earn fame quickly.

Camus, meanwhile, was practically moved to tears.

“Is it true? Have you decided? Right, then I’ve also made up my mind. Between master and disciple, it should be the master who guides the disciple, but there is no doubt that you have shown me the way. It’s a waste of time to take too long to think about it. God will surely grant us His protection as we face forward. Let us go together and die together, Disciple.”

“I told you: I’m not your disciple. And I’m not planning on dying.”

“W-Wait,” Percy half-stood up from his chair as he hurriedly tried to stop the other two. “What can the two of you do if you back to the temple? You’d basically just be going back to die.”

“My brethren are still fighting in that place of death! The blades are at their throats, and after all, how could the men of Atall, who turn their eyes away from that fact, even begin to understand our courage!?”

Camus’s booming voice finally reverberated throughout the room. Percy once again worried about the people around them, but it was already too late. Men were gathering to their table. They were locals who were all of them drunk, and who were, moreover, all of them young.

“We heard what you were saying.”

“The prince – was it you, by any chance? Are you the ones who brought Lord Leo back?”

“And if we were, what of it?” Camus proudly stuck out his chest.

The men looked at each other.

“What do you mean, ‘what of it’? You goddamned priest, doing something so stupid!”

“Stupid?” Camus opened his always large eyes even wider. “On Mount Conscon, men are losing their lives one after another; yesterday it was my brothers, today it will be my friends. And everyone always knows that ‘tomorrow, it might be me’, yet even so, they all grasp their spear and their guns, and they fight! It was the same for the soldiers from Atall who went as

reinforcements. They risked their lives in your place to fight against Allion's tyranny. They were not members of the faith, but all of them fell protecting Conscon. Just like the faithful, they have received God's blessing and have been called to Heaven. And that is stupid? Who dares say so?"

"Shut up!"

"Guys who want to die can just die. The bastards just went off and did whatever they wanted anyway. But I'm saying not to get us involved!"

For a moment, Percy looked up towards the ceiling, stained black from soot.

Caught up in the mood, they were just saying things to hurt their opponents. It wasn't what they really thought. But although he clearly understood that, he still had hard time swallowing back the dark feelings that rose in his throat.

However – if *Percy* had a hard time, it meant that for those who had never had any intention of making any such effort, those words were the same as pouring oil over a burning fire. Camus's eyebrows bristled like flames and, next to him, Kuon's previously listless eyes opened wide.

Who was it who made the first move?

There was the sound of a blow landing along with cries of pain.

"Shit! Bastards!"

"Right, you're on."

A chair flew over Percy's head at the same time as all the men erupted with rage. Angry roars echoed in time to the sound of fists been slammed.

"Stop. Stop it!"

As he was trying to calm things down, Percy got splashed in the face with the froth from a tankard of beer. Coincidentally, at the same time, he was hit hard in the chest and staggered back a few steps.

Percy wiped the froth from his eyes and licked the drops which clung around his mouth.

After which –

"Riight."

– Was all he said. One young man had his back turned towards him, and Percy put all his strength into kicking him in the backside.

Percy desperately dragged Kuon and Camus, who were still swinging their fists and their legs, from the inn.

It had turned into a truly massive brawl, with even people who didn't really know the details joining in. But seeing outsiders acting up, men who took pride in their own strength and youths who usually felt dispirited waded in.

With the number of their opponents swelling into a crowd, not even the three of them could get out of it uninjured. Their clothes were torn all over, and blood was oozing from their face and limbs. Camus's eyes had already gone black and swollen.

Checking behind them as he went, Percy staggered into a narrow alleyway and, for the time being, remained gasping for breath by the edge of a building.

*Good grief. My family's going to be getting a shock again.*

Although he did have that thought, for some reason, the weight that had been pressing down on his chest seemed to have lightened.

"Damn those unbelievers. Why can't they show the same anger and guts that they turned against us to Allion?"

"Oh, that's our master priest alright," Percy spoke without thinking. "So then, Camus, were you putting your body on the line to teach them?"

"Of course."

"...Really? Are you an idiot?" Kuon said scathingly, standing next to Camus who was puffing his chest out. He spat a mouthful of blood from his torn lips. "Then all I've got to say is wipe your own arse. In the mountains where I'm from, even babies know that much."

"Oh? From where I was looking, *you* were the first to hit them."

"Don't be stupid. I don't know what you're talking about." Kuon looked away.

Percy laughed and clapped the two of them on the shoulder.

The stars were sprinkled overhead.

Afterwards, Percy crept home with stealthy footsteps. He hadn't wanted his family to see him with a swollen face, but when he got there, he learned that Atall's palace had received news that threatened to send it into uproar.

A messenger from Allion was said to be coming. His name was Hayden Swift.

## Part 3

Leo, of course, remembered Hayden. They had met each other at Claude's mansion and he had heard that Hayden had raised an army in order to attack Conscon Temple. As for Percy, when he had been captured at Claude's camp, he had heard that the enemy commander was called Hayden.

It was said that man would be visiting Tiwana, the capital of Atall, as an official envoy from Allion.

While it might have been thought that he was, for now, giving up on capturing Conscon, there was also a report that soldiers remained at the fortress. In other words, the commander was personally leaving the headquarters even though the battle front was being maintained. Moreover, according to hearsay, this was not an order from above, but something that Hayden himself had apparently applied for.

*His behaviour isn't normal* – Percy and Leo shared the same impression.

It had been the same when Lord Leo escaped into the mountains with Florrie. Even though it happened right after he had sent a great many of his soldiers out from their headquarters, Hayden had been so badly shaken by the news that, even though it meant leaving the camp empty, he had mobilised most of the remaining soldiers to go hunt in the mountains.

On top of that, it was clear that he had given the soldiers orders to 'secretly kill Lord Leo'.

That was no longer just a case of unusual behaviour: both of them also recognised that – *There's something completely off about Hayden himself.*

Needless to say, Sovereign-Prince Magrid Attiel did not turn away an envoy who was right at their gates.

Atall possessed three air carriers, but all of these ships were sent elsewhere to clear the port so that it could receive the vessel that Hayden was sailing on.

In those days, dragonstone ships were getting larger in size. Up until then, single-seat airships had often been used for messengers or in surprise attacks, but when it came to ships large enough to transport personnel or goods, there was still a lot of work to be done to optimise the engines and their ether consumption.

At the time this story takes places, technology in each country was starting to show rapid progress. Techniques for refining weightless dragonstone metal or for extracting high-quality ether, or else, basic engine technology... the rate of growth in each of these miraculously coincided, and the various countries were starting to build large-scale ships. Moreover, this, in itself, would influence the fates of both Lord Leo and of the Principality of Atall. From then on, and until the King of Allion took possession of the country, ships would continue to increase in size, but the era during which ships and small-sized crafts would be able to sweep over the battlefield would be very short... – But that is a story of a later time.

At that point in time, it could be said that large ships were still rare, just as they were when Leo and Florrie had gone especially to see one, and that these ships served to showcase new technology and to demonstrate a country's power.

This particular ship, which was a size bigger than any that Atall possessed, alighted in the narrow landing space in a superb demonstration of skill at handling a boat.

Sovereign-Prince Magrid of Atall and the envoy, Hayden Swift, immediately sat together in conference.

Hayden went first.

“Your country sought peace with our Allion in the previous war. Yet even so, you sent soldiers to Conscon Temple without any kind of notification to us; this clearly shows your intentions. Supporting the temple which laid curses on Allion's exalted royal family is essentially the same as pointing a blade towards our king.”

He cut straight into things.

“I find myself greatly amazed,” opposite him, the sovereign-prince held firm, “as there is no such thing. To start with, do you have any clear proof that my country sent soldiers to the temple?”

Hayden did not so much as flinch at the retaliation.

“Both when battle was joined and when we were at camp, we showed considerable mercy towards the soldiers who had surrendered to us. Which is how we received multiple testimonies from the soldiers who came to us. Quite naturally, they did not openly speak of the Principality of Atall, but, well, perhaps you have heard of ‘Lord Shalling’? According to the information we obtained, there is a strange resemblance between him and a certain gentleman of your country, Nauma Laumarl,” he pressed forward.

For the sovereign-prince, Nauma’s name being known to Hayden was the same as having his headquarters come under attack. Nevertheless, the Principality of Atall could not recognise the fact that they had sent reinforcements.

“I am not aware of it.”

“In that case, why not invite Lord Laumarl here? How long would it take for him to arrive? Would he be here this afternoon, or tomorrow? Or would it need about ten days to call him back from the temple?”

The sovereign-prince was being buffeted by the incessant onslaught, but Atall also had an arrow with which to retaliate against Allion.

“Well then, how do you explain that my child, Leo, was going to be executed within Allion’s domains?” he asked, but, of course, Hayden had clearly already prepared an answer beforehand, and his words never faltered.

“Your accusation is completely unfounded. Once Atall’s betrayal became known, there were certainly wild rumours within our territory concerning how to handle Lord Leo, but there is no truth to the tale that we would have dragged the prince to the gallows. With all due respect, it would appear that when the prince heard the rumours, he grew frightened and planned his own escape. It also seems that soldiers from Atall, who had trespassed into our territory,

helped him do so.”

There were several recesses throughout. Each time, the sovereign-prince gathered his hereditary retainers and they racked their brains. They could play with words however much they wanted, but the fact was that their national power was far different from Allion's. It was also true that their position was weakened since they had sent soldiers to an entity which was hostile to Allion, despite their relationship as allies with the kingdom.

If, in the end, the discussion turned incandescent and things developed into Hayden declaring that “we will make you understand through sheer strength,” Atall would not be able to do anything.

They had hoped popular opinion would rise up to oppose the attack on the temple, but, at this point, the smouldering hostility against the temple might well be entirely turned against Atall instead.

*Where can I find an opening to put an end to this?*

While they were exchanging words, the sovereign-prince scrutinised his opponent's mood, and as he was doing so, he suddenly realised that there was something strange about Hayden Swift.

Simply put, he lacked drive. He had lost the tone of voice, so sharp that it could have sliced through Magrid, that he had when they first met, and his gaze, which had been like a tightly drawn bow ready to release its arrows, was turned downwards. Perhaps he had already used up most of the words that he had prepared beforehand as he tended now to sink into silence.

Faced with the envoy's wavering attitude, the sovereign-prince put his reasoning to work.

