

III

杉原智則

イラスト * 岡谷

TALES
OF
LEO ATTIEL

レオ * アッティール伝

* 首なし公の肖像 *

電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations



Leo Attiel Den
v02 002.png



この戦い、ぼくが勝利しなければ
アトールは滅びるのだ。

※ アトール公国第二公子 ※

レオ・アッティール

人質同然で赴いていた大国アリオンから帰還。
アリオンに対抗するため動き始める。

これより、全力をもって
コンスコン寺院を陥落させる。

※ 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。
レオ、そしてアートル公国を倒すべく策謀を巡らす。



勝利を約束できるか、小僧。

✦ 荒ぶる僧兵 ✦
カミュ

ヨンスコン寺院に所属する、
「十字教」の敬虔な信者にして槍の名手。

A character with blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing silver and gold armor, is riding a horse. The background shows a blue sky with clouds and parts of the horse's harness.

その先頭で馬を駆り、
自銀の甲冑をきらめかせるのは誰あろう、
アーサー・コースブルク！

サニガイヤ
※ デイティアーヌ聖薔薇団団長 ※

アーサー・コースブルク

デイティアーヌ十字軍の一翼を担う快活な武人。
まだ若く、いくさの経験は浅い。



賭けてもよいけれど、
あの一人、できているわね。

※ 勇猛な修道尼 ※

セーラ

カミュの妹。
きつぷがよく勇敢な性格。
銃の扱いが得意。

おまえはつまり、このおれに、
アリオンを裏切れ、
といっているのだぞ。

※ アリオンの将軍 ※

クロード・アングラット

豪放磊落な辺境の太守。
レオの人質時代、その身柄を預かっていた。

そりだ。「面首」。
わたしもまた、そう思ったのだ。

※ アートル貴族の子息 ※

パーシー・リイガン

功名心あふれるアートル名門貴族の次男。
自ら救出したレオに関心を持つ。

そして迎えるコンスコン寺院での決戦。

知略と武力を尽くした戦いの行方は果たして——!!?



デザイン * ビイパイ

Chapter 1: After the Feast

Part 1

Later historians would say that in his life, Sovereign-Prince Magrid Attiel of Atall had greatly misread the situation on three occasions.

The first was seven years earlier.

Atall was a country with a long history. After the collapse of the Magic Dynasty which had united the world, the continent was engulfed in the torrents of chaos, and Atall was one of the countries which had been born as though it had come crawling out from those waves. But, turning one's eyes to the west, the mighty Allion, a nation with an even longer history, and with a size more than several times that of Atall, had settled its massive bulk right next to the principality.

So as not to be crushed underfoot, Atall inevitably studied the mood of this large country on every occasion. It could even be said that the length of Atall's history corresponded to the length of time that it had been sending envoys and tribute to Allion.

Southeast of Allion and to the west-northwest when looking from Atall, there was a kingdom called Shazarn. In terms of territory, it was slightly larger than Atall, but in terms of its financial power, it far exceeded Atall, thanks in part to its close relationship with the northern coastal countries, and the prosperous trade that went with it. It was said that when it came to the number of their guns – cannons and firearms – Shazarn could even hold its own against Allion, and so its surroundings whispered that it was 'the Silent Ruler'.

There was an area where the borders of the three countries – Allion, Atall and Shazarn – met. Because of the nature of that region, skirmishes had broken out time and again, but, throughout the long years of history, it had served as something of a buffer zone between the three of them, and no matter how fiercely they glared at each other from across it, none of them forayed too deeply into it.

Then Shazarn suddenly built a fortress there. They hired groups of marauding soldiers – mercenaries who acted on a country's orders but who frequently concealed or lied about where they were from or who their employers were – and repeatedly sent them to that area, to drive out the gangs of bandits and vagrant thieves who tried to settle there, or else to bring those men under their influence and borrow their help to construct the fortress. After which, Shazarn sent in regular soldiers one after another.

The general in charge of defending Allion's northeast border was astounded by this, and he immediately flung open his castle gates and led an onslaught against the fortress. For Shazarn, this was completely unexpected. When undertaking military action that involved crossing the border, a commander should naturally first ask their king to make a decision, and Shazarn had judged that since Allion's territory was vast, it would take time simply to send a message to the royal capital.

However, Allion's king, who had been enthroned in his twenties, vigorously crushed any opposition through sheer might. From time immemorial, it has been said that retainers take their cue from their liege's personality, and this border general too followed his king's way of doing things.

If I carelessly let things slide, it'll be too late afterwards – he decided for himself, so before anything else, he sent out messengers requesting reinforcements from the nearby forts and towns, while he himself set out with a party of five hundred soldiers to lead an assault.

Facing his manoeuvre, the fortress took hurried action. They naturally sent messengers to their own country, Shazarn, but they also requested reinforcements from Atall, which was closer to their location than Shazarn was. Atall had long had good relations with Shazarn, and had, from the start, taken part in building the fortress. In those days, Allion was active in expanding its

territory, and the cooperation between the two countries stemmed in part from the fear of not knowing when Allion might extend its reach eastwards. In fact, it could well be said that the king of Allion's towering ambitions had caused Shazarn's apparently abrupt actions.

From Atall's point of view, rather than having a border in direct contact with such a dangerous military force, it would be preferable to have the 'Silent Ruler' become a wall for them. Sovereign-Prince Magrid immediately assembled more than five hundred of his troops and sent them to the fortress.

In that, however, he had misread the situation.

At the time, in Shazarn, the king had begun to hint that he was thinking of abdicating. A fight for the throne was secretly being fought between the two princes and the king's younger brother. Building a fortress in the neutral zone at the border was the sole decision of one of the young princes, who was trying to get a step ahead in that struggle, and it had never been the king of Shazarn's wish.

Moreover, that young prince had apparently naively believed that:

"We won't be attacking any of Allion's keeps, so you can't say that we're seizing a part of their territory. Allion is currently filled with enemies inside the country, without even mentioning those outside of it. They won't go all-out for something like us building a single fort."

On top of that, the bold general who had launched an assault against the fortress suffered because of that same boldness. He repeatedly assailed the fort, but the reinforcements from Atall attacked him from behind and he died in battle.

Worse was yet to come.

Those at the fortress were drunk on their victory. Setting aside the regular soldiers, the prince of Shazarn did not have the makings of a commander capable of harmoniously uniting this group of bandits and marauders, as well as the reinforcements from Atall. Quite the opposite; the prince rode on the wave of momentum and personally led an invasion into the deceased general's territory. Villages were looted at the hands of savage soldiers, and even the castle town was set ablaze.

The king of Allion was enraged. At the time, he had been in the region of the southwestern Kilawoo Mountains, engaged in a standoff against a rebellious territory, so he plucked a thousand men from his camp there and, for five days, almost without pause, he rode hard towards the north. On the sixth day, after riding for part of it, he swooped down on those invading his territory.

No matter how well-maintained Allion's highways might be, that speed was extraordinary. And it too came down to the fact that Allion's vigorous and resilient king was in command. Lacking experience because of his youth, the prince of Shazarn was no match for him. Forced further and further back as the king of Allion pressed forward, he might have been expected to barricade himself in the fortress, but, contrary to all expectations, he passed straight by it, and before anyone had time to realise what was happening, he had already holed himself up in his own country's territory.

Once Shazarn's soldiers had withdrawn, the only ones left were the bandits, the marauders and the troops from Atall. Naturally, they fled too. The fortress that Shazarn had built burned to the ground in no time at all.

After that, negotiations were conducted between Allion, Shazarn and Atall. The territory that had once been the neutral zone between borders was given to Claude Anglatt, a general from Allion who had distinguished himself during the war, with the result that Shazarn's border was pushed to the north, while Atall was forced to send its second prince, Leo Attiel, as a hostage to Allion.

That was the first occasion on which Sovereign-Prince Magrid had misread the situation.

Seven years had passed since the war. For a time, the relationship between Allion and Atall seemed to have reverted to calm, but then a change occurred. Relations worsened between Conscon Temple, which was situated within the neutral zone, and Allion, which had once funded the temple and promoted its reconstruction.

In response to the temple's request, Magrid Attiel sent reinforcements. Although they did not take part from the start, unlike the time with Shazarn, the situation was very similar.

Tensions sprang up again between Atall and Allion. On Allion's side, they

dispatched an envoy to find out what Atall's real intentions were. Sovereign-Prince Magrid was hard-pressed to give an answer, but judging from Hayden, the envoy's attitude, he guessed that Allion was not planning on immediately sending troops, and it seemed that they had just barely managed to maintain a semblance of friendly relations.

Additionally, an unexpected but happy situation occurred.

It concerned Lord Leo Attiel, who had been sent to Allion as a hostage. Although given that he had escaped from Allion, the prince might potentially have become a new source of conflict with them, he now announced that he had pledged his future with Florrie, the daughter of General Anglatt, in whose custody he had been placed. It was at a banquet at which Hayden had been the guest of honour, but thunderous applause filled the hall.

Not having been informed of any of it, Magrid was taken by surprise, but he quickly realised that this was not a bad idea. Once the marriage was completed, far from being a source of conflict, Leo would become a good link with Allion. The only thing was that since General Anglatt was an upstart, he had no connection to Allion's royal family. It would be a lie to say that Magrid was unconcerned about that, but, for now, he was not in a position to aim too high.

"Is that true, Leo?" Magrid also clapped his hands. After which, "Really, in sending my son away, I had intended for him to broaden his perspective, but then he goes and finds himself a bride. I guess you can't fight the Attiel blood, huh?"

He joked and made everyone laugh. He glanced towards his wife, the princess-consort, to get her approval, but as she responded with an unamused expression, he quickly cleared his throat. Nevertheless, there was no doubt that Sovereign-Prince Magrid welcomed the announcement.

That was the second occasion on which he misread the situation.

The hall was enveloped in a harmonious mood, but Lord Leo Attiel's announcement was in no way likely to strengthen the relationship between the two countries, and was instead a 'declaration of war' from Atall to Allion – or rather, from Lord Leo to the Allian aristocrat, Hayden Swift.

But then, perhaps it was too harsh to blame Magrid for misreading the

situation. The only one there who had realised Leo's real intention was Hayden Swift, who was staring intently at Leo, his face ashen. In other words, within that hall that was filled with warm applause, it was only between Leo and Hayden that feelings of furious enmity were colliding.

Speaking of declarations of war, Leo had already received one from Hayden. It was he who had first said that, "Atall's peace is just like the feed tossed to cattle. It won't last for long."

It was nothing less than a declaration of his intention to burn Atall to the ground. For a moment, Leo had not thought that he was serious, but when he noticed how unnatural Florrie's attitude was as she announced to everyone that she would be returning home, he had realised, *that man would actually do it*. It was only now that he realised how this man had worked out scheme after scheme to get his hands on Florrie.

For a moment, the capital, Tiwana, appeared in Leo's mind; set alight at Hayden's hands, its buildings burning down. The people who were running about, trying to flee, were cut down one after another by Allion's soldiers. Hayden Swift watched as women, children and the elderly were run through with spears. He wore a faint smile, and Florrie was at his side, his hand on her waist.

That was what Hayden had said he would do.

Which was why Leo had also spoken.

"I'll show it you. How Atall, how this second-born prince, Lord Leo, will turn the tables on you."

He had spent more than six years as a hostage in a foreign country, and he was a prince who had rarely openly displayed his emotions before now. His anger, sadness and joy all seemed to be wrapped up in a cloth, which they never came out from. He frequently did not even know what kind of expression he himself was showing at any given time. In that moment, those feelings that he had been accumulating for six years and more had condensed and transformed into a single arrow which were fitted to a bow drawn as tightly as it would go before being released at full power.

Hayden Swift – the enemy pierced by that arrow – staggered and stared astounded at Leo. And Leo Attiel savoured unparalleled delight.

But that too lasted no more than an instant. Hayden's face slowly turned scarlet from rage and, as if keeping pace with it, Leo's joy faded. *I might have done something that can never be undone*, a surging sense of regret completely shrouded his delight at his victory.

Allion was, of course, a great power. Even if all of Atall fought against it, they did not have a one in a million chance of victory. Which meant that the words which had ridden on the arrow he had just fired might have been no more than an incantation to bring ruin and destruction to his native land.

While Leo might have gotten frightened at Hayden's furious expression, now that he understood its true nature as well as what lay behind it, there was no longer anything dignified about it. On the contrary, Leo could see that the essence of Hayden's anger was that of a childish and vain man filled with a distorted desire to monopolise what he wanted, and a desire to flaunt his own power.

For a while, Leo and Hayden continued their silent exchange of emotions, carried out only through their gazes, but this too did not last long.

“Congratulations, Prince.”

“Congratulations!”

Wine cups in hand, men and women of all ages crowded around Leo to express their delight. Even though they had been curious about Leo, there was a world of difference with how they had earlier hesitated to even stand around talking with him. By nature, Leo was always flustered when he had to appear before a large number of people, yet this time, perhaps because he had only recently put on an act in front of Oswell and Bernard, he was able to receive all of their congratulations with a smile.

“Thank you very much.”

His heart was learning to feel relaxed enough to calmly return their good wishes.

On this occasion, the entire crowd converged on Leo. Everyone wanted to

hear about the start of his romance with Florrie, and about his life in Allion. Although Leo was still under some strain, he managed to answer them more or less tactfully.

During all of that, from the corner of his eye, Leo caught sight of Hayden addressing Sovereign-Prince Magrid. He seemed to be requesting permission to withdraw. The sovereign-prince nodded and called to gather everyone's attention, once more saying a few words in celebration of the good relationship with Allion.

Hayden crossed the hall and walked straight towards Leo, who could not avoid tensing up. Hayden passed him by without pausing, sending him only a slight bow. Observers would not even have been able to see it.

In that instant, however –

“Remember this,” he whispered. “Brat, I'll take Florrie to bed in front of your severed head.”

He darted no sharp glare towards Leo. It was only that there was a darkness within his eyes. Leo remembered the first time he had been anywhere near Hayden; the Allian noble had worn the exact same expression while pouring scorn on Leo and on Atall.