*Does this mean that he never intended to attack Atall from the start – or rather, that Allion hasn't yet decided what attitude to take towards us? In that case, he might just have come to give us a warning not to interfere anymore with regards to the temple.*

The implicit threat was, of course, still there, but, at the very least, it seemed that they were not at a point where a huge army of several tens of thousands was about to descend upon them with its banners raised high.

Magrid continued to pay close attention to Hayden's expression.

"It seems as though there is an unfortunate mutual misunderstanding between ourselves and Allion," he tried a conciliatory approach.

The envoy seemed exhausted from the perfunctory and fruitless argument, and, taking heart from his somewhat relieved expression, Magrid continued,

"Sir Hayden, won't you do us the honour of staying a while in Atall? I feel sure that as we breathe the same air, eat the same food, and speak together at leisure and at length, the misunderstanding between us will surely vanish."

"My liege is in no particular hurry to reach a conclusion, either. And he is sincere in wishing to maintain good relations with Atall. I will accept your kind offer."

The next day, the sovereign-prince announced that "Three days from now, we will hold a banquet in the palace's great hall."

It was to be a huge event, to which the retainers with residences in Tiwana were invited as a matter of course, and which would also include the vassal-lords who were currently staying in the capital, as well as many of the leading figures in the city who regularly paid heavy taxes.

The guest of honour would be Hayden Swift, the envoy who had travelled from Allion.

When they heard about it, the retainers, who had been waiting on tenterhooks for the result of the interview between their ruler and the envoy, and the populace who had been worried that their very lives might come under threat at any moment, all heaved the same sigh of relief.

It was clear that the envoy had not come to present a declaration of war. Sovereign-Prince Magrid of Atall had successfully managed to put him off and buy time.

That was what many people, Magrid included, believed, but actually, it was Hayden Swift who had wanted to stall for time.

There were two reasons for this.

Allion had sent spies, whose mission had been to focus on gathering intelligence, even further east than Atall. Among the reports that Hayden had received while at the camp, there was one that he could not afford to overlook.

*There are movements in Dytiann that do not look good.*

The Holy Dytiann Alliance was basically Conscon Temple's religious bedrock. What Allion feared the most right now was Dytiann getting involved in this fight. Dytiann was regarded as the only power on the continent currently capable of opposing Allion, so if that federation of religious countries took action to assist the temple, Allion would not be able to remain indifferent.

And the country that lay between Allion and Dytiann was none other than Atall.

*Right now, you cannot drive Atall into a corner,* Hayden had received that warning from the king through an attendant.

There was a fear that if Atall decided that it could no longer avoid a conflict with Allion, it might be receptive to Dytiann, who wished to prevent Allion from advancing east, and the two might ally themselves on the pretext of assisting Conscon Temple.

And therefore, during his discussion with the sovereign-prince, Hayden had deliberately displayed a hesitant attitude, which contained the leeway to reach a peaceful agreement. His stay in Atall would also serve as a way of keeping Dytiann in check.

Hayden did not fail to find this irritating. That he, a noble from mighty Allion, needed to pay attention to the mood of an insignificant little country infuriated him. But that would only be for a very short time, and Hayden had one other reason for needing to spend time in Atall.

The next day, Hayden went to pay a visit to Florrie Anglatt's parlour.

It was an extremely natural development that he, as a guest, should go and check up on a young lady from his country who was being taken care of in Atall. For Atall, it was also a way of proving that they had not treated her roughly, so permission was granted readily for the two of them to meet.

"We seem to share a strange fate, Miss Florrie. Since meeting you in your

home, I have found it painful to be separated from you, but to think we would meet beyond the border, in Atall.” Hayden tactfully opened the conversation. “I would very much like to hear you sing again.”

“I do not feel like doing so at the moment.”

Florrie’s behaviour had changed completely from that of the innocent young girl at the Anglatt manor, and when she answered him, the expression on her face and the tone of her voice was exactly those of an adult woman. Her very caution, however, proved that she was still a young girl.

Hayden did not lose his smile. “Your father must certainly be worried. A few days from now, I will be returning to Allion. Won’t you ride back with me on the air carrier and give your family peace of mind?”

Even though he urged her to return home in the proper manner, Florrie did not nod in consent.

That day, Hayden left after no more than a few minutes.

The way he saw it, *this will need time*. If he tried to hurry things too much, it would end in failure. Which was why he felt the need for a lengthy stay in Atall. He had judged that it would take at least ten days, but, by the second day, his self-control was already reaching its limits.

Florrie Anglatt, whom he had pictured in his mind even when he was in a military camp, was now right in front of him. And not as an illusion. He could feel her body temperature close by. Her voice reached his eardrums. If he stretched out his hand, he would be able to touch her black hair. He could draw her body, which had never been polluted by anybody’s hands, to him.

The passion that had long remained dormant within Hayden had converged to flow towards one single point. It was only by keeping a tight grip on his self-control that he just barely managed to maintain outward appearances. If Florrie were to sense his intense interest in her, her caution against him would increase noticeably.

Hayden’s abilities in every area far surpassed that of the average person, yet the one thing that he could not handle was his own passion.

Florrie’s caution did not abate by the second day. That was expected. Today,

he intended simply to chat, without urging her to return to their home country. He would start with asking her if she was not bored in Atall, then tomorrow, he would present her with the poetry anthologies and illustration books that he had purposefully brought with him from Allion. That was the plan.

But even though it was expected, Hayden could not endure Florrie's obstinate attitude. Why didn't she immediately show him a smile? Why wouldn't she sing like she had before - but this time only for him? Even though there was no future for Florrie Anglatt other than one in his arms!

Hayden wanted to make Florrie realise that she should never, not even for a second, take her gaze away from him. It was a feeling close to hatred.

"Enough, Florrie."

His strict tone had Florrie turn a startled gaze towards him.

"Although your father might be master of a castle, at the end of the day, he's just an upstart come from nowhere. You don't seem to understand your own position."

"A-Are you insulting my father?"

Even though up until a moment ago, she wouldn't meet his eyes, now Florrie was scowling straight at him as hard as she could. Hayden's blood boiled as it pounded in his ears. Urged on by that heat, he chose the most dangerous of the weapons that he had at hand.

"You're just like a child, and you know nothing: neither about your dear father, nor about anything else. You are aware that I can mobilise the army, right? And even a child like yourself should be able to understand what kind of situation Atall is in right now. Not only did it betray Allion and send soldiers to our opponent, but Lord Leo, who was a hostage, used you as a shield and escaped from the country. That's more than enough provocation. Right – the fate of a tiny country like Atall rests entirely in my hands."

The blood rapidly drained from Florrie's face. After which, colour violently returned to it and her large eyes filled with tears.

"A-Are you threatening me?" she asked in a stiff voice.

Hayden's heart ached painfully. Yet even so, that pain still felt sweet as it had been given to him by his beloved lady.

"I merely stated the facts. Whether the nobles and people of Atall, as well as its prince, will be able to continue to happily live their lives tomorrow, or whether those lives will be swallowed up in a sea of flames in an instant, and all of their happiness be reduced to ashes... that all depends entirely on your attitude."

He could only laugh sardonically. At times like these, there was no choice but to stray from one's real feelings and choose words that would shake the other person. He was putting into practice what Percy Leegan had called to mind a few days earlier.

Something other than tears also welled up within Florrie's eyes. Vehement anger.

"You coward!" She shouted.

In that instant, Hayden felt her anger pierce through his chest like an arrow. Florrie was sweetness itself, yet it felt as though her emotions were thrusting his heart into the burning agony of the hellfire that was spoken of at temples.

*What am I doing?*

For the first time in his life, he felt something like self-reproach. Everything he handled had always gone according to his expectations, so he had lived life without knowing remorse. Hayden was as overwhelmed as a child by the fact that he could show off neither these first emotions of his, nor his own talents as much as he would have wanted to.

"N-No, that.... That was just an example," the voice that spilled from his lips also sounded like a child's. "That wasn't what I really meant. I just wanted to explain to you how dangerous your position is, and..."

With the sudden change in Hayden, Florrie forgot her anger and was left astounded. She did not, by nature, have a violent personality. On the contrary, she had lived a life unrelated to hatred and anger. As anger receded, something like pity for this man welled up within her in its place.

In a sense, that too – let us purposely write down the words, despite knowing

that tedious repetition is inelegant – was proof of how young Florrie was.

Her showing compassion for the man who had threatened her did not only stem from her natural kindness. Florrie naturally knew that after spending just one night at the Anglatt manor, Hayden had approached her father to say that he wanted to take her back to the royal capital. What was the roundabout meaning behind it?

This man liked her. He saw her as a woman. That fact made her feel so embarrassed that she wanted to just vanish, but, at the same time, it made her feel just a little bit happy and encouraged. Because Florrie was at that age to be interested in love and to long for it.

It could not be said, however, that she had much experience with it. If she had dealt with it, even just once or twice, she might have dealt with the situation better, pushing Hayden by the shoulders while telling him, “at any rate, please go back. I will pretend that I never heard what you just said.”

At that moment, she found herself in a dominant emotional position towards a man who was considerably older than her. Therefore, she pitied him and, just like Hayden, she did not know how to handle emotions that she was encountering for the first time.

“If there is something you want, you are the kind of gentleman who will do anything to get it,” Florrie continued to attack the already despairing man. “I don’t know about other people – but my feelings will never be stirred by a man like you!”

In a way, Florrie was almost in rapture, and her words sent Hayden Swift’s feelings into upheaval again. He drew up towards her with a look of fury. Without giving her time to make a sound, Hayden seized her by the shoulders then twisted one of her arms behind her.

“How fragile,” Hayden growled. “It feels like I just need to put some strength into it to snap it off. Little girl, were you just making fun of a man from the House of Swift?”

“L-Let go – Let me go!”

Florrie struggled desperately and, in doing so, her free hand struck Hayden’s

chin. The next second, a slap flew across her cheek.

Florrie had never received that kind of treatment before, not even from her parents. It was an extremely light blow, but the shock it caused her was more than sufficient.

The dark presence of violence swirled next to her. And its unexpected appearance made her remember the scene in the mountains when she had witnessed someone being killed for the first time. Swords and spears gleamed, there was the sound of flesh and bone being torn, screams of pain, sprays of dark blood flying...

Florrie's entire body trembled and her teeth chattered.

Hayden stared down intently at the girl who had stopped resisting.

*The sight of a damaged flower is also nice...* the blood inside him was pounding loudly.

Sensing Florrie's terrified gaze on him, he himself had the impression that his was an existence which towered over everyone, so much so that his early weakness seemed unreal.

He released Florrie's arm and took hold of her dainty chin instead.

"Don't go too far in bothering adults, Florrie. Never speak like that in front of me again."

With her chin still in his grasp, Florrie indicated her consent.

"You will also be attending tomorrow's banquet. And there, you will announce that you will be returning with me. If you do not, Atall will be engulfed in the flames of hell, and will perish within a single night. I am ready to use whatever power is needed to make that happen. Do you understand?" he whispered into her rose-tinted ear.

Florrie nodded again. Large teardrops spilled from her eyes. As though entranced by the way they shimmered, Hayden once more brought his face next to hers, moving to suck on Florrie's lips.

She shuddered violently. For a moment, it seemed as though she wouldn't react but then, at the very last moment, just as their lips were about to touch,

she weakly shook her head.

Hayden had seemed about take them by force, but Florrie's compliance allowed the heat of his blood to abate. He released her after having only brushed his lips against her cheek and ear.

When he left the room, his chest seemed about to burst with joy.

All that he had done had almost been for naught, but, in the end, it had turned out well.

He had held the girl he loved in his own arms; not an illusion or a pretence, but her actual flesh-and-blood body. He even felt that there had been awe in her gaze as she looked at him.

The excitement of having treated her harshly provoked a new feeling of arousal within him. As far as Hayden was concerned, that warped arousal did not contradict the love he had for Florrie: if she was going to be hurt, then of course it had to be at his own hands.

*Once I have Florrie, this tiny country will have no more use. Once I'm done with the temple, I'll find some excuse to level it to the ground.*

He had that power.

Hayden Swift felt that the long time during which he had almost lost all enthusiasm for anything was more than made up for by the force with which it had come sweeping back to him in this short space of time.

# Chapter 6: The Banquet

## Part 1

When told that Percy wished to attend the banquet, his father had not looked pleased.

If Percy attended, he would naturally attract attention. This was to be the ceremonial occasion that would symbolise mending their relationship with Allion, so Percy could sympathise with his father's feelings, and he understood why Nordred did not want to bring a potentially dangerous trigger to it – especially not one from his own House. However, Percy desperately wanted to see the man called Hayden Swift with his own eyes.

He was the man who had been sending orders from behind to the marauders and to Allion's enlisted soldiers whom Percy had clashed with first-hand. And he was probably the man who had attempted to carry out the scheme to erase Lord Leo; a plan which was incomprehensible, but which was all the more horrifying because of it.

Percy didn't have any concrete intention of doing anything when he saw the man, nor did he expect anything to change, but he could not bear the thought of waiting and leaving the situation to others.

Because his son, who did not usually ask for anything of his parents, was being unusually persistent, Percy's father eventually gave in.

"But no heroics. Try to stand out as little as possible. And don't even think of speaking to Sir Hayden, the guest of honour," he warned.

Percy had never had the slightest intention of starting a fight, but, only a few

hours before he was to leave for the banquet, Sarah suddenly paid a visit to the mansion. Just one glance at her urgent expression was enough to tell him immediately that something bad had happened. A 'fight', exactly what he hadn't been aiming for, was brewing.

Hastily adjusting his outfit, Percy rushed from the mansion. Led by Sarah, he found Kuon waiting at their destination, but this time, the boy was not responsible for the commotion; Sarah's brother Camus was.

When he heard that the envoy from Allion who was currently staying in Atall was Hayden Swift, Camus had flown into a rage. Hayden was the very person who had gone to the temple to mediate yet who, faced with failure, had immediately claimed that they had "shouted curses at the royal family", before leading the army to attack.

Camus had already been on the verge of losing all patience with Atall, which still hadn't taken action. Upon learning that Hayden, who should, by all rights, have been despised in the principality, was going to be the guest of honour at the banquet, he had finally snapped.

"I'll march straight into that banquet. If I strike Hayden down there, Atall won't be able to go back anymore."

Yesterday, he had said words to that effect. And today, he had disappeared from the inn. To make matters worse, Sarah's gun had vanished at the same time as him.

At that point, even Sarah had worried, and she raced outside, forcibly dragging along Kuon, who had been in the next room. They had run all around the downtown area, but there had been no sign of Camus. They realised that in the worst-case scenario, he might already have gotten into the palace. It was at that point that Sarah had come to find Percy.

Leaving the two of them at the palace gates, Percy went galloping into the castle. He searched the courtyard that would serve as the venue for the banquet, as well as the great hall that gave onto it, but they were filled with crowds of people who were still getting things ready for that evening. Ignoring the group of irascible, elderly nobles who were sitting in a corner of the hall, snitching food as they chatted together, he went over every nook and cranny.

*Honestly, what kind of priest are you!* He cursed him inwardly.

His blood ran cold as he imagined Camus shooting Hayden dead. That would spell destruction not only for Camus, but also for the entire country of Atall.

He went around the hall two or three times and searched its vicinity. There were a few people who looked like Camus from behind, so Percy deliberately walked past them to check their faces. He also called his name out loud. The young warrior monk, however, was nowhere to be found. As he left the castle grounds, Percy was making up his mind to either give Camus's description to the soldiers, or else to consult with his father about whether to organise a guard for Hayden.

"Ah!" Just as Percy was about to join up with them, Kuon let out a cry of surprise.

A different voice echoed the same cry. Camus was by the outer corner of the wall.

He disappeared at once, running back the way he had come. Kuon started sprinting after him in that same moment, with Percy and Sarah chasing a little behind.

Camus ran down the street, either avoiding people or shoving them aside, but Kuon was much faster than him and continued chasing while skilfully weaving through the crowd.

Constantly looking back, Camus tried two or three times to lose his pursuers by ducking into alleyways, but Kuon nimbly climbed up the walls that lined the road and got ahead of him. He jumped. Camus had hurriedly turned on his heels but stumbled forward when Kuon flew onto his back. It looked like the boy was pony-riding on Camus's back.

"Let go," Camus shouted behind him. "What do you think you're doing, kicking your teacher! Even speaking of it will bring down divine retribution!"

"Shut up, Camus. Our positions are reversed compared to that time," Kuon pinned down the struggling monk.

Having come rushing after them, Percy and Sarah grabbed the panting Camus by the arms and made him stand once Kuon had gotten off. Camus did not have

the gun. When asked about it,

“I already sold that thing off,” he answered angrily.

“Whaat!” Sarah shrieked. “Why? That was *my* gun.”

“You don’t need it any more. And besides, there was that event at the mountain. Your brother was worried that you’d cause some needless commotion in town. What, why are even Percy and Kuon getting so worked up over just a single gun.”

“The one who’s been going around kicking up ‘needless commotions’ is you, Big Brother!”

Camus assumed an air of complete innocence. He insisted that the only reason he had left the room taking the gun with him was so that he could sell it for his sister’s sake.

Percy stared searchingly into the monk’s face.

“Apparently, you were threatening to shoot the envoy from Allion.”

“Don’t be stupid! That was just a joke. Sarah foolishly took it seriously and then you two took a woman’s babbling at face value. Honestly, it’s ridiculous.”

“Then why did you run away?”

“If someone suddenly shouted at you and started chasing after you like a hunting dog, you’d run away too.”

Although he was putting on a show of anger, Camus turned his eyes slightly away from Percy’s. And this was a man who, when he was angry, displayed it much more openly.

When he left the inn at least, Camus might have really intended to shoot Allion’s envoy dead. But what was certain was that, now, he did not have the gun but had the money from its sale instead. Although he could somewhat guess the reasons, Percy avoided probing too deeply at this point in time.

“Whatever the case, that was definitely *my* gun. How could you just go and do whatever you wanted with it!”

“Didn’t I already tell you that you don’t need it anymore? Did you think that I,

your older brother, would wholeheartedly approve of you acting like a man and fighting? You should stay in this city and look for happiness like a woman. I'll find a partner for you."

*"Piece of shit."*

"Sarah, what did you just say to your brother!"

Glancing at the siblings who were snarling at each other, Percy gave a small sigh.



*To shoot Hayden...?* The chills he had been feeling as he searched the castle had vanished but for some reason, now the matter was settled, his heart seemed to be burning with emotion. Emotions that were in agreement with Camus.

Percy shook his head, a little afraid of himself. Honestly, those guys – it looked like it wasn't only at Coscon Temple: even here in Tiwana, the city he knew so well, they still had their own way of doing things. While deploring something a little ridiculous, he discretely called Kuon over.

"I still haven't gotten my money," Kuon said abruptly.

Percy wondered for a second what he was talking about, but Kuon had previously announced that, "with the money I receive, I'll buy weapons and armour, hire soldiers, and return to the temple." This was probably him forestalling the question of *how come you're still in Tiwana?* Percy gave a small laugh.

"I'll ask the people at the castle about the money later. More importantly, you're a good friend to have. Just because Sarah asked you to, you went running around looking for Camus until you were drenched in sweat from it."

"It's not like I had anything else to do, anyway."

"Hmm? But if Camus had shot the envoy, Atall and Allion would definitely have gone to war. It would have been a good opportunity for you to gain as much glory as you wanted."

"Maybe." Percy was half-teasing but Kuon frankly acknowledged what he was saying, even as he turned his eyes away. "But that... would have been a betrayal."

*A betrayal*, murmured Percy. Did he mean that letting Camus run loose while knowing that it would lead to war would have been a betrayal towards Atall? It was difficult to understand in that moment. Since it seemed like there was some tangled circumstances behind those words, Percy deliberately decided to return to the problem at hand.

"Sorry, but could you keep watch on Camus tonight? Just in case."

"Don't worry," Kuon looked towards the still-squabbling siblings. "Sarah won't

be leaving him alone, anyway.”

After parting with the three of them, Percy immediately went home to the mansion and got himself ready in a mad hurry.

The banquet began as the stars started to twinkle in the sky.

It was a huge affair. Flames burned brilliantly from the chandeliers ornamenting the hall’s ceiling and from the iron braziers in the courtyard, casting a light that was as bright as day. The feast was spread out over the rows of table tops. Percy’s eyes were drawn to the food that would not normally be seen even at the Leegan House’s dining table: the freshest of fruit, fish baked straight from the water rather than having been salted and preserved, a whole roast of pork... normally, Percy's young stomach would almost have been growling, but tonight, perhaps because of his feeling of tension, or perhaps because of the earlier crisis, he had no desire to wolf down food.