Although he had an air of being terribly level-headed, in fact, and just as Leo had earlier sensed, Hayden was as immature as a child who had yet to grow up. In spite of that, he could not, of course, be dismissed as “nothing but a child” since he was a high-ranking noble from the great country of Allion, and one whose position allowed him to be entrusted with diplomatic missions such as his current role of envoy.

At the very least, compared to Leo, who was not in a position to freely move even a single soldier, he held some ‘power’. And he had both the ability to take action and the ambition to put that power into practice. The proof of that was that he had come to Atall Palace according to his own wish.

How does he intend to wield his ‘power’ next?

Before long, Hayden's retreating back passed out of sight, but Leo was inwardly plunged in worried thoughts, even as he was still surrounded by

people offering him their congratulations.

Part 2

Once Hayden had left the hall and everyone gathered around Leo had satisfied their curiosity about him, the atmosphere at the banquet turned a little dull. At least for the time being, the threat that might have befallen them at any time had passed by, and it seemed that they would be able to continue enjoying the peaceful days they had known until now, and so all of those there started to spend their time how they best pleased: flirting with the women they had an eye on, talking business, singing songs or dancing for pleasure.

Sovereign-Prince Magrid showed signs of leaving, so everyone spoke words of salutation and were about to see him off, when a commotion that was not a minor one erupted.

When turned to look at the people involved, Leo's eyes narrowed.

How interesting, he thought.

Of the two of them, one was a man who, even among the other vassal lords, inevitably attracted the eye thanks to the luxurious clothes, sparkling ornaments and precious metals that he wore, while one glance at the other was enough to see that the faded clothes he had on were his best suit, which he seemed to have hurriedly climbed into.

In terms of appearance, the two were complete opposites, but both were domain lords with castles to the south of Tiwana, the capital city, and were nobles who were referred to as vassal lords of hereditary fiefs. Even Leo, who had been away from Atall for so long, remembered their names and faces.

The first was Darren Actica.

More than ten years ago, sparks had flown when two vassal lords had been embroiled in a dispute over a vein of dragonbone, and Darren, who had been one of those concerned, had emerged victorious. Moreover, because the then sovereign-prince had been unable to arbitrate the dispute, a great many of the

nobles had criticised him for his 'lack of ability', which had forced him to hand over the throne to the then prince, Magrid. The key figure in ousting the previous ruler had again been Darren.

From there on, the power of the ruling princely house weakened, while that of the vassal lords was strengthened. And among them, Darren was the one who had become the most influential of them all.

The other man was Savan Roux.

He possessed a fort and a small territory at the southwest border. His clothing was shabby and his face pallid, in sharp contrast to Darren's glowing complexion. Although Savan could not have been older than his mid-fifties, his hair was already completely grey. He should have retired from the position of castle lord a long time ago.

Savan edged up to Darren to say something, then, the next moment, seemed about to move towards Sovereign-Prince Magrid.

"Wait!" This time, it was Darren who sharply called out as he blocked Savan's way. "What are you planning on saying? Are you going to inflict upon His Majesty the same baseless rumours that you just told me?"

"What 'baseless rumours'?" Savan shook his grey head. "How dare you say that? Pull your scoundrels out of my territory right now!"

He was as incandescent with anger as a fireball, while Darren turned towards the sovereign-prince, who seemed about to stop, as though to quickly ward him off.

"I beg a thousand pardons. This is nothing that you should be disturbing yourself over, Your Majesty."

He spoke courteously, but to Leo, it looked as though the sharp glint from Darren's eyes was urging the sovereign-prince to leave as quickly as possible.

Although Magrid's expression turned conflicted for a moment, he nodded. "Well, in that case..." he said and left the hall, accompanied by his wife and several pages,

"Please wait!"

Savan cried out even so, but Darren once again stood in his way. Savan agitatedly shoved him in the chest, at which point the onlooking crowd starting clamouring in excitement at the prospect of an interesting development. Darren, however, calmly fixed his dishevelled clothing and shrugged his fleshy shoulders.

“This is very distressing, Lord Savan. You have defended this country for many long years, and I respect for you for that. But it is clear how you intend to bring me down – well, to put it simply, this vulgar gossip sprung up very quickly...”

“Shut up, you damn whelp,” he was gasping and wheezing as he thrust a finger towards Darren. “You manipulate the ruler like a puppet with your hundreds of lies and your thousand of flowery words. You’re the very incarnation of the two-faced, country-destroying devil. The guardian deity Lévi-Rahan’s scissors made from a melted horseshoe should reveal your two tongues and your three tails, and expose your real nature.”

“You’ve gone too far!”

Previously poised and relaxed, Darren now flared up angrily. “The two-faced devil”, “scissors made from a melted horseshoe” and so on were the greatest possible insults in those lands. They originated from myths but, since they were very old-fashioned expressions, the younger generations barely used them.

“Take that back!”

“Oh, it looks like even a devil can’t stand to have their own actions criticised.”

“You’re still saying that!”

Now that both of them were shouting, the other vassal lords and nobles finally intervened. Some time later, the two of them had been pulled apart and were on the point of leaving the hall through separate exits, but Leo was right ahead in the direction that Savan was taking. Or rather, Leo had put himself there, making it look like nothing more than coincidence. The grey-haired rural domain lord glared at him, anger blazing in his eyes. Still breathing violently, he passed by Leo without a single word of greeting.

Only a few people were left in the hall after that, involved in long

conversations, stuffing left-over food in bags, or, for the lovers, exchanging promises of secret rendez-vous. Leo emerged from the narrow corridor leading to a balcony from the hall's mezzanine floor. Florrie Anglatt walked beside him

“You must have been surprised,” he said nervously, and Florrie nodded silently.

She still hadn't spoken since Leo had made his declaration. Whenever their eyes had met in the hall, she had quickly looked down, her face as red as if it were on fire.

“I was thinking of talking to you about at some point, when I got a chance,” Leo's explanation was equally awkward. Stuttering repeatedly over his words, he spoke of his emotions. “Do you remember what I said that time – the night we were being chased down by Allion's soldiers? That for me, whether in Allion or in Atall, wherever it is that you're laughing and singing is where I can laugh too. My feelings have been set since a long time ago.”

It's not a lie, thought Leo.

At the very least, it was true that his heart had strongly rebelled against it when he realised that Hayden was probably reaching to grasp hold of Florrie. He had also thought at that moment that *he* should be the one standing beside her, with his hand on her shoulder.

Fate has decreed that will definitely be the case one day . It just happened a bit sooner than I expected. Leo transposed his feelings into those words.

He peered at Florrie, who was still silent.

“Are you against it?” he asked. “If you're against the idea, then there's no helping it. Tomorrow, I'll talk to my father and we can forget about it. You can even go back to Allion with Sir Hayden on that very same day. Everyone at court will laugh at the pathetic prince for the rest of all time. But don't worry, it's fine. You don't need to feel even the smallest twinge of pain over it.”

“Leo, you...” Florrie opened her eyes wide and her mouth fell open in surprise. It was as though the smiling mask she had constantly been wearing in the hall was crumbling away. “Are you threatening me?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“You're a coward.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” seeing Leo avoiding the issue, Florrie looked as though she gave up.

“Could you ask me once more? ‘Florrie, are you against it?’”

“You’re not against it?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Florrie threw out her chest, imitating Leo’s voice and facial expression.

The two of them broke into chuckles. Then Florrie, her face bright red, said “I’m... not against it,” in a voice that had almost faded to nothing.



“...anyway, if I go back to Allion like this, I would probably never see you again.”

“When Florrie isn’t by my side, I cry from loneliness.”

“Honestly,” Florrie stared wide-eyed at him again. “You're hopeless without me. It’s only been a few days that I haven’t taken care of it, and that beautiful hair has already turned into this.”

Florrie touched Leo’s hair, which was roughly bunched up behind the back of his head.

“There wasn’t anyone making a fuss about my hair, and since it was just in the way, I was thinking of cutting it short. Without you, Florrie, this hair only has a few days left. Poor thing,” Leo softly placed his hand over hers, which was still touching his hair. “It seems that the young lady who loved you so much is heartlessly going to abandon you and go home. Isn’t there anything you, O my hair, wants to say?”

“Are you planning on holding your own hair hostage this time?”

Afterwards, they talked endlessly, mostly about stories of their time in Allion. About the secret hideout hut they had made out of hay, about going fishing at the pond, and also about the time they had saved money without the adults knowing, and then slipped past those adults’ surveillance and gone out shopping in the town.

“Back then, you were the scariest, Leo. ‘Look, that vendor on the street corner, doesn’t he look like one of the soldiers at the castle? He’s definitely in disguise and keeping watch on us. Let’s take a different road. Ah, wait... the women down that way – I’m sure I’ve seen them in the kitchens’...”

“I wasn’t frightened,” Leo responded indignantly. “It was a case of being cautious and wary. It’s essential when protecting yourself and the one you care for. That’s something that both Walter and Jack are missing; they’ll definitely never be called heroes.”

Florrie giggled and Leo burst out laughing in turn.

Encased in their iron baskets, the fires were still blazing in the courtyard. The time the two of them spent talking as they looked down on that line of lights

reminded Leo of living in Allion. From start to last, the two talked only of past events.

“Father,” Florrie let drop a single word. “What would Father say if he could hear us?”

The unchangeable past had suddenly been caught up by the shadow of the future. The signs of change were impossible to predict, and so went hand-in-hand with unease. For just a second, Leo did not know what to say.

“He would be happy. Or then again, maybe he’d come after me with a sword. While shouting something like: ‘if you want to take my daughter, you’ll have to take my head first’.”

He laughed it off as a joke, and Florrie also let herself be lured into smiling.

“I wonder who I should support in that case? I don’t want either you or Father to be hurt.”

“It’s fine. It’ll just mean going easy.”

“Father will have to, you mean?”

“Hey! Even I’m stronger than I look.”

The fires in the courtyard started petering out one after another. Before long, Florrie, accompanied by several ladies’ maids, left the balcony. He wished her goodnight and watched her leave, while thinking, *that girl and I are going to get married?* Strong and sweet emotions welled up within him. It seemed unreal.

A memory resurfaced of playing house when he was very young – long before he had been sent to Allion. He had chosen one from among the daughters of the palace servants to play the part of the bride, and they had spent all day pretending to be a married couple. He smiled crookedly, but it quickly vanished.

As though replacing Florrie, Percy Leegan appeared on the balcony.

“Have you, by any chance, been waiting for me all this time?” Leo asked when he saw him. Percy nodded with a calm expression.

“I did not want to disturb your time with the young lady. Please do not worry, I was not eavesdropping.”

“It’s fine since it’s you. You helped me out back there.”

Leo thanked him for how, when he had announced his betrothal to Florrie, Percy lent him a hand by saying that “your relationship will mean that relations between the two countries will grow even warmer.”

“It was impertinent of me, but I am honoured if it was of help to you,” Percy gave a slight bow. “Although this may be arrogant of me, I feel that it was through a mysterious connection that I met Your Highness and the young lady in the mountains. Your marriage would fill me with joy, but...”

Percy was worried about how abrupt the prince’s actions appeared to him. Percy had spoken to him directly at the banquet, but judging from his state at that time, it was hard to believe that the prince had been intending to announce his engagement from the start.

What’s up with the timing?

It was just after Florrie Anglatt had declared that she would return to Allion, so it was possible to view as the impetuosity of youth succumbing to the pain of separation. However –

“I don’t know anything much about it, but when everyone was swept up in that celebratory mood, only Hayden went white. Was that really alright?”

When Percy said that, the expression on Leo’s face was exactly the same as if a person passing him in the street had suddenly sprinkled purifying salt over him. The next moment, he unintentionally let out a laugh.

“Not only are you a master at the spear, Percy, but you’re also outstandingly sharp.”

“I didn’t want to barge in again since that would also have been impertinent, but...”

“It’s fine.”

Still, even though he said that, Leo did not explain anything about Hayden and Florrie. Percy did not press him for an answer as he was still unsure about what his distance was with the second prince. And while he was hesitating, Leo changed the subject entirely.

“You arrived just at the right time. I was curious about the commotion earlier. Do you know what’s going on between Savan and Darren?”

This too was abrupt. *Oh?* Percy seemed to say as he raised his eyebrows for a second, but he answered immediately afterwards, “As I was also somewhat curious, I asked a few people about it. Apparently, marauders have appeared in Lord Savan’s territory and have laid waste around a quarry there. It seems as though Lord Savan believes that it was Lord Darren’s doing.”

“The Leegan House’s hero is also quick of ear,” Leo smiled at Percy’s ready answer. “...And? How credible do you think that rumour is?”

“I don’t have enough grounds to form a judgement, but the vassals and retainers are saying it's ten to one that what Lord Savan says is true.”

“Why?”

“Lord Darren frequently talks about how he wants to build a new castle in his territory. And Lord Savan’s domains have an excellent quarry. For a long while now, Lord Darren has been approaching Lord Savan about the idea of sharing ownership of it, in exchange for which, he would send soldiers to help with ensuring security at the border.”

“And Savan keeps refusing?”

“Aye. Well, he does not seem very fond of Lord Darren.”

There was of course a reason for that. During the war, seven years ago, Savan Roux’s lands were the only ones to have been invaded by Allion. Shazarn, the main instigators behind the war, had lost their fortress, and Atall’s troops had already withdrawn, but Allion had probably reasoned that ‘we need to make our opponents fully understand the difference in power.’ The border fortresses held by Savan’s retainers were all burned down one after another, and Allion’s army got close to his castle town. Savan repeatedly requested reinforcements to Darren, who was on standby to his rear, but Darren came up with one reason after another for not responding to the appeal.

No doubt he had realised that Allion did not intend to utterly annihilate Atall, and that this was no more than their making a show of power to instill fear. In which case, there was no need to desperately defend the country to the death.

Darren must have decided that rather than wasting soldiers and money, it would be better to firmly shut the gates of his own castle, and wait for the storm to pass.

With the brunt of Allion's attack turned towards him, however, Savan had no way of protecting his people other than to frantically try to stop Allion's invasion.

"...The result was that Allion pulled back even though Lord Savan's castle was right before their eyes, but both of Lord Savan's sons died during the fighting."

After a short pause, Leo nodded. "I see."

He remembered the glance that Savan had sent his way when passing him by. That anger had not been directly solely at Darren.

Leo Attiel descended back down to the hall in which all activity had almost entirely died out. It was here that, today, he had stood isolated and friendless, that he had approached the vassal lords in order to try out his own 'power', that he had trembled in fear of Hayden Swift, and that he had declared his betrothal to Florrie Anglatt. The past no longer existed here. What there was, or better said, what Leo needed to be looking towards, were the 'changes' of the future.

Part 3

From the next day onwards, one sudden 'change' took place and Leo started to be proactive. It was hard to believe that he had been secluding himself in his own room at the palace, since he now started visiting the nobles who resided in the outskirts of the capital, Tiwana, as well as the vassal lords, who had gone there to call upon the sovereign-prince.

Among the nobles that he visited were those of the Leegan House. At the time, Percy, the second son, was out of the house, but he learned about it later from his father, Nordred.

Leo had apparently approached him saying that, "I wish to deploy permanent forces in Tiwana and in the other towns."

It had been so abrupt that Nordred Leegan had been bewildered.

"Currently, in Atall," Leo had begun, "the nobles who have soldiers live in the towns or villages of their domains and, if ever war breaks out, they will receive the king's command and gather their retainers, and sometimes, mercenaries so as to assemble a troop to command. The proportion of mercenaries in Atall's military forces is unusually high. But don't you think that this is far too inefficient? I saw that in Allion, several hundred or, depending on the scale, several thousand soldiers were stationed at all times in each of the castles and towns. This isn't only for defence, but also so that whenever an order comes from the king, military forces can be moved quickly. Moreover, those in command of them are not the domain lords, but 'generals'.

The majority of them are nobles but, as was the case with Sir Claude, in whose custody I was left, there are also those whose birth has no bearing on their position. A certain percentage of them serve as domain lords or as lords of a keep, but the remainder reside with their soldiers at the royal capital, or at important strategic locations, and in case of an emergency, their mobility is far

greater than that of a keep-lord. Furthermore, since they are, by nature, individual groups, it's easy to identify each one's strengths and weaknesses – for example, the House of Gatanoah is good at siege warfare, or the Veen Corps excel at naval battles – so that when Allion is at war, the troops selected from among the keep-lords and generals are organised according to the situation and to the battlefield.”

After expounding at length on Allion's military superiority, Leo had declared that “Atall should do the same”.

“I wish to request the assistance of each of the vassal lords and of the hereditary retainers. Please, won't you petition Father with me about it?”

He had leaned forward as he said that, but of course, Nordred could not give him an immediate reply. His eyes politely looking down, he had said, “I will think about it.”

To his son, however, Nordred confided his honest thoughts. “With all due respect to him, His Highness whom you rescued seems to have been a bit too strongly influenced by Allion.”

Percy wasn't able to say anything, but neither did he laugh at it.

Just like at the banquet, he's very sudden in what he does.

The next day, as he was leaving the castle as usual, Leo was ambushed by Percy. Unsure about what to say after giving his greetings, Percy had decided to leave that for when the time came. As a result –

“I heard about it from my father.”

– Was how he broached the subject. Having halted his steps, Leo smiled.

“I'm sure your father laughed it off as me being whimsical.”

“I did not say that. Still, I've crossed spears with soldiers from Allion; there are things to think about in Your Highness' suggestion. May I accompany you today?”

“Sure,” Leo agreed easily.

They left the castle building together and attendants lead horses to them.

“Do you intend to go far?” Percy’s eyes went wide.

Leo only had one young boy as an attendant, while Percy hadn’t brought any.

“Today, I’m going to visit the residences of the vassal lords in the suburbs.”

Do you intend to visit everyone who lives in Tiwana’s suburbs?

He was certainly being thorough. Which indicated that he was neither doing it just for show or on a whim. Percy deliberately refrained from trying to get Leo’s intentions out of him. Nor did he ask him why. He felt that if he tried to press him now, Leo would simply dodge the issue. Leo Attiel looked like a soft and malleable person to deal with, but there was a certain firmness in his expression.

Let’s try going with him for a bit.

After all, he felt a strange ‘connection’ to Lord Leo. There was probably no clear reason for it, but when Leo had publicly announced his betrothal at the banquet – Leo, who had once been humiliated in front of everyone by Hayden and who, from what Percy could see, was now giving Hayden a surprise – Percy’s impression of the prince had acquired a little more depth.

And speaking of ‘connections’, there were also Percy’s strange friends.

From the next day onwards, the mercenary Kuon and the warrior monk Camus joined Leo and Percy. Needless to say, the latter had been the one to call them; partly to protect the prince, of course, but also because Leo had wanted to meet from the start. And with Camus, his younger sister, Sarah, naturally came to, looking intrigued.

“We’re not going to play,” said Camus.

“I know. That’s why I brought *this*,” on horseback, Sarah brandished what she was talking about. Camus started.

“T-That... Isn’t that the gun I sold? W-Why... How come you have it?”

“I went and spoke honestly with the merchant. He was a very kind-hearted old gentleman, and immediately gave me my gun back.”

“What was honest about that?” Kuon wearily denounced her. “You even dragged me into it.”

From what he said, Sarah had forcefully brought Kuon with her to the shop where her brother had sold her gun and there, she had immediately pointed at the guns lined up in front of it.

“That gun was stolen from our home,” she had declared before suddenly clinging to Kuon.

“Although the family has fallen into ruin, we are descended from village nobles who were once known for their military exploits. Thieves barged into our home, aiming for what little was left from our grandfather’s time. Who was it who brought you this gun? What? It was someone who looked like a priest of the Cross Faith? Kuon, it must definitely have been *him*. Right... I see, that man was no monk of the Cross Faith. He pretended to be one in order to deceive us but was actually the ringleader. He murdered our father when he tried to stop him. That gun is essentially my little brother’s sole memento of our father. Please, take pity on the child. Please give him a chance to take a revenge of leaden bullets against those hell-spawned demons!”

Sarah buried her face against Kuon – her ‘little brother’s’ – shoulder and burst out weeping. It went without saying that Kuon’s shoulder did not get even remotely wet, but the shopkeeper, who looked so stern at first glance, completely fell for it.

“I thought he looked shady from the moment he appeared in front of my store, but I never imagined it was that bad. My credibility is going to drop like stone for having bought stolen goods from such a vicious bastard. It’s fine, I don’t need the money. Take it. Use it to drill a hole right through his sorry forehead.”

He handed the gun to Sarah, believing her to be the older sister in this imaginary pair of siblings.

“W-What! How could a devout believer lie like that?” Camus roared from on horseback. The poor guy had, after all, been treated like a burglar and got called a ‘hell-spawned demon’. “Get off that horse, Sarah. Kneel and beg the Lord for forgiveness.”

“No,” Sarah’s response was as quick as it was uncompromising. “In the first place, you’re the one in the wrong, Big Brother, for going and selling my gun

any way you pleased. You're the one who should be confessing and repenting."

Since the usual kind of quarrel had sprung up between them, Percy – also as usual – had to calm things down between them.

"Enough already, you two. Honestly, even though His Highness the Prince is right here."

"It's fine. They're exactly as you said they were," Leo laughed brightly.

Sarah turned to smile at him and congratulated him on his engagement.

"It's such a romantic story: the aristocrat's son and the young lady bound together beneath the starry sky as they were chased down by savages bearing flaming torches. I wouldn't be surprised if it still gets sung about as a verse in a heroic legend many years from now. Big Brother, we'll be in that legend too."

Sarah looked like she was in high spirits.

"It wasn't a starry sky," when Kuon threw cold water over it, she immediately turned sulky.

At the same time, Camus wore a complicated expression. The mood was already tending towards a reconciliation between Atall and Allion, and on top of that, if Lord Leo married the daughter of an Allian general, that trend would only get stronger. Which would be a problem for Camus, who was hoping for reinforcements from Atall to help Conscon Temple against Allion's army.

Still, he didn't say anything. That was partly because his interest had been caught by the Leo's 'business' with the nobles he was visiting.

"Right, let's go."

Even if the number of attendants increased, that didn't change what the prince needed to do. Leo urged his horse forward.

Leo's group visited ten nobles in three days.

By the third day, the rumour had already spread about him paying calls to aristocratic residences. Each and every time, the nobles standing in the entranceway or in front of the gate, or else looking down from the mansion

windows, wore an expression that said – *Wow, so he really came*. Percy had seen it time and time again.

Among the aristocrats they visited were several vassal lords who had been at the party.

Oswell, Bernard, Tokamakk.

There was no particular difference between their reactions and those of the other nobles. When Leo started to preach about the need of forming a national army:

“I see. What you are saying is certainly very reasonable,” nodded Bernard.

“However, it isn’t the sort of thing that can be done overnight,” answered Tokamakk, irritated at having to waste time on the prince’s visit.

“It is a momentous topic for the country so, in the future, let us take out time to discuss it at length,” Oswell began, turning him down in an unhurried tone of voice.

In short, it was the same as with Percy’s father.

“His Highness has been a very much *influenced* by Allion,” was an impression that was widely shared. Among the nobles:

“Since the prince lived in a foreign country, he seems to believe that only he can recognise how vast the world is.”

“Things can’t go on like this, our country has fallen behind... – well, that kind of fretting is common among young men, but dragging us into it is honestly not funny.”

“His Highness no doubt intends to protect the country single-handedly.”

His father’s words and reactions were more than enough for him to guess what kind of rumours were being whispered. At first, Percy had held similar thoughts. Where he differed the most from the other nobles, however, was that he had found it heart-warming, interpreting it as, *he is in every way a young man with a budding interest in politics and society*.

Yet after finishing making the rounds of several noble residences, he began to think differently. Although he had known him only a very short time, he could

not believe that the second prince was that foolish and unperceptive. He must surely realise that he was not welcome at any of his destinations, and that his proposal was not being favourably received.

Normally, one would at least consider changing their way of doing things.

The prince's attitude, however, did not change. What he said remained exactly the same. Since his words never changed, even Kuon, who stood behind him like a bodyguard, learned to remember them, and one lunchtime, when the prince wasn't around, he recited them from memory.

Sarah immediately flared up.

"Do you even understand the meaning of those words? Even a monkey can imitate human actions."

"He's talking about how to fight more skilfully and more effectively. Don't take me for an idiot," Kuon snarled in reply. In the past, he had surely experienced fighting as part of a group. "I get what the prince is saying. But it's useless. Because he keeps talking on and on, it's so boring that listening makes you fall asleep."

Despite showing sympathy for the prince, even Kuon was critical and felt that he needed to do better. Camus did too.

"It's presumptuous for us to interfere, but shouldn't we instruct the prince in a few things?" He came to consult with Percy. "As things are now, the prince is being far too direct. For example, when we speak of God's teachings, merely preaching with passion is no good. To lull people's caution, we need wisdom, structure and quick wits at the appropriate times."

"Oh? Does that mean that you support what the prince is trying to do, Camus?"

"Of course," Camus raised his thick brows and puffed out his chest. "The prince is no doubt raising the need to reorganise the military because he has experienced how untrustworthy Allion is, and because he has his doubts about the current talks of peace. I can tell that he is far braver compared to those gutless Ataltese nobles. While everyone is slaving for a false peace, he is prepared to gather soldiers and to oppose Allion, even if it means doing so

alone.”

Previously, Camus had concluded that the prince ‘did not have what it takes to lead soldiers’, and he had felt no little displeasure over the engagement with Florrie, yet it seemed that Leo’s current attitude had greatly impressed him.

“Still,” Percy frowned. “Doesn’t it seem that he is hurrying things too much? Rather than going around calling on anyone and everyone, he should narrow his focus on two or three people who look like they might be open to his suggestion, then carefully argue his case in depth with them.”

“If he does not act swiftly, the vassal lords will all return to their territories. More importantly, about persuading him: Percy, won’t you talk to the prince? I can teach you how to seize a person’s heart so that it can’t break free of your grasp.”

“In that case, wouldn’t it be better for you to talk to him directly?”

“A mere warrior monk cannot talk to a prince about something like that.”

As unlikely as it seemed, it looked like Camus was conscious of differences in social position. Although, rather than it being a case of him being filled with awe, Percy guessed that it was simply because Camus felt awkward dealing the unfamiliar House of the sovereign-princes. Although he seemed like kind of reckless hothead who would come flying out of a house shouting, “I’ll shoot the messenger”, he also had this other side to him.

As for Percy, he had more than once thought about talking to the prince. When the nobles that Leo was trying to persuade looked bored, Percy had several times been on the verge of lending him some help.

Yet he had stopped himself each time. Not so much because it wasn’t his place to interrupt, but because he had been struck with the thought that, *perhaps the prince is always repeating the same thing because his purpose is something other than trying to convince the nobles.*

And even if I’m overestimating him...

On the evening of the third day since Percy had first joined him, the object of Leo’s final call was Savan Roux. The man who, during the banquet, had tried to petition the monarch over trouble at a quarry, and who had gotten into a

quarrel with Darren Actica.

Unlike the other vassal lords, Savan had not set up a mansion within the capital. In cases such as these, there were residences as well as rooms at the palace prepared for those who had come to pay their respects to the ruler. Yet Savan had rented a small, cramped house. But then again, he had only brought three attendants with him. Although the living room served its purpose, it soon got overcrowded as Leo, as well as Percy, Camus, Sarah and Kuon all squeezed into one after another.

“I was thinking of leaving Tiwana tomorrow. If you have business with me, please keep it brief.”

Again unlike the other vassal lords, Savan did not even put up a superficial pretence. He must surely have heard from rumours what the ‘business’ was, and had decided that it was a waste of time. Camus started to frown, however –

“Tomorrow? Did something unexpected come up?”

– Leo’s curiosity-filled question had him exchanging glances with Percy. The message their gazes exchanged could be summed up as: *huh?* Up until then, Leo had always cut directly to his own “business”, without allowing the other party to get even a single word in.

“As to that,” Savan shook his grey head, “it’s simply that if I am away for too long, certain parasitic henchmen will be free to damage my lands.”

“I see. Sir Savan, since your castle is by the western border, you need to prepare for foreign incursions.” “It’s not limited to foreigners.”