There were a few people he knew, here and there, as well as dignitaries from the city and the vassal-lords who had come hurrying from the south. So far, Sovereign-Prince Magrid and the guest of honour, Hayden Swift, had not yet appeared.

*Whoops* – as he was surveying the hall, the people from the Laumarl House came into his sight, and Percy quickly put some distance between them before they noticed him. As mentioned earlier, the Houses of Leegan and Laumarl were antagonistic towards one another. On top of which, there was the issue of the process through which he had left Nauma behind and returned on his own; he did not want too much inquiry into those details.

That was how Percy came across a corner of the hall which was like a gaping hole, empty of people.

Leo Attiel was standing alone near the wall.

It was the first time that the prince had shown himself in public since returning to the country. Although there was no end of people who came to give him their greetings, there was no one who stopped and talked with him for long. After exchanging a word or two, everyone moved away from him as if they

were fleeing then, once they were at a sufficiently safe distance, they would steal furtive glances towards him.

Having been told not to attract attention, Percy simply stopped and observed him for a while.

Compared to the mud-covered figure he had met in the mountains, he was of course currently dressed much more neatly, but there didn't seem to be any spirit in him as he remained gazing downwards throughout. Even his long hair, which had previously been carefully braided, was now simply tied in a single bunch behind his head.

When the hall herald announced the sovereign-prince's arrival at the same time as Magrid appeared, almost everyone there turned to welcome him, so Percy took advantage of the opportunity to approach the prince. When he called out to him, he was met with a hesitant gaze. The next moment, however, Leo Attiel gave him the same relieved smile he might give an old friend.

"Oh, the Leegan House's... I was feeling bothered by the fact that I still haven't thanked you sufficiently."

Percy found it heart-rending. Even though he had saved the prince's life, the fact that Leo would show so much affection when greeting someone that he had only met once indicated how isolated he had been since returning to their country.

"I was hoping you would come. The others aren't with you?"

"They all said that they don't can't really handle formal ceremonies. I am to give you their greetings in their stead, Prince," Percy picked suitable words for glossing over the situation. Just like he himself, Camus and Kuon had never been invited.

"I'm not good with them either," Leo's tone became casual as he shrugged. "Anyway, I spent more than six years in a backwater in Allion. I don't have connection to sumptuous feasts."

"I-Is that so?"

"The castle lord and his family were often invited to banquets at other castles or mansions, but I didn't go even when I was included in the invitation. I hate

being the centre of attention. But it was a bit of problem: Florrie used to insist that if I didn't go, she wouldn't go either. That girl has always worried about others, even way back when. To be honest, I'm not sure which would be worse: being shamed as a criminal in front of a crowd or trying to soothe and coax Florrie," Leo gave the slightest of laughs.

Immediately after, he seemed to regret having shown happiness, and his expression tightened. He was probably aware that being publicly shamed as a criminal was, in a way, a good description of his current situation. Percy felt his heart wrench again.

"Enough about me; won't you tell me tales of heroism?" Leo asked, looking like he was trying to change the mood.

"Tales of heroism? But you know, if you wish to hear some, there are several minstrels in the courtyard..."

"I don't want to hear boring old legends and mouldy old myths. I want to hear new epics from one of the people themselves about the brave men who rescued Attal's second-born prince," while maintaining a straight face, Leo showed a glimpse of playfulness.

Percy was somewhat modest about his own "tales of heroism" but, as Percy Leegan of the Leegan House, he did not have many stories or topics of conversation that could help dispel the prince's boredom. The only thing they had in common to talk about were the events in the mountains in Allion, so he chose to talk, in the hopes that it would help raise the prince's spirits, if only by a little. He had only intended to sketch the briefest of outlines, but seeing Leo's eyes sparkle and the way that he leaned forward, occasionally letting slip a wondering sound, Percy began talking with enthusiasm.

"What? That girl, Sarah, she looked like a young saint from a legend, but she actually shot a bandit leader through the head?"

Percy did not only talk about himself, but also spoke at length about Kuon, Camus and Sarah.

At that point, since most people had finished giving their greetings to the sovereign-prince, their attention was drawn back to Lord Leo.

*Never mind.*

Percy deliberately pretended not to notice, and continued his tale, enhanced with hand gestures – sometimes pretending to stab at something with a spear, sometimes pretending to be harshly scolding Nauma, his superior officer. He finally reached the climax of the story. Percy and the others had arrived at the end of their forced march and the enemy headquarters was right in front of them.

“The stronghold seemed to be almost empty, right? That’s right... If only I hadn’t escaped into the mountains at that time, the soldiers would not have been sent out and that means that you wouldn’t have been found, and instead, you would definitely easily have taken the enemy headquarters. If you had, you really would have been extolled as patriotic heroes in Atall. And then, your tale wouldn’t have been wasted by telling it only to me in a corner of the hall; you would have crowds of people at banquets like this begging to hear it, it would become a new ballad for the minstrels, and it would become known throughout the country. It’s my fault; I’m truly sorry.”

“What are you saying?” Percy smiled. “In the first place, it was thanks to Hayden sending his soldiers out to look for you, Prince, that the camp was empty. So your assumption doesn’t hold.”

“Oh, right,” the prince laughed.

Percy laughed with him as if to encourage Leo to continue smiling, but, perhaps because they were once again attracting attention from their surroundings, the prince pulled back his happy expression.

*Camus might have been right*, thought Percy. Even though the prince was seventeen-years-old, there was a trace of childishness in every one of his actions. At the same time, perhaps because he had spent so many years as a hostage, he seemed to hate catching people’s attention any more than necessary. Just as Camus had said, you could not hope to find in Leo the dignity and boldness of “a commander capable of rallying people at a single one of his commands.” However –

“You truly are braves. I would dearly like to listen to Camus, Kuon and Sarah as well.”

Percy felt an overwhelming feeling of affection for Leo when he spoke that innocent wish, like a child longing for a toy that they could never have. He wanted to talk more with the prince about his friends and himself.

“Being too brave can also cause unnecessary trouble. Take today for example: because of that, I felt as though my blood had frozen in my veins.”

“What do you mean?”

“That damn Camus was raging about how if Atall wasn’t going to move anymore but was going to sit down to peace talks with Allion, then he would shoot the messenger from Allion dead.”

Despite knowing that he was treading on dangerous ground, Percy talked about the day’s events. Although naturally, he did not mention that they had only been able to stop him through sheer use of force, but kept the story at a level where everyone had to desperately talk Camus down after he had drunk too much.

He had expected Leo to be astounded before maybe breaking out into laughter, but Leo did not say a word about the story.

The princess-consort of Atall had entered the hall right at that moment. While everyone present clapped their hands to greet her, Leo quickly hurried out of his mother’s line of sight.

## Part 2

Leo Attiel still did not have the courage to meet his mother's eyes.

Percy could not read his feelings to that extent, and thought that he must have lost interest in his stories. Just then, he caught sight of Lord Gloucester – his fiancée Liana's father – in the crowd.

"I have to go and greet some people," he excused himself and took leave of the prince.

Leo, left behind, once more loitered in silence.

Had it really been six and a half years since then? *I still haven't even seen my mother's face clearly*, Leo felt horribly discouraged about himself.

On top of that, he felt he even harder to understand his own feelings. Did he hate and resent her? Or did he desperately miss her? No matter how far away he had tried to keep it from the surface of his mind, the shadow of Leo's mother had always been at his side. Yet he felt that if she only turned to him with a smile, and said, "Leo, it's been hard on you," that shadow would vanish like the mist.

*With just that little...* He felt disappointed and irritated with himself at the thought.

Still – he did not have the leisure to think about his mother at any great length. Now that he was alone again after Percy had left, Leo was once more made aware of how complicated his situation was. Although he was still looking down, he could feel gazes piercing him from every direction.

"Why did he run away?" He could hear their voices. "Even if he came back to Atall, the second-born prince is worthless. The first prince and heir has grown up healthy, while the third prince is loved by everyone at court. Whether the second prince exists or not, it's all the same."

“Since he’s not good for anything, at the very least, we could have hoped that he carry out his job as a hostage.”

Naturally, those voices were no more than auditory hallucinations. At that point in time, the second prince was in a strange frame of mind. It was as though his eyes had flown away from his body and he was looking from afar at himself, who was standing still and staring down near the wall. Watching himself from the other people’s point of view, he really was nothing more than a tiny, wretched little boy.

Perhaps it was a phenomenon unique to Leo, who had been honing his eyes and his skill at observing his own emotions from afar. And in this case, the word ‘eyes’ could just as well be replaced by ‘his heart itself’; that was how Leo was able to cool-headedly observe himself and his surroundings from the viewpoint of a third party.

Basically, he could see himself as others saw him. Leo understood other people’s feelings very clearly, which was he heard so many of those imaginary voices.

*Honestly, why did you come back, me? Wouldn’t it have been better to be killed in Allion?*

Six years earlier, Claude had told him to wait “until you obtain power equal to the name ‘Attiel’.” However, in the end, he had done nothing in those six years to either surpass it or find a substitute for it. It was entirely fair to say that he was useless.

*Compared to that...*

He vividly recalled the tales from the battlefield that Percy had just told him. Be it Percy, Camus or Kuon, their ages were not so very different from his, yet they had fought a fearsome foe. They had put their lives on the line in that struggle, without letting themselves be overwhelmed. His heart thumped just thinking of it. The feats they had accomplished did not have any relation to either their family names or their lineages. Percy had fought to accomplish his duty, Camus to protect the faith he believed in, and Kuon probably to gain fame. Those reasons had been enough.

As far as Leo was concerned, they were dazzling. What on earth was there for

him to fight against or to fight to obtain?

Although he had no way of knowing it, his laments were a lot like those of Hayden Swift. Neither of them had anything more that they could wish for, nor any way of showing their abilities, so they had sunk far down instead.

Leo felt envious as he imagined Percy and the others dashing across the battlefield. If he had been born a commoner, would he too have charged shoulder-to-shoulder with them, a spear in his hand and his face flushed? Would he then be standing with his shoulders miserably hunched up in a place like this, which was more hostile even than enemy territory?