The anger in Savan’s expression was clear even as he smiled, and his words were aimed at Darren for sending marauders to his quarry.

“Do you not think that the current system is insufficient to protect the country against foreign enemies?” Leo returned to the usual ‘business’.

Savan listened in silence while sipping his watery tea.

“What you say is interesting,” he said with a nod. Leo’s expression instantly brightened.

“Really? In that case, Sir Savan, won’t you cooperate with me and...”

“However, it would cost huge amounts of money,” Savan reignited Leo in.

It was obvious that it would ‘cost money’. Setting up the aforementioned defensive force would cost two or three times what had been spent on the military up until then. They would need to pay for wages, provisions, weapons, armour and horses. The soldiers would also need places to live and people to help tend to their daily needs.

It was precisely to avoid the cost in money and effort that, in Atall, the sovereign-prince and the nobles employed mercenaries every time there was a war. So in a way, the system was one that maximised efficiency.

“A moment ago, I said that the enemies might not only be outside. But since my castle is at the border, I have to use my personnel and my funds to defend it at all costs, and I cannot afford to spare either for the enemies within. That’s what my situation is. Pardon my rudeness, but your idea is unrealistic.”

What he said was entirely reasonable, yet Leo’s reaction was unexpected for Percy and the others.

“It’s about money?”



For some reason, his good-humoured interest abruptly disappeared, his tone of voice changed, and he started contradicting Savan.

“The ones providing the money will not be you lot but the princely house. There is nothing for you to fret about, Sir Savan.”

“The princely house?” Savan’s expression also changed. “In that case, it’s all the more impossible. As I said a moment ago, I am one link in the western chain of defence. Yet in spite of that, His Majesty Magrid has not once concerned himself with my territory, which was driven to ruin by the previous war. It’s gotten to the point where I have to wonder if His Majesty Magrid hasn’t decided to let Allion have the western border region. If, at this point in time, the ruling House finally decides to raise the vast sums of money needed, then we can start reorganising the military.”

“That...” the prince immediately opened his mouth to argue, but could not find the words to continue.

Camus elbowed Percy in the ribs. Since he himself was unfamiliar with the country’s situation, he was probably trying to tell Percy that he should be the one to help the prince out. Percy, however, remained silent.

“Please go home, Your Highness. My circumstances are as you see, so I am in no position to offer you proper hospitality. Your Highness, why don’t you talk directly to your father about your thoughts?”

After that, there was nothing more to be done. By the time Leo and the others left the house that Savan Roux was renting, it was already starting to get dark. Sitting astride his horse, Percy could read the expression on Leo’s face.

“Well then, let’s go back,” Leo Attiel called out to the others. “I appreciate that you’ve undertaken to act as guards. Not to borrow Savan’s words, but as I do not have money to spend freely, I’m sorry that I cannot pay you.”

He urged his horse into a canter. The others followed behind. Camus was sullen the whole way, since, in the end, things they had not gotten the results he had hoped for. Yet when Percy has glanced at Leo’s face, he was sure that he had seen him smiling.

It was a smile that seemed to imply that far from not having achieved any

results, they had accomplished something vital, which the rest of Leo's party would learn of before long.

Chapter 2: Laying the Groundwork

Part 1

There were two reasons why Leo Attiel had been in such a hurry to visit the nobles and vassal lords.

The first was the one Camus had pinpointed: he had to see the vassal lords before they returned to their own domains.

The second was Hayden.

The visits absolutely had to be finished before the messenger from Allion returned to his own country. During this time, when the situation had yet to become urgent, Leo had wanted to ascertain how the nobles thought and what they would do. Put differently, Leo was convinced that once Hayden returned home, the situation would begin to move in some way.

And Hayden Swift would be leaving the Principality of Atall on the fifth day after the banquet.

Hayden's chest was filled with dark anger. In and of itself, the return journey should have been something for him to look forward to. Florrie Anglatt should have been sailing on the same air carrier, they should have been relaxing together in the spacious cabin, talking, laughing, and he should have had the chance to hear Florrie sing near him. Instead of which, he was wild and rough as they sailed back: he never parted from his alcohol, and he who was known for his elegance now spent his time shouting indiscriminately at pages and sailors alike.

As soon as they arrived in Allion's royal capital, he requested an audience

with the king. This was to ask him to raise an army to subjugate Atall; during the voyage, Hayden had thought of nothing else. Or better said, whenever he imagined Tiwana engulfed in flames while he personally severed Leo's head, Hayden felt a seething anger, as hot as those same flames, that almost seemed about to burn him to death.

Unfortunately, however, the king was away from the capital.

Three days earlier, he had apparently headed south with an army in tow, as a insurrection had broken out in a territory that lay in that direction. The king could have let the troop of two thousand deal with it, but once he heard about battle, he was completely unable to resist, and so he had left his throne and departed in person.

That bad habit of his...

Hayden clicked his tongue, which was equally unusual for him. Then again, speaking of unusual, Hayden's current proactiveness and level of energy were rare for him. Previously, he had been bored and weary of everything, but now, as soon as he heard of the king's absence, he had his retainers prepare horses, clothes and travel expenses, while he promptly left the capital for the south.

Another five days later, he had reached the place where King Hugh-Jarl of Allion had pitched his pavilion to rest along the way.

– This is a digression, but as a matter of fact, the king's name was the very embodiment of bad taste. Both 'Hugh' and 'Jarl' were the names of kings who had ruled over Allion in the past, but Hugh was known as a lecher, said to have impregnated a thousand women, while Jarl's repeated failures at government and warfare had led to the loss of large swathes of territory, and had earned him the nickname "King Landloss". In other words, the name was an aggregation of terrible reputations.

"No future king would ever inherit this name, so I'll claim it for myself," the current king had declared on the day of his coronation. Even so, less than a few days later, he seemed to change his mind and decided that he no longer liked being called 'Hugh-Jarl'. Still, it wouldn't do to change his name immediately, so instead, he insisted on having even those closest to him refer to him simply as 'Your Majesty' or 'King Jamil'.

Hayden hurried to “King Jamil’s” pavilion.

After he had been announced by a sentry, a naked white body came crawling out of the tent. This man, who was lazily stretching his neck and yawning sleepily was King Jamil. He was developing a bit of a paunch, but he was still a young man in his thirties, and his once chiselled body was yet robust.

“I seem to have disturbed you while you were resting, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, who do you think I am, Hayden? You’re having trouble with Atall, huh?” A flustered-looking page draped a gown over the king from behind. The king did not appear to pay it any attention. “I’ve already received your report. So why are you here? Have you come to join the hunting? Although I’ve competed with you before on the number of beasts killed, we’ve never yet competed on the number of soldiers slaughtered.”

He laughed as he chewed a rather tough-looking twig of some medicinal plant that had received from the page.

Unfortunately, King Jamil loved the battlefield, and could never get enough of it. Rather than sit quietly on the throne and handle the petitions brought to him, he was always much happier when riding his horse through the fields of war, spear or gun in hand and armour clanging. Ever since he had taken the throne, the kingdom of Allion had constantly been at war.

According to whispered gossip, this was not so much because of a burning ambition for supremacy, but because, *he simply loves war, so it’s inevitable.*

“No, I have to go to a different ground,” Hayden matched the king’s manner and smiled. Just as he had pictured on the journey back, he asked the king for permission to suppress Atall.

“They have halfway admitted to helping the temple. If we turn a blind eye to this, they’ll grow more and more arrogant, and might start scheming against us with the temple, or even with Shazarn again.”

Hayden fervently preached his piece, but the only thing about it that caught the king’s interest was the ardour which Hayden had been showing recently.

“You look like you’ve changed, Hayden. Haven’t you heard of how evil spirits bring grief when you sleep alone? If a good man isn’t always sleeping with a

good woman, wicked spirits will encroach on him. You should get friendly with your wife in bed and pray for protection from benevolent spirits.”

“Y-Your Majesty...”

“I told you I’d received your report. Ignore Atall. They’ve been given enough of a warning.”

The king had always seemed indifferent to the issue of Atall sending reinforcements to the temple. He was currently busy stabilising his territory, which had expanded so rapidly, so, for now, he had his hands full. When he got tired of administering the country from his throne, he would go hunting; when he got tired of hunting, he took part in riding the warhorses to whatever skirmish had occurred in some part of his territory. As far as King Jamil was concerned, the current status quo was nothing but enjoyable, so he did not feel the need to go out of his way to embark on a foreign campaign.

What made it all the more bitter for Hayden was that it confirmed Leo’s words. “There’s no great cause worthy of sending troops to Atall,” he had said.

For all the eloquence he could deploy, Hayden could not march on the principality all on his own. The report that had reached the king contained the facts that a banquet had been held with Hayden featuring as the guest of honour, and that as a messenger, his stay had been a smooth one. There wasn’t a single thing warranting suspicion. At this point in time, there was no reason for the king to take action, and there was certainly no just cause to back it up.

And Hayden certainly couldn’t say that he wanted war 'because Atall’s prince provoked me to my face'.

Hayden bit his lip. He was no fool, however; if it was not possible to raise a new army, then at the very least, he could not afford to lose his current military authority.

“Then I leave the matter of Atall for my king to decide,” he gave a laudable nod then changed the focus of his speech. “However, I heard some disturbing rumours in Atall. There are hints that Dytiann intends to take advantage of the matter of Conscon Temple for their own selfish ends.”

“Dytiann, is it?”

King Jamil rinsed his mouth and gargled with the contents of a wine cup, then spat out the alcohol at his feet. If the fearless king of Allion had one thing he worried about, it was Dytiann. He flatly denied the rumours whispered among his retainers of any 'Great Eastern Campaign' – which was speculation that he might soon lead Allion's army to unify the whole of the eastern part of the continent – but any intervention from Dytiann would be a problem.

As already mentioned, the king was busy with consolidating his power base. If, by any chance, a large army came marching towards them, not even Allion would be able to avoid having to make concessions.

Seeing an opening, Hayden once again launched into a speech to persuade the king. The result was that they came to an agreement that "Conscon Temple must be seized without delay to prevent Dytiann from having an excuse to intervene".

Hayden then deliberately declared that, "the troops currently at our stronghold are sufficient. Reinforcements are unnecessary." This way, he underlined the fact that he still held military authority, and easily ensured that he would obtain the king's authorisation.

As expected, the king nodded and said, "I'll leave it to you then."

At which point, Hayden witnessed an eerie sight. The pavilion's entrance flap split open at the same time as gracefully slender white arms stretched out from it, and mercilessly twined themselves around the king's neck from behind.

"Argh," King Jamil pretended to be in distress. "Alas, is the king of Allion, renowned for his valour, to be slain at the hands of a villainous temptress? Hayden, seize thy sword and rescue thine liege."

"This is what you call 'getting your just deserts'. Since you are the king of Allion, please get out of this by yourself."

"Honestly, what a retainer unworthy of affection. Oi, Sausha, knock it off, won't you? I'm discussing important matters of state right now."

"Your Majesty, it's not good to keep a lady waiting this long," the woman called Sausha placed her dainty chin on the king's shoulder and cuddled up to him.

The king often brought his favourite mistress to the battlefield. Hayden was disgusted by those of his peers who lecherously prowled around after women, but although he saw this as a bad habit of his friend the king, he was naturally not going to say anything about it right now.

“Well then, Your Majesty, I take leave to retire from your presence.”

“Leaving already? You’re a restless bastard. I don’t care much about the rest, but try to keep Bishop Rogress alive if you can. He did once save Prince Kaseria, after all.” “I understand.”

Even as he answered, Hayden had already started to think about something different.

Part 2

This happened a little before Hayden returned home.

Leo had been visiting a great many nobles and vassal lords, arguing for the establishment of a permanent army... When the rumour reached Sovereign-Prince Magrid, he naturally couldn't just ignore it, and, one morning, he summoned his son.

Sitting at the dining table, Magrid broached the main topic after the meal was over.

"You've turned seventeen, haven't you? As a prince of the Attiel bloodline, I'm sure you have many thoughts and ideas. But if you want to say something, you should tell it directly to your father. You got the retainers involved for nothing, and might have caused needless concern."

"I am sorry, Father," Leo bowed his head obediently. "Although I have my own ideas, I am still inexperienced. I was worried that my own limited ideas would only bother you, Father, so I wanted to discuss them with the vassal lords."

"And, what did everyone say?" asked Branton, Leo's older brother, looking deeply interested.

Leo laughed slightly as he shook his head.

"They didn't think much of me. And because of that, somewhere along the way, my visits to them started to be made mostly out sheer stubbornness."

"That makes sense," Magrid nodded with relief.

If the talk had ended there, the occasion would have ended in complete harmony. It was the first time in a long time that all the members of the family, Leo included, ate breakfast together. He could have entertained them with tales of his time in Allion, and they would have passed some time quietly together.

However –

“Then, Father – would you hear what I have to say? Oh no, I won’t take up much of your time. From now until the audience starts is all I need,” Leo dove in determinedly.

For a second, Magrid looked annoyed, but this was after all the child who had been sent away as a hostage for six years. He clearly felt some compassion and sympathy for him, as, in a display of generosity, he said,

“It’s fine, but keep it short.”

Just as he had to the nobles, Leo presented his idea at length to his father. The sovereign-prince’s answer, however, was already obvious; as stated previously, Atall’s current system aimed for the greatest possible financial efficiency. Within the country, the vassal lords held considerable authority, and the majority of the income from each of their domains went straight to them. In other words, there was no surplus in the sovereign-prince’s treasury.

“Then you should tighten the pressure on the vassal lords. Have them pay a percentage of their revenue to the national treasury,” Leo brought out another argument. “Are you not the sovereign-prince and guardian of this country, Father? If His Majesty exercises his authority and gives the order, nobody could oppose it.”

“National affairs are not as simple as you think. The sovereign-prince and the retainers are all equally human. Being the guardian of the country does not give me the right to act as though I were a god.”

“Leo, think about it,” Branton came to his father's aid, “you are, of course, father and child, and you love and respect your father. But what if someone took your favourite toy or book by force and without asking you for permission? Even if that person was your beloved father, wouldn't you fight back and, after it was taken, wouldn't you feel bitter about it?”

The reason behind the somewhat childish allegory was that the image of Leo already being a young man of seventeen had not quite taken hold within Branton yet. But Leo was not able to make allowances for that. His face flushed red.

“We're not talking about children's toys. This is a situation which could influence the state of the country. With all due respect, Father, Brother, neither of you understand how important this is.”

After shouting that out loud, what he said next was enough to make everyone there feel uncomfortable.

“If this was Allion, this wouldn't even be up for argument. It's so truly childish. In Allion, the king wields absolute power, and all the retainers bow before him like grass blown down in the wind. That is how you hold a country. For Allion...”

“Enough, Leo!” Magrid finally burst out.

He was usually a gentle monarch, so the maids and even the government officials eating at the lowest end of the table looked surprised.

“Are you trying to say that I lack authority as the ruler?”

“N-No... that isn't...”

“If you like Allion that much, then you can leave your father's protection right now and go running to the king of Allion. Should I personally write him a letter asking him to take you in?”

Unsurprisingly, Leo could not stand up against that angry rebuke. He bowed down and apologised in tears. Still breathing roughly, Magrid showed himself to be a father:

“Well anyway, you've been away from the country for many years, and you did, after all, accomplish something important. The fact that you are thinking and planning for the country's future is proof in and of itself that you are growing into adulthood.”

Afterwards, Branton worked hard to calm the situation by asking Leo about his time in Allion, and especially for tales concerning the announcement of his betrothal to Miss Florrie.

Incidentally, Leo's mother and younger brother, Roy, were also present, but the two of them appeared wholly uninterested in the conversation. Seeing her youngest son finishing his meal before anyone else and putting his knife down, his mother asked anxiously,

“Are you not eating any more, Roy? You're not feeling unwell, are you?”
When Roy nodded with an abstracted air, her expression turned faintly alarmed. “Don't go to studying and training today. Stay in your room; I'll come and check on you later.”

Beyond that, she did not say anything.

The events at the dining table soon leaked out and spread all over thanks to the servants' gossip.

As a sequel to that, the prince who had so energetically been expounding on his ideals became utterly despondent after being scolded by his father, and once again secluded himself in his room.

Leo Attiel certainly remained in his room for a few days. He went out only once, but immediately shut himself in again. To the people around him, he seemed as though he had been possessed by some timid insect, but very soon after that, the second prince of Atall would make his move, and would implement various measures involving his country and its current enemy, Allion.

Most of them were what he had thought about while he was shut away in his room.

Whether or not those plans succeeded as Leo had hoped is something that will gradually be revealed as the story unfolds, so we will leave that question aside for now. Nevertheless, it is worth saying that Leo held no hesitation.

Normally, when one was about to put large-scale plans into practice, one would definitely experience worries and doubts. Isn't there something missing? If even a single thing is lacking, won't it bring it disaster down on me and those around me? – such fears would arise. Leo Attiel, however, put into effect one after another the measures he had imagined.

Now then.

Allow me to interrupt the story for just a moment and ask a certain question.

Do you think that Leo, who, at the tender age of seventeen, carried out his plans with such a complete lack of hesitation – who seemed to be brimming

with so much confidence – believed himself to have the makings of a wise general, worthy of leaving his name in history?

Or that he could have guessed that he would later be known far and wide as “the enemy of God”? That they would whisper in every land that he had summoned devils that oppose the Heavens, and that these had imparted their evil wisdom to him, and granted him countless vile traps to use?

That latter is, of course, impossible.

As for the former, it is difficult to know.

Leo had certainly had a talent for scholarship ever since he was young. He read. Both when he was in Atall and when he had been sent to Allion, he read to a staggering extent. Books were by no means inexpensive and, since Claude was an upstart, there was at the time no library in his castle. However, and in part because he hoped that Leo’s love of learning would be a positive influence on his sons, Claude asked the temple priest to buy old manuscripts and such as cheaply as possible, and gave them to Leo, who would finish reading them so quickly after getting them that Claude would joke about it.

“If my territory ends up bankrupt in the near future, it’ll either be because the warlock Hebetes of the bottomless stomach has secretly taken up residence in the castle, or because of that prince from Atall.”

Books are the crystallisation of the wisdom and knowledge of our predecessors. By making their contents ours, we can also imbibe some of that. However, not to repeat myself, but Leo was still only seventeen. He did not know the battlefield. He had never experienced the strategies of adults. Nor had he met and talked with all that many people.

And above all, there was the question of Leo’s personality.

According to those who had known Leo up until then, he was not, by nature, someone who enjoyed fights, and he did not choose the life he led. Although he had shown some slight ambition while in Allion, that was merely in the form of wanting to live a life as something *other* than an ‘Attiel’, but, in the end, even that was about to be buried beneath the fate he had been born to. Finally, even when Hayden was going to have him brought to his headquarters – where one cannot deny that death by hanging probably awaited him – Leo only fled

because Florrie had dragged him by the hand and forced him to do so.

Even so, Leo cannot simply be dismissed as a 'coward'.

He accepted his responsibilities. He had a sense of duty as a hostage sent from Atall, and also when he had been determined not to bring trouble upon the Anglatt family. Leo treated those around him with as much sympathy and consideration as he would himself.

Knowing Leo Attiel's true personality, it is impossible not to doubtfully question his future actions. Yet I can assert that he did carry out those actions, despite being as he was – or rather, because he was as he was.

When Hayden Swift left Atall, the vassal lords also returned to their domains one after another, as though being pulled along with him.

They had originally come to the capital to censure the sovereign-prince for sending reinforcements to Conscon Temple. When a messenger from Allion arrived on top of that, Magrid couldn't help but break out into a cold sweat. This turned out to be a stroke of luck, however: when the messenger's attitude softened, the vassal lords also suspended their criticisms for the time being.

The sovereign-prince heaved a sigh of relief, although obviously, he didn't believe that everything was now amicably resolved. There was still the matter of Conscon Temple. It was obvious that Allion had not yet given up on capturing it. However –

"If the temple falls, it will be as good as leaving Atall stark naked," Oswald Taholin, who had thus persuaded his monarch to send reinforcements, had also returned to his territory without offering any further advice.

Nauma Laumarl is still at the temple. Should I have him withdraw immediately? No, but... if we abandon Conscon, it'll turn out just as Oswald said.

It was a constant source of worry.

"There's also the issue of Leo's betrothal. First of all, we need to send a messenger to Miss Florrie's father, General Anglatt, then next, one to the king of Allion. Could we go as far as having them acknowledge Atall as a friendly nation through this marriage, and have the envoys carry a treaty of non-

aggression?”

Time and time again, he sat in talks with his retainers and Branton, his eldest son.

“When His Highness and Miss Florrie have a son, we could also consider sending him to Allion on the grounds of ‘sending him to receive education in his mother’s native country’.”

“Or perhaps we could have the child inherit the Anglatt family’s castle?”

During one, somewhat protracted, conversation, a soldier guarding the Chamber of State Affairs brought in a message. The very Leo Attiel whom they were talking about was outside the door. Magrid’s expression turned grim, whereas Branton’s brightened.

“Isn’t this perfect? After all, he *is* the one involved in this marriage. There are sure to also be circumstances on Allion’s side that only Leo knows about. There’s a lot to ask him about.”

Branton truly had all the thoughtfulness of an eldest son, however, not even he could have predicted what his younger brother’s errand was.

“I’ve come to report to you, Your Majesty.”

Once the door was opened, Leo stepped in with an expression just as bright as his brother’s.

“What about?” asked the sovereign-prince. “The previous conversation is already over.”

“Yes, of course. I have come to realise how thoughtless I was being. After you scolded me, Father, I have spent the past few days reflecting deeply upon myself.”

Then what was it he wanted to say? Just as the retainers were wondering if he had come up with an idea for entertainment at the wedding ceremony, Leo smiled,

“I was thinking that, in the near future, I would like to be baptised into the Cross Faith.”

His tone of voice was utterly inappropriate for what he was saying. He announced it as casually as he would say something like, “from tomorrow onwards, I’m changing my horse’s name from Celios to Atlas.” Although, of course, one couldn’t just respond with, “oh, is that right?”

The people present, Sovereign-Prince Magrid included, were every bit as surprised as they had been when Leo had announced his betrothal with Florrie at the banquet.

Wanting to know if his son was being serious, Magrid sent away the retainers so that only Branton and Leo remained.

“A-Are you quite sane, Leo? What do you mean by this?”

While there were adherents of the Cross Faith in Atall, they were very few in number. Except for in the west, where the Dragon Gods’ Faith flourished, and in the east, in Dytiann, which was held together by the Cross Faith, people throughout the continent mainly held polytheist beliefs which had existed since the Magic Dynasty. Even in Allion, where the notion of spirits was deeply entrenched, the basis of their faith included many of those teachings and legends.

In this region, there were several ‘chief gods’, and in Atall, that role belonged to the “Iron Saint”, Lévy-Rahan. There was a fairly large-scale shrine to him in the capital, and the ruling family frequently used it during festivals and formal events. Consequently, it was unprecedented for a member of the sovereign-prince’s family to convert to another religion.

“As I said, I reached this conclusion after thinking long and hard about it.”

Leo’s point of contact with the Cross Faith had been Camus, the warrior monk. He was one of those who had saved Leo from a nearly certain death, and because of that, his teachings had left a deep impression on Leo.

“In all honesty, I thought that things like gods only existed in the unreachable heavens, and had nothing to do with us mortals. I was in a distant foreign land, far from you both, Father, Brother, and I lost count of how many times I cursed the gods for giving me such a fate.”

Whether or not he was deliberately saying things that were painful for his

father to hear, Leo continued,

“However, I was reminded that although God is an existence to respect, He does not mercilessly hand down a fate whose decrees one must blindly follow.”

He spoke with eyes wide open. The best example was Conscon Temple, Leo continued. They had fought against Allion, whose terror and might Leo knew well for having once lived there himself. They were motivated neither by self-serving pride nor by a selfish greed for the spoils of war, but believed that by standing before God, they could empty themselves and discover their own true will and power as humans.

Sovereign-Prince Magrid frowned. The threatening clouds that had been gathering between Allion and Atall had finally been dispersed, yet if Leo, who had fled from Allion, was now going to do no less than convert to the Cross Faith, he would simply be needlessly provoking their powerful neighbour.

Magrid was about to clearly state his opposition when Leo said something that was the complete reverse of his father’s opinion.

“If I receive baptism into the Cross Faith, I will be able to build a better relationship with Allion.”

When asked what he meant by that, he continued,

“There are many adherents of the Cross Faith in Allion. And there must be equally many who have very mixed feelings regarding the campaign against Conscon Temple. Those who loathe the temple from the bottom of their hearts are probably a minority. Which is why the brunt of the populace’s feelings turned against Atall, which broke the peace treaty and sent soldiers. Therefore, if I join the Cross Faith, the anti-Ataltese sentiment should subside somewhat.”

Magrid swallowed back the dissenting opinion that he had been about to voice. It was certainly true that Leo had by far the best understanding of Allion’s internal situation.

“And although you could call this making up excuses after the fact,” Leo still had more to add, “if I, the second prince, am an adherent of the Cross Faith, won’t it make other adherents think that was why Atall couldn’t ignore the danger the temple was in? Or rather, we should actively spread this rumour:

that the connection between the temple and the prince goes far back, and that the temple even went out of its way to send warrior monks to save the prince.”

In other words, the point here was to downplay the fact that they had “betrayed Allion” by deeply fixing in people’s minds the impression that they had “taken action to defend God’s teachings”.

Rather than expressing his own thoughts, Leo then spent some time talking about how far the Cross Faith had penetrated Allion, and about how, although they were by no means a majority group – or rather, for that very reason – they felt a very strong affinity for fellow adherents, and even for those who lived far away from them.

After pondering the matter, Branton showed a willingness to endorse his little brother.

“If on top of his religious conversion, Leo celebrates his wedding to the young lady of the Anglatt House according to the rites and customs of the Cross Faith, wouldn’t the connection to Allion deepen in a double sense?” he spoke up in Leo’s favour.

Magrid folded his arms.

Part 3

An event occurred that same evening.

Kuon was called into the chambers that Camus and Sarah were sharing in the inn they were all staying at, and also found Percy there. The inn was high-class, so the sleeping area was separate from the living room, which had a fireplace installed.

They chatted for a while. Camus was still unhappy with the atmosphere in Tiwana, where the prevalent mood was one of reconciliation with Allion, and his irritation only seemed to be increasing.

“What’s with those brainlessly optimistic nobles we met with? Even though they were once trembling with fear at the thought that Allion might be arriving any day, or even today. The saying about ‘danger past, God forgotten’ fits the people of this country perfectly.”

“Who wants to listen to the same complaints every day? Say, Percy, could you please refer me for work somewhere? I want to earn to pay for a room of my own. Even working as a maid at the palace would be fine. Oh, actually, how about just hiring me to work at your house?”

Although Sarah, his younger sister, was pretending thoughtless optimism, her heart was by no means as calm as her outer appearance suggested. After all, she was a woman who would open fire in the street for a friend’s sake. She could not possibly be indifferent to the predicament the temple was currently facing.

Kuon, for his part, was squatting motionlessly in a corner of the living room. Relentless as the boy was, if they took their eyes off of him, he might go running back to the battlefield.

Finally, the last to turn up was the very person who had called them all there – Leo Attiel.

According to what was being said, the prince was in very low spirits after having received a sharp rebuke from his sovereign and father, so Percy had thought that – *the prince has no choice but to stay quiet for a while*. So he had been surprised to receive these sudden summons from him. He was wondering what he wanted to talk about, but after exchanging greetings, Leo precipitously dove straight into the matter.

“I want to convert to the Cross Faith,” he announced.

Those words came as a complete surprise to everyone in the room.

“Ah,” Camus sounded overcome with emotion. Leo had already been the only one in Atall advocating reorganising the military, and now that he was turning to belief in the Cross Faith, Camus could feel that this prince was truly, truly, a kindred spirit. Or no – he wondered as his excitement flared up – was their meeting not perhaps ordained by God?

Listening carefully, however, it became clear that the purpose of Leo’s conversion was to soften the anti-Atall feelings in Allion and was absolutely not because he wished to entrust himself to divine guidance.