And... what was it Percy had talked about last? Oh right, he had said that the warrior monk called Camus had wanted to kill Allion's envoy, Hayden, to get the situation to move again. He had gotten distracted because his mother had made her entrance at that moment, but thinking back on it now, it had been a truly audacious and thrilling conversation.

Leo's lips curved into a faint and bitter smile.

He could imagine being born a commoner, but even so, he didn't think that he would be able to show the same determination in any situation that Camus had. He who had no value other than as a hostage, he who could not even look directly into his mother's face – he probably would not be able to carry through with that way of life like the level-headed Percy or the reckless Kuon.

*They will make names for themselves. That's an impossible fight for me, since I'm enmeshed in the name 'Attiel'.*

It was that bitter thought that had made him smile, but he quickly retracted it in case it made him look arrogant. He returned to seeing things from his own position, and lifted his head. The piercing gazes that had been shot at him like arrows scattered and fell.

Everyone chatted light-heartedly about things that had nothing to do with Leo. Outwardly, at any rate; before long, there were people who started sending glances his way again. Earlier, Leo had turned away from them, but this time, mostly on impulse, he deliberately returned their looks. His eyes met those of a portly noble. Leo smiled sweetly; looking flustered, the man sketched something like a bow before turning to avoid his eyes.

*Interesting*, though Leo Attiel.

The reason why they were currently looking down on him and disregarding his presence was because Leo was an Attiel. Meanwhile, the reason why they could not ignore him and had to show him more than common courtesy was also because Leo was an Attiel.

When he realised that, a faint feeling of mischievousness took root in him. In the end, he had not been able to obtain anything equal to the name of 'Attiel', but Claude had said something else six years ago: "I didn't have a name. So I made a name for myself and proved my own existence." Looking at it the other way round, the power that Claude had struggled for, fought for, and had desperately grabbed with his own hands was something that Leo had been given from birth.

*Power, huh?*

A power so insignificant that it almost made Leo burst into laughter. If he had to make a comparison, it was like one of those stray dogs that lived off scavenging scraps in alleyways trying to fight one of the giant dragons whose civilisation had once swept over the entire planet. But, even so, the other dogs in the small area of those narrow backstreets might perhaps be afraid of that stray. Maybe it had the authority to get first pick of the leftover scraps. That was still a form of power.

Leo once again let his gaze wander around the hall. Those whose eyes met his and those whose eyes seemed about to do so all turned away. Among them were three men standing diagonally across from the wall he himself was next to.

He recognised them. All of them were vassal-lords with their own established castles.

One of them was Oswald Taholin, the man who had strongly urged the sovereign-prince to send reinforcements to the temple. His hair was already conspicuously tinged with grey. Even six years ago, people were talking about whether he wouldn't soon be handing over the family headship to his son, but it seemed that he was currently still residing at his castle as its lord.

With Oswald were Bernard and Tokamakk.

Bernard was in his mid-thirties. He was tall and had a sturdy build. Both his hair and beard were neatly groomed, but his clothing was dishevelled. With that said, it was undoubtedly an artful disarray. He was, after all, a dandy. Be it at court or on the battlefield, he was man who stood out wherever he was, and equally, he was a young fellow whose eyes followed the behinds of every woman who happened to walk past him.

The third man, slender and fair-skinned, was Tokamakk. He was the complete opposite of Oswell: a youth who had only just been handed the position of head of the family by his father, who had recently been confined to a sickbed. Since his father had been late having a son, Tokamakk was still only twenty-one years old. When Leo had entered the hall, he had made an effort when presenting himself, but his hostility towards the prince was obvious behind the cramped smile that he wore.

His expression then was the same as it was now, and Tokamakk's bearing showed that, for some reason, he disliked being with Oswell. It was clear from his animosity towards Leo that Tokamakk did not want any quarrels with Allion, so he probably did not have any kind feelings towards the one who had advised the sovereign-prince to send reinforcements to the temple. However, their ages were as far apart as that of a parent and child. Oswell was smiling benignly and seemed to be making evasive conversation with Tokamakk, who was a straightforward young man. Bernard looked like he was finding it amusing to watch them, and he occasionally opened his mouth to poke fun at something.

Leo started to walk towards them. His heart was pounding.

*I'll give it a try.*

In Allion's rural backwaters, the name 'Attiel' had not held any great power – well, actually, being able to provide him with food every day to fill his belly and a warm bed to sleep in was already pretty great, but it wasn't the kind of power that could shake society at large – but how about in the Atall's own palace?

*I'll test how far my fangs can reach in this world of stray dogs.*

Somewhere in his thoughts, he had the stories that Percy had told about fighting against Allion. He was probably in a frame of mind similar to that of a child who had gone to bed with their heart throbbing after their parents had

read them heroic tales, and who wanted to gather up all their friends as early as possible tomorrow to play heroes.

He wasn't being carried away with fervour. This was nothing but a game. An innocent child's game, just as Florrie had sung about.

*Was I born to play? Was I born to frolic?*<sup>[2]</sup> He hummed to himself.

The three people noticed his approach. Their expressions were uniformly startled, but each of them greeted "His Highness, Lord Leo" with the appropriate courtesy. Realising that Leo was empty-handed, Bernard offered him a wine cup. Leo was about to refuse, but then changed his mind at the last moment and took it.

"But please keep it a secret from my father," he said jokingly. Bernard grinned.

"Tonight's banquet is also a celebration of your safe return, Your Highness. His Majesty the Sovereign-Prince will surely overlook something like this."

"Is that right?"

"With all due respect, I believe it would be best to stop," Tokamakk interjected. Even though he was always pale, his face was now strangely white. Bernard made a fed-up expression.

"You're being so rigid again."

"It's not an issue of being rigid or soft. Allion's envoy has been invited to this banquet. There are still many uncertainties about what direction the relationship between our two countries is heading towards. Since it was our side which acted improperly towards Allion, Lord Hayden's mood might be soured if he sees the prince merrily getting drunk."

By that time, Leo had already shifted his viewpoint to one outside of the four of them. As soon as he did so, his anxiety and fear melted away, and it felt as though he was a spectator watching a play on stage. And the very best actors were those whose field of vision stretched wide, and who could pay careful attention not only to themselves, but also to each of the other people.

*In other words, you're saying that I needed to understand my position as a*

*hostage.*

Leo put on a fearful expression and seemed about to put the wine cup back down.

Tokamakk smiled when he saw that. It was a smile that was very like the one that Hayden had worn at the Anglatt manor.

In that moment, Leo drained the contents of the wine cup in one gulp.

“Oh!” Bernard exclaimed out loud.

“Y-Your Highness!” Tokamakk’s voice sounded as though his throat was clogged up.

“I have no taste for alcohol,” Leo’s expression was unconcerned. “Getting drunk, not getting drunk... I don’t have anything to measure that by. So I tried having a cup. It’s fine: if it’s just this, then I think it will take three cups before I show any effects.”

He stretched out a hand towards Bernard, who immediately handed him another cup. Meanwhile, Tokamakk’s pale face flashed as though lit by a fire.

“Your Highness, you are being reckless.”

“It’s only one or two cups. What are you making such a fuss about?” Bernard reproved him, although he had probably realised that the prince's drinking was not what had caused Tokamakk’s anger. “Were you always this rigid? When I brought you with me to my favourite brothel in Tiwana, weren’t you having a grand old time? How many girls did you go with that time? Three... four, was it?”

“L-Lord Bernard, you can’t talk about something like that at a place like this!”

“Oh, I’m just jealous of you being a bachelor. Do you know how what my wife and daughter put me through afterwards? It was definitely someone from your house who betrayed me. It’ll be a while before I forget this grudge.”

Leo smilingly watched the exchange between the two. At the same time, however, and from a spectator’s position, he was carefully observing Oswald’s expression and behaviour, as well as those of the surrounding people who were casting interested glances their way.

“Lord Bernard, your wife and daughter are both renowned for their beauty. Personally, I'm jealous of you,” when Oswell said that, Leo looked as though he had just thought of something.

“Did you not bring them with you? How unfortunate... I would love to present them my greetings.”

“But of course. My wife and daughter have both been influenced by the Cross Faith, so they might seem a little eccentric, but if you come to visit us, Prince, my entire family will be happy to welcome you. It would be an honour for our castle.”

After exchanging some more light-hearted chatter, Leo broached the main topic with an ‘oh-by-the-way’ sort of expression.

“...Sir Tokamakk, earlier you mentioned that our future relations with Allion remain uncertain.”

*It looks like I'll have to direct the conversation a little forcefully.* Since he realised that the three of them were a little tense, Leo had quickly reached that conclusion, but he continued to smile as though this was not the main issue he had wanted to discuss.

“What do you mean by that? Since we are holding this banquet for Sir Hayden, we should be able to pat ourselves on the back about the fact that relations with Allion will not grow worse.”

“It is not that simple,” Tokamakk’s voice and expression were stiff, but his feelings showed clearly through his transparent mask –

*Brainless brat.*

Leo immediately looked anxious.

“You don’t mean that there’s a risk Allion might declare war on our country?”

“That is a possibility. Even now.”

“T-Then, should head towards Allion to put a stop to it?”

*What’s he saying at this point...* It wasn’t only Tokamakk’s face that reflected that thought; Oswell and Bernard’s were the same.

Tokamakk bitterly shook his head.

“Allion probably no longer needs you, Prince. If it intends to start something, no excuses or tribute will stop it. We will have no alternative but to take our spears and put ourselves on the battle front.”

*This is the situation that **you** brought down on your own country* – It was probably only because he wanted to berate this simple-minded prince that Tokamakk was bringing up such an extreme topic. Honestly, Leo had expected it to take a little longer. But since the other side had offered him such a perfect opportunity...

*Now* – the Leo Attiel who was watching from a distance whispered to him.

“Is that so? Take up our spears to fight... you say?”

“Exactly. It goes without saying that Allion is a powerful country. If it comes to war, every one of Atall’s subjects will need to be prepared to take arms. Naturally, even you, Lord Leo, will be no exception...”

“Hearing that is a great relief.”

*What?* The three people once more wore the same expressions. The only one still smiling, Leo drank from the second cup.

*This is bad* – it looked as though Oswell was having a hard time stopping that thought from showing on his face.

“What do you mean when you say that you feel relieved?” he asked Leo in a careful voice.

Leo took his time to answer, drinking his cup empty before he did so.