Camus closed his eyes, crossed his brawny arms, and stayed silent.

He had pledged to dedicate himself to God’s teachings for the rest of his life and until his body rotted, no, even after death, his soul would be consecrated to the Heavens, so to hear that Leo intended to use those beliefs for political reasons left him fiercely angry. But also,

So after all, the prince is also someone who is just scared of Allion’s might and who can only cower and lower his tail before a powerful country – disappointment grazed his heart.

Disconnected from Camus’ emotions, Leo continued to explain,

“I want the baptism to be made a big event, so as to communicate my religious conversion to Allion, and to advertise the fact that this isn’t just a stopgap measure. For example, rather than just making do with some public spot within the palace or the town, I would first have a chapel built according to the traditions of the Cross Faith, and hold the ceremony there. I’ve already petitioned Father for it and received his approval.”

Although Percy was surprised that Leo had already talked to Sovereign-Prince Magrid about it, what he actually expressed surprise about was something else,

“Oh. You are going to have a chapel built in Atall?”

Leo nodded.

“To be exact, a church with a chapel sanctum. Or would a large-scale building be called a cathedral?”

“Oh,” Percy exclaimed again, then glanced towards Camus. His expression immediately turned a little complicated; he did not know what the other was thinking, but Camus was a man whose expressions were easy to read. He was probably pondering the fact that although it was irritating to have his god’s teachings be used like this, having a base for proselytising in Atall would not be a bad idea...

“Will you build the church here in Tiwana? If you do, but... how long would the construction take?”

“First, I’ll have them quickly complete a chapel suitable for baptism. We can expand it later, so something simple will be enough for now. I intend to hold the baptism within a month.”

“A month?”

“Also, the church won’t be built in Tiwana. I suggested to Father that Sir Savan Roux’s territory would be a good place, and Father gave his permission.”

Catching on to the prince’s intentions, Percy lifted his eyebrows a little.

To be sure, there were high-quality quarries in Savan’s territory, ideal for materials needed to construct a church. Thinking about the time and labour needed to transport the quarried stone, it would be preferable to build as close to the source as possible – that was probably how Leo had convinced the sovereign-prince.

Are you thinking not only of holding a baptism and softening the feeling in Allion, but also of drawing closer to Sir Savan?

“Between purchasing stone from his territory and inviting a large number of people to take part in the building work, Sir Savan’s purse is certain to benefit.

Nor will Sir Darren, who is aiming for the quarry, be able to do anything to interfere.”

Percy was extremely impressed. And at the same time, he was glad.

The prince really is far from ordinary. He's thought of ways to try and break out from the current conditions.

This proved that Percy's own judgement had definitely not been wrong. If he could rescue Savan from his plight, he would surely earn his trust. And he would be killing two birds with one stone by chipping away at the hostility within Allion. And then, once he had brought one of the vassal lords over to his side, what did the prince intend to do afterwards?

Percy felt like a teacher watching over as a good student easily found the right answer, and he was looking forward to what would come next.

“Indeed, Darren's movements will also be blocked... In due time.” Leo's words were loaded with unexpressed meaning. “At the start, I intend to hide both my conversion and the building of the church and move forward with them secretly. Which means that when Darren sees large quantities of stone suddenly being cut from the quarry he is aiming for, he'll panic. If Savan's reading of the situation is correct – if Darren really is sending marauders because he wants to take over the quarry – then he won't be able to leave things alone.”

“In other words, you will be deliberately luring Sir Darren's soldiers to the quarry?”

“Exactly,” Leo nodded as though a student he was teaching had given a correct answer. Their positions seemed to have been reversed.

Percy's eyes went round.

“A-And then what will you do?”

“Defeat them,” Leo declared decisively.

While Camus opened his eyes wide, and Kuon and Sarah's eyes were transfixed, Percy spoke almost without realising it.

“W-Wait, Your Highness. Why do that? C-Certainly, Sir Darren's actions are

unworthy of a retainer to the sovereign-prince's House, but this would inevitably cause you to make enemies within the country, and..."

"It would be terrible to make enemies. I'm doing this to get allies," Leo's response was concise. "Right now, I basically have neither allies nor troops at my disposal. So I'm doing this to get both."

"T-Then, when you have allies and troops, what do you intend to do next?"

Leo closed his mouth. Rather than looking as though he was hard pressed to answer, it looked as though he was carefully choosing what his next words should be. It was only after Kuon had time to cough once to clear his throat that Leo completed what he was saying.

"My aim is to fight Allion."

Everyone was speechless.

Fight?

In that moment, Percy almost smiled.

There were two reasons for that.

The first was that hadn't he just said that he was converting to the Cross Faith in order to "soften the hostility within Allion"? Yet now, completely incongruously, he was talking about "fighting".

The second reason was simply because the word "fight" did not fit Leo Attiel. In both his facial features and his build, he was just like a girl. He was still only seventeen, and he had not experienced his first campaign. As Leo himself had just said, he had neither allies nor soldiers to lead.

Yet even so, he had said that he was going to fight. Moreover, on top of saying that he was going to "deliberately lure Darren's marauding soldiers and defeat them," he had also announced that this was first and foremost no more than a way to get hold of allies and troops, with which he would someday attack Allion. This tiny prince, against an opponent that Atall and Shazarn had not been able to compete with even when they had joined forces...

It was no wonder that Percy almost burst into involuntary laughter.

When Leo had appealed for the army to be reorganised, although Percy had found the prince childishly idealistic and still unable to discern the realities of the situation, he had also felt that to be endearing. Being childish also meant looking towards the future as only youth could, and that was something that the leading Ataltese nobles and vassal-lords that he had observed did not have.

As the prince grows older, as he climbs the stairs of reality one by one, his ideals will surely turn into a stone weight. It will become hard to climb upwards while still holding that weight, his heartbeat will become erratic, and, in the end, he might even toss them away completely. And they will naturally scatter as they fall. Yet even so, he might also grit his teeth until they bleed, and keep clutching at one last part of his current ideals.

Might not Leo Attiel become a prince worthy of playing a role in Atall's future? Percy held that expectation, and with it, he hoped that he and the prince would be able to walk forward together. But in his mind, that was very much a story for the future.

His childish ideals are like a balloon that has blown to the limit, and they'll burst spectacularly when they confront reality. What can I say to get him to stop?

"You may laugh."

Because of Leo's words, Percy suddenly realised something.

Lord Leo gave him an enigmatic look, just like a young girl would to a member of the opposite sex.

"But before that, maybe I should correct one thing I said. It's not Allion that I'll be fighting – it's Hayden Swift."

"Hayden Swift?"

Although he repeated the words, it did not sound as though Percy was simply parroting them.

Surpassing sympathy or disappointment, Percy felt intense irritation towards the prince. He felt like he knew someone very similar: his own past self, who had so blindly believed that he could become hero, without a single thing to support that conviction.

Just then –

“...May I say something, Prince?” The one who spoke was Sarah. “Visiting the residences of the aristocrats was probably part of your plan, right? Won’t you tell us what it is that Lord Leo is thinking about, including his future intentions?”

Her tone was calm and her judgement composed.

Percy felt embarrassed at how his blood had heated and gone coursing through him. At the same time – *I see...* The reason why Leo Attiel had invited them all and deliberately talked to them about this was because he was looking for their cooperation. It was only now that Percy realised something so entirely obvious.

They still did not know each other well. The number of times they had met face-to-face were few enough to be easy to count. Yet Leo had spoken to them of thoughts that he should normally have kept to himself, including the one about ‘defeating an ally’s soldiers’. Thinking about it, the prince was crossing a very dangerous bridge; whatever it was he was planning on doing, Leo did not have anyone to rely on other than themselves.

Has he been counting on us?

Although Leo’s plan was bold, after all, Percy and the others had also been plenty foolish and bold when they had seriously set about overturning their situation by attacking Allion’s headquarters. Thinking back on how, when he was at the temple, Percy had vowed to himself to *at least strike a blow against Allion*, he felt that he ought to at least listen to the end to what Leo had to say.

At Sarah’s prompting, Leo started to speak. And from that moment onwards, Percy Leegan experienced a series of surprises.

First, Leo explained how Hayden had mocked him at the banquet, and ominously declared that “Atall’s peace will not for much longer”, which had led to Leo making his own declaration of war in return. Percy unwittingly opened his eyes wide.

“My goodness,” Sarah exclaimed involuntarily, but her reason for doing so was completely different from the men’s concerns. “So it was because you were

afraid of Hayden snatching Lady Florrie away that you abruptly announced your engagement, Prince? Without checking Lady Florrie's wishes? I feel so sorry for her!"

"Be quiet, Sarah," said Camus. Not in his usual weary tone, but with a sharpness that resembled the spear he wielded.

Although Leo blinked at Sarah's unexpected attack, he resumed his explanation at Camus' urging. Judging from his experiences while in Allion and from Hayden's words, Leo was practically convinced that Hayden was the one pulling the strings of the war on the temple.

His conviction was not founded on any tangible evidence, but Percy found it easy to believe. When they had been about to attack the enemy headquarters only to be captured instead by General Anglatt, he had, through the what the general was saying, had the constant impression that there was something strange about this war.

Although Allion was the one who insisted that Bishop Rogress had "uttered curses against the royal family" and who had sent its army, the number of troops dispatched was insufficient to surround the mountain. Hayden, the commanding officer, had also planned to kill the prince, even though Leo only had a very tenuous relationship with the temple. Moreover, when he learned that the prince had escaped with Florrie, Hayden had promptly abandoned command of the war, and had uprooted the soldiers from the headquarters to go and hunt in the mountains.

If that series of moves by Allion had in fact been made according to Hayden's wishes, if the reason behind the war lay in one person's feelings, then no matter how incomprehensible it all was, that baffling, inefficient, ostentatious military campaign was certainly easier to understand.

Camus spoke up again.

"Hayden is the kind of man who could take the initiative to try and conquer the temple even though he had visited it as a mediator. I wouldn't put it past him to be thinking of destroying Atall." He nodded with conviction.

Lord Leo looked at each of them in turn as he continued,

“However, even if our opponent is Hayden alone, he has the ‘power’ to move a considerable number of troops. But Atall on the other hand? Even with the country on the brink of crisis, the vassal-lords won’t fall in step with the sovereign-prince. You all saw that, right? Once an obvious threat is gone from sight, they immediately go back to acting like they can lazily doze off in peace. Even though the beast that was just driven off is actually hiding in the nearby bushes, and sharpening its claws and probably still aiming for their throat.”

Leo was no doubt talking about the nobles and vassal-lords that he had gone visiting. What had become apparent to the prince was exactly what Camus had pointed out.

“Given that only the nobility holds the right to command troops here, Atall is fragile. I knew of course what everyone wanted to say back then: ‘you need to try and convince them more skilfully.’ Even I’m not that stupid. I might have obtained better reactions if I had chosen my words or my manner better. But that wouldn’t have been any good. If people didn’t at least share my anxiety before I went to talk to them, then I did not think that they would align themselves with me afterwards either. But, as you also all realised, I couldn’t get even half the response I was hoping for. What do you think it means?”

Percy’s position was once again like having a teacher ask him to answer to a subject under discussion, but this time, he could not carelessly speak up.

“No matter how much you, Prince, try to warn people of the threat posed by Allion and Hayden, as things currently stand, no one will listen,” Camus replied in his place. “In which case, Conscon Temple will soon go up in flames, and Atall will eventually share the same fate.”

Ridiculous, thought Percy. Setting aside the matter of the temple, the talk related to Atall was probably no more than the prince’s mistaken assumption. Surely this was just Camus exaggerating the danger to Atall in the hopes of getting a firm promise of aid to the temple?

Yet despite his impatience, for some reason, Percy couldn’t say anything. Every time he tried to speak up, his throat seemed to constrict as though to prevent from uttering a sound.

Oblivious to Percy’s fretfulness, Leo continued,

“...And that’s why.”

“That’s why?” Camus asked, as though lured in. He had half-risen from where he sat.

“And that’s why, first of all, I will fight. I will fight and defend the country. After having defended it, I need to change it.”

The words almost made Percy feel dizzy. When the floor shook with a dull thud in the next moment, he wondered if getting vertigo due to excessive shock, but actually, it was Camus’ fist which had slammed against the boards.

“You’ll fight. Fight and fight. That’s what you’re saying, right Prince?”

“I’ve been saying it for a while now, warrior monk.”

“Wrong! Up until a moment ago, what you were saying was as unreliable as a dream. But now, I see it clearly: you are a warrior, Lord Leo. Even though you haven’t struck down enemy soldiers at spearpoint, you are more of a warrior than anyone, here in Atall!”

His eyes were shining, and his eyebrows were bristling even more than usual.

“It’s good that you confided in us. It was undoubtedly God’s will that we met in the mountains of Allion. With you, the temple... No, you are one who is protected by God’s love!”

Hold it, Percy tried to hold Camus in check. Yet even though he was driven by a sense of urgency so strong it was enough to make him break out into a sweat, his throat still remained clogged up and his voice could not escape from it.

Dammit! What was wrong with him? Why wasn’t he able to utter a single word to stop these two?

The looks that Lord Leo and Camus were exchanging were feverish. Dangerously ardent. Leo’s heated thoughts about melting the country’s very framework, and Camus’ fervent resolve to protect his divine doctrine even if it meant taking on the most formidable of enemies – the two were mingling into a vortex that might burn away Percy and Atall at any moment.

These two are young. Or rather, they’re too childish. The prince provoked Hayden even though he has neither power nor support. And it doesn’t even need

to be said that Camus thinks it's fine to die for his god. And it's all well and good for him to die by himself, but he can't be allowed to involve the rest of us. If I leave these two unchecked, they'll put Atall in danger. They're more of a 'threat' than the one from Allion that they're talking about.

I have to stop them. Right, as the oldest one here, scolding children is my duty...

"Lord Leo."

The constriction in his throat finally wore off and Percy called out Leo's name more prudently than he had ever addressed him up until now.

"To fight... yeah, your intention to fight is splendid. And I certainly can't say it's impossible that Hayden will march his troops against us in the future. But taking on an impossible fight can lead to death, even for the recklessly brave like Camus here."

"How can you say that Percy? Those who aren't prepared to die cannot survive war!"

Camus shouted angrily, but Sarah stopped him with a quiet wave of her hand. It was a reversal of the siblings' usual roles. Percy continued, without paying them any attention,

"Winning is essential. Or at the very least, hoping that you will win. You are saying that you won't wait for Hayden's invasion, but will start the fight deliberately and of your own accord – do you believe you can fight and win?"

While ostensibly, he was directing that question to Leo, inwardly, he was asking himself,

Is this what I wanted to say? Didn't I want to stop the two of them?'

Percy's eyes were open as far as they would go and were staring intently at the prince, as though to not miss a single thing he did. Percy himself did not notice that those eyes of his were also radiating a certain kind of heat.

There was a long pause.

"Of course."

For as long as he lived, Percy would never fully forget that moment in which

Leo gave a single nod.

“I’ll say it as many times as I have to. If I don’t win this fight, Atall will fall.”

Part 4

Savan Roux returned to his territory, but not a single one of his retainers enquired about the result of his visit to Tiwana. They didn't even need to see the expression on his face; it was enough to hear his angry footsteps.

The other vassal-lords had also visited the capital, but in Savan's case, his reason for going had not been to criticise the sovereign-prince.

A ridiculous situation – Savan felt like laughing it to scorn. After all, he was the one who had the best right to denounce the sending of reinforcements to Conscon Temple.

He was the lord of the only territory which had been caught in Allion's invasion seven years ago.

The battles had been fierce. Clad in his armour, Savan had personally lead his troops and had fought desperately.

Yet the sovereign-prince, who had guessed that Allion was not interested in extending their invasion any further than that, had only sent a few hundred in reinforcement, and those soldiers had merely remained stationed inside the castle. Rather than wage desperate war against Allion, it seemed that they were simply going to wait until their enemy had, so to speak, finished 'teaching them their lesson'.

Allion's aggression did not abate, and the dependent castles and fortresses leading to Savan's main stronghold fell one after another. Reports reached him again and again of the deaths of his retainers – kinsmen or long-time companions all. Among the fallen were Savan's two sons. His second son had been married less than a year. It seemed like so very long ago that Savan had leaped to his feet in joy upon learning that his daughter-in-law was pregnant.

In the end, even though they had made peace with Allion, that relationship had now once again turned dubious.

Savan felt like flying into a towering rage and screaming to the sovereign-prince's face – *What the hell did you even learn from the last war? Haven't I sacrificed enough yet?*

Since a while ago, however, Savan had another problem in the form of his quarry being targeted.

Bandit-like men were frequently sighted, and they harassed the villages around the quarries, claiming to be “mercenaries in charge of defending the territory.” They seized provisions, demanded women, picked quarrels with the men working at the quarry, and when the rough stonemasons responded to the provocation, the bandits set fire to houses and tied up the workers in question before dragging them behind their horses, all in the name of “revenge”.

Naturally, having received the reports, Savan had sent out soldiers more times than he could count to send them away. Yet the raiders would quickly reappear and do the same thing all over again. Given that Savan was a domain lord with the country's border to defend, he could not afford to move too many soldiers away from it.

It was obvious that this was Darren Actica's doing. He had long had his eyes on the high-quality quarry in Savan's territory, and had several times approached him with an offer of joint ownership of them. A few days earlier, a message had arrived from him, saying,

“It appears outlaws are running riot through your domains. Given that you bear the important duty of defending the country's borders, Sir Savan, why not allow me to take over the task of subduing these shameful raiders?”

These ‘raiders’ were clearly actually marauders that Darren was directing. He planned to pretend to send soldiers to drive them away, then, under the vague pretext of ‘defending resources’, he would afterwards occupy the quarry.

Darren had wanted to build a new castle in his domain for a long time now. He would need a very large quantity of stone for that, but he begrudged having to pay the money to buy it from Savan.

In Atall as it was then, even though they belonged to the same country, it was by no means rare for fights over resources to break out between domain lords, starting with the vassal-lords. This was largely because the ruling princely

house, which bound the country together, had lost much of its power – but I have already spoken of this several times.

Even among the vassal-lords, Darren's political power was conspicuously strong. *The other nobles can't say anything, and the ruling family doesn't have the strength to spare to intervene in my affairs* – perhaps it was because he had made that evaluation that Darren, more than anyone, acted as he pleased.

“That damned villain.”

Savan bitterly resented Darren for the way that he had repeatedly turned down his appeals for reinforcements during the aforementioned war against Allion.

When he had learned that Darren and the other vassal-lords intended to visit Tiwana because of the matter of Conscon Temple, Savan had made firm his decision to go too. At this point, he had no choice but to appeal directly to the sovereign-prince in front of a crowd of nobles.

As for the result... the sight of Savan wandering aimlessly around his castle, his loud footsteps, and the fact that he had barely spoken to his retainers since his return all told their own tale.

The sovereign-prince had absolutely no inclination to listen to him. Besides wanting to keep any kind of trouble at a distance because of the pressure from Allion, that was undoubtedly also because he feared Darren, who had lead the movement which had pushed Magrid's father from the throne. The fear that he might follow the same path if he carelessly antagonised his opponent had been clear on Magrid's face.

Darren is a villain, but the sovereign-prince is utterly unreliable as a ruler. Savan wept from frustration. If he can't even defend a retainer's people and land, it would be better if relations with Allion grew worse and he was destroyed. I no longer have any reason to offer my life to the sovereign-prince. When the time comes, should I join Allion's side and go take Darren's castle first?

He even went so far as to think those thoughts.

Sava stopped in a corner of the castle. The jars that he had collected as a

hobby in his youth were lined up on either side of the corridor. One especially old and valuable wine jar had a large crack running through it. It had been caused when his sons, who had been very young at the time, had been swinging pieces of wood around, pretending it was sword practice. The two of them had apologised to their father in tears. At first, their attitude had been laudable, but that soon turned to a quarrel.

“It was Big Brother’s fault.”

“What, you’re the one who broke the jar! How can you trample all over my good intentions when I said we’d take the blame together!”

And with that, they had started scuffling again.

As he traced the crack with his finger, tears rolled down Savan’s cheeks.

– Not even a few days later, a messenger came to Savan from the sovereign-prince. Savan, understandably, frowned in suspicion.

What business does the sovereign-prince have with me at this point? If he wanted to talk, he could have done so in Tiwana.

It was not just the timing which was strange, but also the line-up of messengers.

Leading them was an elderly man whom he had never seen before. He said his name was Bosc, and he seemed to be a priest of the Cross Faith. He had been born and raised in an area of what was now called the Dytiann Alliance, and had crossed over to Atall thirty years earlier. Since then, he had been scraping by and carrying out missionary work. He currently lived in a village southwest of Tiwana, in a small church which had been built there.

“But what business does an honoured priest have at my castle?” enquired Savan, whereupon a man who was accompanying the priest handed him a letter from the sovereign-prince. This man also appeared to be a monk, but his build was large and his eyes sharp.

Growing increasingly suspicious, Savan opened the letter and read what was written.

The man accompanying Bosc – Camus, saw Lord Savan Roux’s expression change. The suspicion in his face turned to surprise as he turned his eyes down towards the letter, before he quickly cleared his throat, probably in an attempt to regain his composure, and read through the letter again.

The old man named Bosc was someone Camus had located. During his stay in Tiwana, he had mingled with the few members of the Cross Faith there, and had exchanged information with them. Since there was no church within the capital, a certain merchant had built a small chapel in the basement of his own home, and people gathered to worship there. When Camus heard from his fellow faithful that there was a priest who, unusually in Atall, was continuing to disseminate God’s teachings, he had gone to visit him in person.

When Camus had confided what his business was to Bosc, the old man had been no less surprised than Savan currently was. However, his small church had been harassed several times after Atall’s relations with Allion soured over the matter of Conscon Temple,

“This is undoubtedly an excellent opportunity to dispel the people’s ill feelings and to spread our teachings throughout Atall,” he made up his mind to help.

Meanwhile, as the hands with which he was holding the letter trembled imperceptibly, Savan asked,

“Is this true?”

“It is true,” Camus answered instead of Bosc. “His Majesty Sovereign-Prince Magrid wishes to build a church for the Cross Faith – we ourselves do not call it that, but, for the sake of convenience... – here in his land.”

“B-But... why my territory?”

“As is written in the letter, a large-scale monastery will eventually be built, but for now, because there is need to hurry Lord Leo’s baptism, he believes that even for what will only be a simple church, it would be preferable to build it near the quarry.”

Savan’s eyes returned repeatedly to the letter. It was certainly in Sovereign-Prince Magrid’s handwriting.

He gulped. The country would be buying vast quantities of stone from Savan’s

domain. Furthermore, in order to build the church, scores of carpenters, masons and craftsmen would be converging on his castle town.

The markets under Savan's jurisdiction would naturally profit greatly. And once construction was complete, adherents would come every time there was a ceremony, and it was even possible to hope that a great many pilgrims would travel from afar to it.

But what Savan was most grateful for was not those long-term considerations, but that this meant that *Darren won't be able to interfere with my territory anymore.*

This was an edict from the ruler. No matter how much Darren might look down on the princely house, he would not oppose the ruler's decision for no good reason.

"Since there is not yet any large church organisation in Atall, Father Bosc here will one day be installed as bishop and a single, large diocese will be established in this country. We hope to build monasteries and churches throughout Atall, starting in your domains, Lord Savan, while a church council, centred around Bishop Bosc, will preside over their establishment and the selection of abbots, and..."

Savan was barely half listening to the speech that Camus was smoothly reeling off. Thinking about how this would put Darren Actica's nose out of joint, Savan decided that for the time being, he would extinguish the fires of treason which had been irresistibly raging in his heart only a short while earlier.

Chapter 3: Sword and Mask

Part 1

Just as Leo had explained to Percy and the others, the construction of a church and the prince's religious conversion were, for now, being kept hidden. The official reason was that "it's best to wait for a good opportunity to advertise these facts."

Sovereign-Prince Magrid looked sullen and grim again as he worried that the vassal-lords would once again denounce the way he 'acted without taking advice'. However –

"Isn't it fine to ostensibly be preparing a place to hold the wedding ceremony?" said Leo, looking unruffled. "First of all, it's not even a lie. And then, it goes without saying that the vassal-lords fear Allion. If you emphasise the fact that we are holding the ceremony on a large scale in order to mend the relationship with Allion, they won't utter a word of criticism."

After obliquely conveying the information that Savan's quarries had come under attack from marauders, Leo further added:

"Sir Savan is having to move soldiers away from defending the western border. Father, you should send some guards in your name as ruler... Oh no, it doesn't need to be any great number. The point is simply to make it known that this is His Majesty's edict," he sounded out his father.

Sovereign-prince Magrid could not conceal his surprise at the way Leo was giving out opinions one after another. When he further insisted on taking command of those soldiers, Magrid stared fixedly at his son's face. Still, since it

was a purely nominal position, he gave his permission. After all, once Leo got married and set up a family, he would need to provide him with a suitable territory, or perhaps with an official position within the palace. So it wasn't a bad thing to have him undertake various tasks from here on.

“Up until I sent him to Allion, I thought he was such a quiet and docile son.” Magrid smiled wryly to his oldest son, Branton, after Leo had finished giving his opinion and left the room. “But why is it? It's been nothing but surprises from him ever since the banquet.”

“Leo has obviously inherited the blood of the House of Attiel.”

“There's that but... Seeing him change so much is a bit terrifying. Let's hope the boy hasn't received a bad education in Allion,” Magrid passed off his concern as a joke.

Leo Attiel was provided with soldiers from the Royal Guards, which were the military troops under the sovereign-prince's direct command. All of them were of aristocratic lineage, but although they were all children of the nobility, most of them were second or youngest sons, who would inherit neither land nor title. Since Percy fulfilled that condition, and given also that he hoped to make his way through the military, his father had, as a matter of fact, recommended that he enlist into the Royal Guards.

However, as Percy explained to Leo, “I wanted to stand on the battlefield more than anything, and to earn glory through my own achievements.” And when the Royal Guards took to the battlefield, they were given very few opportunities to perform anything of merit.

Leo had been given twenty cavalymen. Since each of these was accompanied by five retainers acting as infantrymen, the total number of troops came out at more than a hundred. Along with Leo and the familiar faces that were Percy, Kuon and Camus, the troops left the capital.

Given that it was a military departure involving the Royal Guards, Sarah was unable to join them this time. Camus had been worrying about how to persuade his tomboy little sister, but unexpectedly, she had readily backed down.

“Got it. It wouldn't look good for a nun to be included when Lord Leo is leading military troops for the first time. I'll behave myself. I've been able to

make a few friends in Tiwana, so I won't be bored."

Leo's group made it to the highway without any problems. As it was a military force, Leo was naturally wearing armour and a helmet. Although, since his build was not suited to massive armour, the equipment was light. It was the first time Leo had experienced arming himself and riding his horse forward, followed by soldiers. He turned to Camus, who was next to him and who was cautiously surveying their surroundings.

"Does it suit me, Camus?" he asked.

"Of course," Camus nodded deeply.

This large warrior monk already held certain hopes and expectations of Leo. The air drifting around him was like that of a warrior who would still be serving the prince ten years from now.

"I'll gallop on to survey what's ahead," he sprang his horse forward.

It had not even been an hour since they had left Tiwana. Besides which, it seemed unlikely that anyone was going to aim for the prince's life on the well-maintained highway. Still, it seemed very much like him to be restless.

"That's Camus, but what do you think, Kuon?" Leo turned towards the person who was riding on the other side of him. Percy, who was behind them, stifled a chuckle at the sight of Kuon's startled face.

Among them, Kuon was the only one who was younger than Leo. Even though he had accompanied him several times already, he had never spoken with Leo directly up until then. Percy and Camus wanted to protect the country and the temple and, aware that the prince shared that desire, they could not help but feel a more than average interest in his actions, and hold certain hopes of him. On the other hand, Kuon, who had left his birthplace behind him, did not share that sense of purpose. Fundamentally, he couldn't care less about what the prince was going to do, and on top of that, he had been under the impression from the very start that the prince couldn't possibly be interested in a country-bred mercenary like him. Which was why the boy was so unexpectedly flustered when Leo spoke directly to him.