“When I was staying in Allion, I asked the people there, half as a joke, what kind of battles they expected if the situation with Atall once more turned to war, and what kind of outcome they predicted. Their answer was perfectly clear: ‘it won’t come to war’.”

“...”

“‘After all,’ they said, ‘Atall’s vassal-lords don’t have any obligation to send soldiers to the central ruler. They would oppose such an overwhelmingly unfavourable war. And if it looks like something is going to happen, as long as

we promise to let them keep at least half of their possessions, they'll go from trembling in fear to easily switching sides, and they'll let Tiwana fall to us'."

The three were left speechless.

This time, Lord Leo stretched out his hand in a slovenly manner, and it was Oswell who handed him the third cup. With it in hand, Leo continued,

"Actually, they told me that they had planned to hold out their hand to the vassal-lords during the previous war. That pointless war ended quickly. I had no way of verifying what they said, so I felt terribly depressed. But hearing what you said just now, Sir Tokamakk, I feel at ease. After all, you are all ready to fight for Atall at any time, right? I feel like going straight back to Allion and thrusting those words at them. This time, it will be their turn to tremble, right?"

"..."

"Oh but no, I don't need to go all the way back to Allion," Leo nodded triumphantly. "Sir Hayden will soon be here. I happen to be acquainted with him. I must go and tell him at once about Atall's determination."

"S – Stop! N – No... I mean, please wait, Your Highness," exclaimed Oswell, speaking instead of Tokamakk, whose mouth didn't seem to be functioning properly.

His expression mirrored Bernard's, who was next to him. *Don't tell me*, could clearly be read on both their faces, *d – don't tell me that this damned brat is planning to make a fool out of us adults?*

Leo did not feel any duty to answer that question of theirs. He simply maintained his smile. Blinking in confusion, Oswell said,

"It's better to keep that determination concealed in our hearts. To let the opponent take us lightly and then, when the time comes, to act decisively is..."

"If we allow them to look down on us, we're giving the enemy a chance to invade us. By showing them that we are ready to fight to the very last soldier, we can prevent the enemy from making any hasty moves."

"T – That's true, there is that... But..."

Leo was satisfied with the conversation.

After that, they talked lightly about Allion's possible arrangement of troops and also about how best to deploy Atall's forces. All of this on the assumption that the vassal-lords would send out their soldiers. While attempting to read Leo's expression and to sound him out on how serious he was being, the three of them could not afford to ignore the conversation given the current situation.

A little later, Tokamakk, followed by Oswell, made some vague excuses and left the prince. Only Bernard remained. For a short while, both of them stayed silent. During that interval, Leo's gaze followed Oswell's back, watching as he went to speak to other vassal-lords. Maybe he was walking around making small talk by telling stories of the ridiculous Lord Leo since they turned around to look towards Leo, but when they saw him staring fixedly at them, they hurriedly shifted their gaze forward again.

Leo Attiel's gaze did not only follow Oswell; it travelled carefully around the other vassal-lords and nobles as well. There were plenty of variations even among the nobles: on the one hand, there were those dressed in gorgeous clothes, while on the other there were those whose shabby appearance would make it easy to mistake them for servants working at the palace. There were those who exchanged smiling voices, and those – was it because of some past history or because they were currently in the middle of a quarrel – who would not even look at each other.

*They...* even if the country were in danger, they would absolutely never unite to defend it – Leo felt that realisation so strongly it left him stunned.

"Oswell Taholin..."

"Yes?" Leo had spoken so suddenly that Bernard answered out of sheer surprise. Leo didn't pay it any attention and continued,

"I had not expected him to behave so boldly."

"... By which, you mean...?"

"He was the one who advised my father to send reinforcements to the temple. Naturally, everyone here is aware of that fact."

"Of course."

"Given the situation, his position should be as bad as mine, who ran away

from Allion.... Or perhaps even worse. Something along the lines of: 'it's your fault that Atall is on the brink of danger', no?"

"That... No, that's true."

Bernard probably didn't know where the conversation was headed. Nor did he notice that Leo's tone had changed; he simply felt uncomfortable.

"Yet even so," Leo put the third cup, that he had never seemed interested in drinking, back on the table, "he is very dignified. Even when Tokamakk was criticising him, he didn't bat an eyelash. It's been six years since I saw him, but I don't remember Oswald having nerves this strong."

"..."

"That story about what was planned, is it true?"

This time, Bernard did not ask anything. His head slightly lowered, he only opened his eyes wide. In response, Leo deliberately pretended to be impatient.

"I asked you a question. Answer."

For a moment, anger flashed across Bernard's face at Leo's high-handed tone. After a few seconds had passed, however, he started to speak heavily.

"...It's true that before the last war began, an envoy from Allion, disguised as an itinerant entertainer, visited the castles of the vassal-lords. He came to mine too. It wasn't anything as grandiose as a plan, though. He claimed that since Allion didn't wish for a war at that time, his mission was to ask us to band together and try to persuade the sovereign-prince out of it."

"That would have been more than enough to throw our camp into chaos. He must have hinted at rewards too," this time Leo did not demand an answer, switching instead to another question. "Does my father know?"

"Lord Oswald apparently travelled to Tiwana at the earliest opportunity and explained everything directly to His Majesty the Sovereign-Prince."

*Father knew about it? In that case, this isn't a topic that Bernard particularly needs to conceal anything about.*

Leo was a little disappointed, but, well, getting him to tell even this much to a seventeen-year-old boy wasn't a bad result for now. Even if Bernard had,

ostensibly, pledged allegiance to Sovereign-Prince Magrid, and even if Leo merited his respect by virtue of being a prince, Bernard had no actual obligation to obey when Leo had ordered him to 'Answer'.

"Is that so, Oswell was it?" having started it Leo, continued with his act. "That would certainly have earned him His Majesty's trust. Enough so that when he advocated sending troops to the temple, His Majesty took that advice."

"What do you mean by that?"

Bernard's question was asked in a low voice, but Leo had only spoken an idea out loud, and the conversation had simply veered in that direction by chance. At that point, Leo was preoccupied with something else.

*So the 'Attiel power' that I hold is, at best, just this much?*

He had wanted to try out how effective the weapons he had to hand were, but although he gone barging in, the end result was that they only allowed him to 'not be ignored by the vassal-lords'. Even though he was supposed to have known that from the start, Leo felt so irritated that the top of his head seemed to be burning, and at the same time, he felt so anxious that it seemed as though he was about to collapse.

*It's not just me. Atall itself is horribly fragile and flimsy. A single whisper from Allion can upset things this easily.*

With Atall as it was, even a man as powerless as he was could easily throw it into chaos as long as he simply had Allion's backing. It would be like a dragon stepping forward and trampling over a hut: it would effortlessly be crushed underfoot.

Leo inwardly caught his breath. His body went cold to the core, just as though the castle ramparts, that he had always implicitly believed to be so solid, and the palace walls with them had collapsed with a thunderous roar and left him exposed to the winds.

He was enraged at the people who laughing happily. It felt as though he was the only one who was facing up to their terrifying reality.

However, he had just been made to realise just how weak the 'power' that he wielded really was. It was a paltry thing, incapable of changing anything..

*If I want more power...*

He could feel himself being bathed in the light – as bright as the noonday sun – coming from the brilliant flames that shone all around from the chandeliers, from the lamps on top of the tables and from the candles; whereas looking at his surroundings, he had the impression that they were somewhat dark and dim.

*If I want to be the strongest 'Attiel'... that only means one thing – becoming the sovereign-prince.*

## Part 3

He had started out only wanting to play at being a hero, but even though it was just a game, his thoughts had taken a strange turn.

For a second, Leo was confused by his own ideas, but immediately afterwards, he felt his blood seething with excitement. He thought that it was almost like a profanity.

Just then, the voice of the herald announcing arrivals rang out, and new guests appeared in the hall. At a single glance towards them, Leo's blood, which had almost been roaring with heat, seemed all at once to turn chilled.

It was Hayden Swift. He was escorting a woman that he was leading by the hand.

Hayden was, of course, the guest of honour at this banquet, and also an envoy from Allion; the very ones who were thrusting true 'power' at Attiel. Leo could not compare to it. Leo's buoyant feeling receded. Right then, he heard Bernard, who was next to him, ask in a surprised voice,

"Oh? Who's the beauty?"

Leo took another look at the woman next to Hayden. He hadn't noticed because of the distance, but it was Florrie Anglatt.

Just like Leo, it was the first time she had appeared in public since arriving in Tiwana, and she was standing beside Hayden, wearing the kind of dress that he was not used to seeing her in and lavishing her smile on her surroundings. It was not only because of the distance and the dress that she had, for a moment, looked like another person to Leo: she was also wearing makeup, which was unusual for her. Although it might be a slightly exaggerated way of putting it, Leo was utterly dumbfounded.

She who combed his hair every morning when he was in Allion, calling out

“Brother, Brother,” to him, now seemed like a completely different person. She was a girl around whom there had always drifted the scent of wind and earth, and the faint perfume of flowers, but now, in her grown-up dress and makeup, and wearing a slightly enigmatic smile, she seemed exactly like a young lady born to a noble house.

Was it Hayden who had brought her here? Also smiling all the while, he was holding her by the waist and showing off their intimacy.

Although the behaviour they were displaying was perfectly appropriate considering their positions, Leo had an uncomfortable feeling about Florrie’s smile that he found hard to shake off.

Besides Bernard, a number of voices throughout the hall had started murmuring praise of her beauty. They subsided, however, when the host and the guest of honour – the sovereign-prince and Hayden – finally stood side-by-side. Together, they spoke words about expecting good future relations between the two countries, and they both lead the assembly in offering toasts.

Leo was once again left alone in a corner.

All the many gazes and the idle curiosity converged on Hayden. He skilfully rode the wave of noble ladies who closed in on him, wanting to speak in person to this Allian aristocrat, and bestowed the perfect smile and words on them. With just a few parting comments to the prince, Bernard also gravitated towards Hayden. It was a scene that clearly showed Leo their difference in ‘power’.

By nature, he and Hayden were equals. Compared to Hayden’s, however, the ‘power’ that Leo had tested to its limits was, in the end, only something to be used in a world of stray dogs. Leo had tasted excitement strong enough to make his blood roar, and because of that, having truly been made aware of the difference in ability between them, he now felt miserable enough to fall prostrated to the floor. He who had been so proud of his privileged access to leftover scraps had his tail stepped on by humans holding stronger ‘power’, his back had been hit with a broom, he had effortlessly been sent scampering away.

*Playtime is over*, he realised.

He became aware that the wave of gazes and curiosity was once again surging towards him. When he looked, Hayden was approaching him, having left Florrie on the other side of the crowd.

Leo's body tensed up. Facing the smile that Hayden was throwing at him, the smile that he desperately pasted on his own face was so stiff that it was hard to believe he had managed to put on that act earlier, in front of the vassal-lords. His heart was beating wildly.

*But why?* Leo himself was puzzled by it.

When they had met at the Anglatt manor, he had not experienced this nervousness that was almost like dread. When Hayden had mocked him, he had even been seized with the impulse to leap from his chair and strike him. So why was it that the sight of the now-smiling Hayden Swift filled Leo with horror from the bottom of his heart? Why was it that even the silk clothes Hayden wore seemed to be giving off a dazzling radiance? Leo was conscious of the damp sensation of sweat on his forehead.

"It has been many long days since we last met, Prince."

"Y-Yes."

As though the skin of his throat had gone stiff, his voice would not come out smoothly. Hayden raised one eyebrow, ever so slightly, but did not show any other reaction, instead taking two wine cups from the table. He held one out.

"No, I already..." Leo was about to raise his hand to refuse, but at the same time,

"Take it. Everyone is watching," Hayden whispered in a fearfully low voice.

Leo's shoulders started in surprise. He hurriedly accepted the cup from Hayden. With a clear clinking sound, they brought their two cups together. Hayden emptied the contents of his in one go, while Leo only drunk a mouthful from his. He started coughing immediately afterwards, though, probably because he was so tense.

"Oh my, my," Hayden raised his shoulders and turned to the people watching. "Was it a little bit too soon to offer alcohol to the prince? It's true that he still young. I do not know the customs of Atall, for which I beg your pardon. Or

maybe... did the prince perhaps misunderstand, thinking that Allion wanted to kill him, he might have been excessively afraid of me. Thinking, for example, that I might have slipped poison into the wine.”

His joke cut dangerously close to the bone.

“Lord Leo, if you come to visit Allion again, please spend your time at ease there. That way, you won’t jump to the wrong conclusion and run away so quickly.”

Several people laughed. Essentially, Atall would only have the right to exist if they took it as a joke.

Leo felt as though he wanted to just disappear. Although he actually didn’t need to cough anymore, he kept it up because he did not know what to do with himself.

Percy Leegan had been closely watching the scene and, much later, Leo Attiel talked to him about it and frankly confided that never, before or since, had he felt as terrified of someone as he had then.

Because of that, Percy would occasionally think,

*Hayden Swift clearly made a mistake in allowing the prince to escape from Allion. Within the country, there was some debate about who, between him and Claude, bore responsibility for that. And for Hayden, Lord Leo wasn’t the only opponent that he failed to kill: it had been the same with Bishop Rogress, so it wouldn’t be surprising if he was furious at the thought that his reputation had been dragged through the mud.*

*If, at the time...*

*Hayden had already publicly given the prince a verbal smackdown. If he had been content with leaving Atall out of it...*

*If only his sadistic tendencies hadn’t still remained unsatisfied, if only he hadn’t whispered something like that, in a voice deliberately too low for others to hear, in order to deal the finishing blow to the prince...*

... then history might have been different.

Perhaps the Principality of Atall would not become what it later became.

But of course, and just as it is widely said, 'what-ifs' cannot change history.

And back then, Hayden Swift had deliberately touched the prince's arm, as though they were close, and, while pretending to have a pleasant conversation with him, he had whispered it.

That fact could never be erased.

Hayden strode jauntily away from Lord Leo. Once more left behind, the prince stared at his retreating back with an almost vacant expression. What Hayden had whispered as he was leaving was still ringing in his ears.

This is what he said:

"Well done from escaping from Allion. But that's the absolute best that you can do. I've said it before: 'if you plan on standing against us, then you have to be ready to give up your own life'. You don't have that. No, actually, every man in Atall is missing that. It's probably just as I said before. Everyone here is carefully watching my mood and continues to live without determination. What the hell does 'live' even mean here? If all you crave is to eat your allocated amount of fodder, and to sleep soundly under someone else's watch, then that's no different from cattle. O Lord Prince of this country of cattle. The peace you are 'living' in is simply something that Allion has granted you. It won't last for much longer."

He was speaking fast into Leo's ear, his eyes gleaming fiercely as he did so.

"I wanted to see for myself – how far can my own power go? The ones who gave me this chance were you and Claude. My thanks."

With those equally rapid parting words, he left.

Leo Attiel was rooted to the spot in surprise. Why, for what purpose, with what intention, had Hayden spoken that way?

*Atall's peace won't last for long.*

What did those words mean, and what was he trying to hint at with them?

Leo felt like he was being overwhelmed with the 'power' that Hayden held. It was as though he was being once more knocked down by the aberrant words that Hayden, who was still calmly walking away, had uttered.

At the same time, however, a strong sense of resistance emerged within Leo. It was close to the feelings that he had experienced when Hayden had heaped abuse on Atall, Leo's native land, but now, the kindling had taken fire, and the flames were starting to burn brightly within him.

*What can I do with my 'power'? What can I say? What can I change?*

Hadn't he just been given a vivid demonstration of their difference in 'power'? Leo understood it. Everyone understood it. Earlier, when he had been talking to Bernard, he had the impression that only he himself understood the current situation, but in fact, it was because everyone was aware of that 'power' difference that they had to constantly monitor Allion's mood, and that his father went through so much trouble to seek out good relations with Allion.

It was at that moment, just after he had been verbally belittled by Hayden Swift, that Leo's eyes met those of Florrie Anglatt. Not wanting to see the pity in her eyes, Leo was about to turn away, but the first to break eye contact was Florrie.

Hayden, who had just returned to her side, had urged her about something. The girl who had spent six years with Leo took a step forward and once more gave her greetings to the Ataltese dignitaries, starting with Sovereign-Prince Magrid, who was close by.

"Although my abruptness may be impolite, I thank you all for the kindness with which you have received me. I will warmly remember it for the rest of my life. I will soon be returning to my native country, but I pray that both Allion and Atall will continue to prosper."

Hearing that Florrie was going back, Leo forgot for a second about the storm swirling inside him. It had all been to protect Leo's back that she had done the unthinkable and left Allion's domains, but by now, she had already fulfilled that duty. Therefore, it would be best for Florrie to return, both for her and for her father's sake.

Even though his rational mind told him that, Leo could not help feeling

melancholy. The relationship between the two countries was still uncertain, and this might well be where he and Florrie parted ways in this life.

*At least a few words...* Leo was about to step forward with a different reason from earlier.

His eyes once again connected straight with Florrie's; she once again turned away but then, the next moment, she seemed to change her mind and smiled at him.

Leo suddenly understood why he felt such a strange sense of discomfort from Florrie's smile. This was not her usual smiling face. Although with that said, he had the impression that he had seen it before, but it was only now that he remembered when and why that had been.

It was the same smile that Florrie had given her family just after her beloved mare, 'Princess', had been put down.

From the next morning onwards, she had appeared at table with a smiling countenance. Be it Claude, his wife, Ellen, or Florrie's brothers, Walter and Jack, who usually often teased their sister, all of them noticed that her doe-like eyes were red and swollen, but they pretended not to see. Ellen made a point of asking for her daughter's help in the kitchen, while Walter and Jack hogged Florrie's favourite food until their father was provoked into scolding them. The brothers had done that a lot when they were young, but now, since it was a little childish, it seemed unnatural of them. Florrie had never stopped smiling while her father was forcing himself to yell angrily.

She now had the same expression as back then.

Moreover, now that he had taken a few steps forward and could see her face from closer than earlier, he felt that he understood the reason for her almost incongruously thick makeup. Both her cheeks were rouged, but only the left one was somewhat dark in colour. Or rather, it was to hide that colour that she had needed to put reddening powder on both sides.

Leo realised that there was a mark. And not something like a birthmark, but a recently-given bruise.

In that instant, there was the sound of something clanging in his heart.

The separate gears that had been spinning randomly up until now seemed to suddenly fit together.

He had not logically reasoned it out. It was simply that Leo's brain had retained the fact that Hayden Swift had once wanted Florrie Anglatt. Only by placing that fact at their centre did he now feel like he could make sense of the strange events that had taken place.

The fighting between Allion and the temple. The actions that Allion's side had taken at the time. The reinforcements that Atall had sent. The way Claude's position had worsened. Or how, even without the looming threat of the guillotine, Leo had almost been murdered in the mountains.

Why it was that the only time Hayden had been thrown into a complete panic was when he had learned that Leo and Florrie had escaped, to the point of emptying his own headquarters. And why he had left the battle front and was now to be seen in distant Tiwana, capital of Atall.

To reiterate: there was no logical process of reasoning.

Why, what, how... – he had not thought about any of these. He did not yet hold the key to solving those mysteries.

But the crucial point here was the fact that just as the gears clicked together in Leo's head, Hayden placed his hand once more at Florrie's waist.

When he did so, Hayden once more flashed a scornful – or possibly triumphant – smile. At least, that was how it appeared to Leo, and that was all the answer he needed. Part of the high-handed and oppressive atmosphere surrounding Hayden fell away, and human emotions were clearly visible from him.

“I wanted to see for myself – how far can my own power go?” Hayden had said as he was stepping away from Leo.

*Your power, you say?*

The driving force behind the first step forward that Leo Attiel took was the fury that raged within him.

*Would that be the power to snatch Florrie away and to destroy Atall?*

That man could do it. Leo could feel it. Hayden's parting speech had not been a hollow threat or mere mockery. He was the kind of man who, if he could do it – no matter how ridiculous it might seem to other people – would do it. He had basically announced to Leo that he would be leading troops to attack Atall.

*After you've destroyed Atall, are you going to hug Florrie's shoulders with your bloodstained hands? Are you going to force to always wear that smile?*

Rage managed to propel him forward for his second and third steps, but before he could take another one, an insurmountable wall seemed to appear before Leo's eyes. Even though his fury was so strong that he was almost dizzy from it, there was a limit to anger.

It wasn't rational. Simply giving in to a violent impulse would not allow him to break through or smash down anything and everything. Leo bit the edge of his lip and clenched his hands so tightly into fists that his nails bit into his palms.

*It would still be fine if it was just my life. I've already twice prepared myself for death. But the enemy is Allion. If all of Atall gets caught up in this...*

"No."

Leo's shoulders started with surprise as he suddenly had the impression that someone's breath had tickled his ear.

There was no other person near him. What had appeared like smoke beside him was the stagnant black *sludge*, which had taken the shape of another Leo Attiel. It was an existence which could sometimes be called an aggregate of every emotion that Leo had tossed away, and which, conversely, was sometimes that other viewpoint which was utterly detached from all emotions that Leo adopted.

"The enemy isn't Allion. What your power can and should crush, set fire to and overthrow – that is..."

Leo Attiel could feel each of his own footsteps reverberating strangely loudly inside his brain. Before he had even realised it, the insurmountable wall had cleanly vanished from before his eyes. He walked past Bernard, who was standing at the end of the line of people crowding around Hayden, then Tokamakk and Oswell – Leo's profile crossed by the line of sight of each of

those three vassal-lords.

The next was Percy Leegan.

Perhaps Hayden had sensed something, because he turned around, looking surprised. By that time, Leo had already passed him by. Hayden continued to look as though he was enjoying his conversation with the surrounding nobles, but he was inwardly nonplussed.

The next moment, both Hayden and Florrie, who was standing next to him, were left startled.

The sound of laughter blew like a breeze through the hall.

It was Lord Leo. He had suddenly appeared right in front of Hayden and Florrie, and continued to laugh loudly, as though he had completely lost all restraint.

“What the...” Hayden Swift was clearly annoyed by it.

Florrie, too, looked surprised. However, she opened her large eyes even wider at what Leo said once he had finished laughing.

“You should stop it with the pranks, Florrie. If you say that you’re going back to Allion immediately, everyone will actually believe you. Since nobody here knows you all that well, they’ll take even a silly joke seriously.”

As mentioned, Florrie’s eyes went round and she was left speechless, but her natural complexion gradually slowly returned to her make-up-coated cheeks.

“W-What silly joke? Leo-nii... no, Lord Leo, I...”

“You’re really sulking at me for not making many opportunities to meet here in Tiwana, huh? I had my own circumstances. Well, it’s not like I don’t understand where you’re coming from.”

“Prince, what on earth...?”

“It’s fine, you don’t have to pretend. I had intended to personally tell Father and everyone else once things had calmed down a bit more. But if you can’t wait anymore and are talking about going back to Allion, then it can’t be helped. Let’s make the announcement here and now. Florrie,” Leo casually stretched out his hand and took Florrie’s in his.

Hayden opened his eyes wide in anger, but Leo payed him no attention and pulled the bewildered Florrie to stand next to him.

“Father. Mother. I need to introduce you to her.”

“Leo, what are you saying?” Sovereign-Prince could not conceal his confusion. “I already know the young lady.”

“No, this is something nobody will know about,” Leo smiled as he made his announcement. “Claude Anglatt’s daughter, Florrie Anglatt, and I, Leo Attiel, have promised our future together.”



“What!” Hayden let out a voice that was almost a shriek.

He was the only one to do so. Florrie was speechless. Leo’s father and mother, as well as the vassals, at first all looked as though they had heard a joke in poor taste. Leo, however, was smiling.

“Sir Claude has not yet officially given me his blessing, but we can send a messenger from here. If it comes down to it, I’ll even go myself. When we receive permission from the king of Allion through Sir Claude, I’ll be happy to hold the wedding at once,” he continued, at which point, Percy Leegan stepped forward.

“What a happy story,” he smilingly followed Leo up.

Percy, of course, had no way of knowing either the prince’s circumstances, or even whether what he was saying was true or not. But this short amount of time had been enough for him to form a good impression of the prince, and he was moved by the impulse to have his back.

“What this means is that when His Highness, Lord Leo, and Miss Florrie get married, relations between Atall and Allion will get warmer, and all those misunderstandings that have occurred will all be solved at a stroke.”

At that point, the people in the hall grew noisy with excitement. Hearing what was happening, those in the courtyard were also gathering close.

Leo Attiel swept his gaze around the enthusiastic crowd.

“May I hope that you will all celebrate it?” he asked.

Say what you would, the prince who had seemed about to sow the seeds of trouble with Allion was instead going to become their best bridge with Allion. There was nobody who did not welcome this development. Everyone there clapped as they unanimously called out their congratulations.

Florrie Anglatt blushed bright red, and tears flowed out from her limpid eyes.

Unfortunately for her, however, after giving her slender shoulder a single pat, Leo quickly released her arm and, still smiling, walked towards Hayden Swift.

The sound of applause was ringing out incessantly. Amidst it, Leo deliberately took a heavy step forward and trod lightly on the tip of Hayden’s boots. Hayden’s scowling expression turned into one of surprise.

In exactly the same tone that Hayden had earlier used on him, Leo whispered softly,

“Smile. Everyone is watching.”

“W-What?” Hayden was struck dumb, but rage quickly flared up within his eyes. “What are you trying to pull, you bastard? Even an ignorant brat like you... you can’t think that you’re going to get away with s-something like this and...”

“What do you mean?” Leo laughed brightly. “There’s currently no great cause worthy of sending troops from Allion and Atall. Or instead of a cause, are you, my little friend, going to substitute that power that you were so proud of earlier to move the army? It’s fine, I’ll happily show it you: how Atall, how its second-born prince, Leo, will turn the tables on you.”

Hayden’s Swift’s eyes opened as wide as they would go.

# Afterword

Sorry for keeping you waiting!

... Even if I say that, those of you who have just read this book probably won't have any clue about what you are going to be reading here next.

It would be one thing if this was a popular series which hadn't come out in a while, but this book is the first volume of a new series. And there must be plenty of people picking up a book by this author for the first time. But in actual fact, that strange 'sorry to keep you waiting' greeting was not meant for the readers.

Around about the end of last year, Sugihara Tomonori folded his arms as he sat in front of his desk. This useless adult, who was no longer young but who really doesn't exude the dignity of a veteran, was worried about 'becoming a productive member of society'.

He had written successively about a gladiator who got caught up in a plot and made into the body-double to the heir to the throne of a large country; then (under a different publishing label!) about how, on a battlefield filled with heroes and braves, a boy rose in position not through physical strength or magic power, but only thanks to his own inborn cunning; and finally about the adventures of an ordinary boy, and of his older sister who yearned for a world of fairies.

"So, what comes next?"

The sense of being unable to move forward was like a gaping hole had opened wide in his chest.

That's right, he was racking my brains for an idea of what to write for his next novel.

Although various fragmentary ideas, such as *Celtic mythology*, *karate*, *ninjas*,

*yakuza, teachers, MRV missiles, spirit possession, boxing, warring states...* came to mind, he could not find anything that clinched things within him. Given that worrying endlessly was probably nothing but a waste of time, this man, who was seriously worried, decided to waste time doing whatever he wanted instead – sorry, I mean he gave ‘his own seriously worried self’ some time off instead.

After spending several weeks in complete idleness, a certain name surfaced within his brain.

Leo Attiel.

The sound of that name carried with it a mix of joy and nostalgia, like unexpectedly meeting an old acquaintance in the street. Right, at the time, he hadn’t abruptly come up with something, but rather, he had known that name since long ago.

Several years ago, when he was writing ‘Rakuin no Monshou’ under Dengeki Bunko and was coming to the end of the ‘story of the west’, he thought to himself,

“Maybe the next one will be the ‘story of the east.’” And so he started to ponder about the various countries and powers that were dotted around to the east of Mephius, the lead actor.

In the end, and perhaps also because of the author’s own lack of ability, not even half of the memo produced at the time was put to use, and, for some reason, only Leo Attiel’s name and a brief outline of his career stuck in the author’s mind for a long time after.

The name ‘Leo Attiel’ did not only bring feelings of nostalgia with it. The various settings and scribblings concerning Leo and Principality of Atall, the many scenes from Leo’s life, the innumerable anecdotes that drew a picture of Leo’s personality, all came flooding back one by one with so much strength that it was impossible to stem the tide.

It was exactly as though Leo was complaining to the author,

“Have you finally remembered? In that case, hurry up and write about me. Tell my story to as many people as you can.”

Sugihara Tomonori – actually this is kind of a pain, so, basically, I – stiffened my resolve and took up my pen.

That greeting at the beginning – “Sorry to have kept you waiting!” – was addressed from the author to none other than to his main character, Leo Attiel.

An old hero, forgotten by history. I want to tell to as many as possible the ‘true’ tales of a person who is by no means famous, or who is only known because of his bad reputation. It was with a passion a bit like that of a history writer’s that I finished penning this book.

Those of you who have already finished reading it will have realised that the lead actor in this story did not appear much in this volume. However, I hope that you, the readers, will look forward to seeing how Leo, who is currently still an unreliable boy, will leap to the centre of this historical tale.

P.S.

As written in this afterword, this humble book is set on the same stage as ‘Rakuin no Monshou’. If it had been a direct sequel, however, it wouldn’t have been possible to enjoy it without knowing the previous series, and I wanted those who have not read ‘Rakuin’ to be able to pick this up without worries.

Although of course, if this book motivates you to take an interest in the author’s other series, nothing could make me happier...

--- Sugihara Tomonori

# Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Pronounced like the name of the French author, with a silent 's'.
2. ↑ “Was I born to play or flirt?” or “Was I born to play? Was I born to frolic?”, is a line from the *Ryōjin Hishō* (梁塵秘抄/Songs to Make the Dust Dance on the Beams), a collection of songs popular in 12th century Japan and compiled by Emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127-1192). Thanks to the help of the Taira and Minamoto, Go-Shirakawa seized the throne after a struggle for succession and a brief civil war (the Hōgen rebellion), but reigned only three years before completely losing effective power to first the Taira then the Minamoto who had once supported him. After the Genpei War between the two samurai families, Minamoto no Yoritomo established the Kamakura shogunate, and the emperors of Japan were reduced to figureheads for the next few centuries. Leo humming a song associated with this emperor is probably ominous. It could also be indicating that he is very well-read, since the anthology he is quoting is relatively obscure. Finally, [this song in particular](#), sung by an aged prostitute, is controversial since it can be interpreted either as her regretting her old way of life, or nostalgically looking back on her youth, which would fit Leo's ambiguous reputation.