"E-Er, well, what Camus said... er, no, that which he said... is, er, correct..." he

replied stutteringly.

Leo gave a soft laugh. His tone, however, was harsh.

“There was no conviction in those words. If you don’t speak honestly, I’ll have you punished.”

Kuon looked around him, searching for help, but Percy deliberately pretended not to notice.

“T-Then, if I have to say it honestly...”

“Hmm.”

“Y-You’re too skinny, Prince, so... it, really, doesn’t suit you... at all. There are women where I’m from, who fight with bows and guns, and t-they’re much... more masculine.”

“Go on.”

“You should... throw back, your shoulders more. And then, when you’re riding your horse, you should throw out your chest more, like a general, and put your chin up... then you’d look more like it.”

“L-Like this?”

“That’s too far. Your neck has to be straight and you have look ahead.”

In short, Leo was messing about. Even so, he felt considerable interest in the boy called Kuon. Percy had talked with the prince several times about the battles that had taken place around the temple, so he was curious about the characters who appeared in those tales.

When it came to Kuon, however, there were still many things that Percy did not know about him. Percy wished to protect his country, Camus and Sarah wanted to protect the temple; but then, for what purpose was Kuon fighting? If he merely wanted to earn his daily income, there should be plenty of other work available. And he did not seem to be the calculating sort, who would get close to the prince in the hopes that it would prove profitable for him later.

Regardless of whatever youthful thoughts they held, the party entered Savan’s fief a few days later. The vassal-lord's main castle simply took its name from the territory and was known as Guinbar Castle.

Savan came out in person to greet the prince's party. Rumour seemed to have spread throughout the district that the second prince of the House of Attiel had come from Tiwana, so there was a crowd of people outside the citadel's walls, watching curiously and cheering in welcome.

"Tsk," Percy easily guessed why Camus clicked his tongue with a glum expression. After all, even the sharp-eyed Kuon looked stunned.

Sarah, disguised as a town girl, was mixed in among the populace that were waving their hands. Looking amused, she blew a kiss towards Percy and her older brother, who had turned their gazes her way.

Now then, Leo was supposed to stay at Guinbar's castle, but no sooner had he arrived than he gave Savan a strange order.

"Please prepare five hundred sets of armour, spears and swords. I'd like them to be ready as quickly as possible."

Savan was bewildered. When he asked the reason for needing them, Leo replied that it was:

"To enhance the prestige of the baptismal ceremony."

Given that the church hadn't even been built yet, Savan felt that he was really getting ahead of himself, but considering that Lord Leo was Guinbar's lifeline, he could not refuse him.

In parallel to that, Leo started travelling around the villages exactly as though he was inspecting his own territory. Percy, Kuon and the others escorted him to guard him. Incidentally, just like last time, Camus was following up on the connections between the few adherents of the Cross Faith to find builders with experience in constructing churches, so once they had reached Guinbar, he had immediately left castle again to go meet with them.

When Leo found any solidly-built young men in the villages, he would send one of the soldiers or pages that Savan had put at his disposal and have them brought to him, with the words: "you've caught the prince's eye. Won't you come and listen to what he wishes to say to you?"

While the youths' expressions went tense from suddenly being summoned before a nobleman, Leo asked them, "would you carry a spear for my sake?"

He explained that in order to confer dignity to his baptismal ceremony, he wished to be accompanied by five hundred young men in full armour. A small sum of money would also be paid out to them, so they unhesitatingly jumped at the offer.

The numbers increased in no time at all, and Percy Leegan, who was accompanying Leo, suggested sifting through them. He proposed that the criteria be that they had brothers, and that they were single. Upon hearing that, Leo simply said, "I see," and lowered his eyes.

Even with Percy's stipulated conditions, they somehow gathered together five hundred young men, and Leo had them summoned several times for Percy to teach them some basic military skills.

"Even though I told you that I simply need soldiers for the prestige, it would be a problem if you were simply there as ornaments. If you have the mettle to kill enemies with your spears, then that will come through even when you stand still, and make you look more impressive. On the other hand, if you don't have that fighting spirit, it will be obvious that you're complete amateurs, and you'll become a laughing stock," Leo argued to persuade the young men.

At first, Percy took on the role of instructor, but when they were given spears to hold, it became apparent that some of them already had some technique. Some of them had even had practical experience manning fortresses as soldiers, so once Leo and the others had identified those, they immediately promoted them to platoon leaders, and left them the task of organising and training their own units.

A strange thing to do, thought Savan, but he did not pay it any more attention than necessary. It was a truly childish way of thinking to want to demonstrate his own authority through a ceremony, but then, this was the prince who had advocated reorganising the army until he had been scolded by his own father. And it was equally indicative of childishness that he wanted to implement his ideals among his entourage, even if it was only on a very small scale.

When he learned that scores of stone-cutters and labourers had been sent to Guinbar's craggy mountains, Darren was in the middle of entertaining himself, his compliant retainers, and his sons, with a hunt.

Hunting was an aristocratic pastime, which also served to temper and forge body and mind, and Darren was therefore proud that his domains boasted any number of good hunting grounds. The only thing that was unobtainable to him without buying it from another territory, however, was stone with which to build a castle.

Which was why he had his eyes on Savan's lands, to the west. Yet not only had Savan flatly refused Darren's suggestion of shared ownership of the quarries, he had even attempted to appeal directly to the sovereign-prince. Fortunately, even the nobles who had long had dealings with Savan had no intention of getting themselves involved. And that included the sovereign-prince. As for Savan himself, it must have been truly vexing to be made to realise anew what the balance of power was like between Darren and him.

You're a damned fool, Savan, to not know your own place. All you need to do is to keep pushing your old sack of bones to watch over the border.

Darren and Savan were only about five years apart in age, but since Darren spent his days going out hunting, his skin had a healthy glow to it, and even though he was a little plump, he was in excellent physical condition compared to other men his age. Even now, he kept five mistresses.

He felt nothing but contempt for Savan Roux, yet no sooner had the latter returned to his territory than he had apparently sent crowds of people to the quarry. Darren was surprised for a second, but he soon started to laugh while wagging his fleshy neck.

"Ha, ha, ha. Harvesting the 'crops' before they get stolen? I don't know if he wants to annoy me, but what's he hoping to do, spending huge sums of money to stockpile stone he won't be able to sell? Togo, you go and play with him."

Togo was Darren's oldest son. A grin spread across his plump face, which closely resembled his father's. He was thirty years old, and, while officially serving as his father's aide, he was the one who was secretly in charge of hiring marauders. Occasionally, he would ride out in person at the head of the

soldiers, pretending to be a marauder and laying waste to Savan's territory. At those times, to avoid letting his face be seen, he wore a mask that a master blacksmith at the castle had forged for him. He gloated proudly at the way the marauders referred to him as "Master Iron Mask".

The next day, that man in an iron mask, accompanied by five vassals and about twenty marauders, forced their way into the quarry. Just as the reports had said, scaffolding had already been erected at the foot of the mountain, and huge numbers of workers were carving out stone. The mineral dust from the rocks drifted in the wind, and Togo grimaced behind his mask.

He had wanted to charge in immediately, but armed soldiers could be seen all over the quarry. No doubt the troops Savan had moved for guard duty. When they noticed them, they started shouting something and converging towards them.

Taking hold of his horse's reins again, Togo decided to withdraw for the time being. Up until then, they had always pulled back from ravaging the quarry and surrounding villages whenever Savan sent out soldiers. They didn't need to go out of their way to shed blood; it was enough to simply give him plenty of trouble. Besides, Guinbar did not have the means to permanently station soldiers either in the villages or in this quarry.

When Darren received the news from his son, however,

"Now that they're in the middle of quarrying the stone, there are crowds of people around. Maybe they're planning on having a few guards remain permanently." He looked pensive for a while, then, "right, let's bring things to a head. There won't be that many enemies. Go take the fight to them."

"Sure," having removed the iron mask from his sweaty face, Togo grinned broadly.

"Once you've driven away the soldiers, don't chase them too far. Keep watch on the surroundings for a while, just to make sure. If it looks like they're coming back with increased numbers, do the same as usual and pull back. Seriously, don't go overboard. I won't close my eyes to it if you act like before and even attack the villages," Darren didn't forget to warn his son.

It would be easy to plunder by force of arms, but he was still, at least for the

time being, a retainer to Sovereign-Prince Magrid. He had to maintain outward appearances.

The next morning, with thirty additional marauders beefing up the previous day's line-up, Togo Actica headed towards the quarry.

He found it completely deserted. The armed guards, as well as the craftsmen and labourers who had been working away so busily had vanished. They investigated the huts which had been built for the workmen to sleep in, but these too were completely empty.

Togo had been hugely excited since that morning at the prospect of testing out on human opponents the skill he had long been polishing at hunting, but his targets had slipped from between his fingers.

"The hell, did they get scared because we showed up yesterday? They're not worthy of being men from Atall; Savan's soldiers don't even have an ounce of our guts."

In retaliation for having his hopes betrayed, Togo burned down the huts and the scaffolding which had been set up at the foot of the mountain. He roamed around the surroundings on horseback for a while, but got tired of the colourless landscape, and took a rest at the only remaining hut by the mountain.

"There isn't even a bird or a beast to shoot."

Togo had taken off his iron mask to sulkily wipe the sweat off his face when one of the vassals whispered into his ear as he was bringing him tea.

"There was a village when I went down to the riverside. Although, even if I say a village, it was more of a small settlement for hunters who roam from one hunting base to another. Even if we attack it, your lord father wouldn't mind."

"You'd like it too," despite putting on an unwilling expression, Togo continued, "it can't be helped. Dispelling their retainers' displeasure is part of the duty of those who stand above them. Grab a weapon, you lot. From here on, we're going hunting. But our opponents are going to be hunters who are used to taking down game, so don't be careless."

Regaining his enthusiasm, he drained his tea in one gulp then once more put

on the mask.

It was at that moment –

Arrows flew one after another into the hut's immediate surroundings. One man, who was just stepping out of the doorway, had the tip of his boot pierced and leapt back with a shriek.

“W-What is this?”

Panicked, Togo peered out from the hut and saw a group of riders appear from downhill. The armoured cavalrymen had their bows at the ready. There were about twenty of them perhaps.

Togo grabbed a pot which had been left abandoned in the hut, and while covering his head with it, he just managed to jump on his horse which was tied outside. The others did the same, crawling out from the building and catching hold of their weapons.

Togo's group had checked their surroundings. Yet even so, like clouds drifting out of nowhere in a clear sky, the enemy had appeared and had probably been intending to corner them like this from the start.

As soon as Togo's group took up their stance to counterattack, the arrows stopped. In their place, black clouds again came rolling into view, this time at the riders' feet. It was a group of infantrymen, long-handled spears in hand.

“Get them!”

At someone's command, they started to charge.

Although Togo held his breath for a second, the attack was not one to lose his nerve over. Even from a distance, he could tell that they were amateurs, who were simply wearing armour like they were the real thing.

Poor Savan, were you so understaffed that you had to hire neighbouring peasants? Togo's mood immediately lifted, and he smiled.

“Even if there are a lot of them, our opponents are just novices. Soldiers, go! I'll pay you for every head you take.”

In response to his order, the marauders moved forward. They were, of course, very familiar with fighting, so it was sure to turn into a one-sided

massacre. Carried by their momentum, they would attack on horseback from behind. With that intention in mind, Togo took the spear which was tied to his saddle.

Speaking of spears, the ones that group of foot soldiers were carrying had handles which were far too long. They were about twice the normal length; let alone peasants, even seasoned soldiers would have difficulty handling them. Which just made it all the clearer that they were rank amateurs. And yet –

What?

Togo could hardly believe his eyes.

The foot soldiers were not using their weapons to jab and attack. In the first place, because of their spears' length, it was impossible to inflict fatal injuries on their enemies with them, so they were using them simply to halt their opponents' charge.

The tips moved vertically in a tight formation. They did not do so with any great vigour, yet even when Togo's subordinate marauders caught them in their hands and easily turned them aside, because of the long handles, they did not have time to get close to the enemy. At that point, Togo noticed that there were men without spears mixed in among the foot soldiers. They were armed with short-bladed swords, the complete opposite of the spears which they easily slipped beneath, before diving towards the chests of the marauders, who were having so much trouble advancing, and landing clean blows on them. Several men fell.

“B-Bastards!”

When the marauders, who had been jabbing at air, concentrated their caution on the swordsmen, the tips of the spears once again swarmed towards them. When their attention was caught by those, they were again showered with blows from the short swords.

The movements had clearly been drilled into them. In terms of numbers, this bunch of amateurs was double Togo's group. And thanks to the strange tactics they were using, they had gotten a head start on his subordinate soldiers, who were gradually being pushed back.

While Togo was becoming worried, one of the vassals spurred his horse forward.

“Young lord, this way!”

He too had no doubt decided that they were at a disadvantage and was looking to find an escape route while the marauders continued to fight. But even if they slipped past the group of infantrymen, there were still the twenty or so riders beyond them.

There was no choice but to force their way through them.

Just as Togo was making up his mind, there was once again movement among the enemy. A single cavalryman rode forward from among the group of riders.

He wore a helmet, and Togo had no way of knowing it, but this was the group's commander, Leo Attiel.

He had deliberately set only a small number of soldiers to guard the place on the previous day. It was of course well within his expectations that Darren's troops would attack today; therefore, after having the craftsmen leave, he and his group had concealed themselves in the mountainous terrain. In addition to the regular soldiers from the Royal Guard, Leo had also brought a part of the militia that he had previously gathered from the villages and had trained.

There would be actual combat. Since the young men from the villages had not at all expected to find themselves in that situation, there were many who absolutely refused to go, but Leo did not say a word of reproach to them, and he took only the hundred or so of them who decided for themselves to take part.

Fundamentally, just using the regular soldiers would have answered the purpose. In spite of this, Leo had purposefully brought them to a scene of genuine fighting. And just as purposefully, he had them stand them before Togo and his group, who had lost their path of retreat and who had no choice but to attack.

For Leo too, this was his first time in a real fight.

He had continued his martial training throughout his time in Allion. He had taken part in mock jousts. Yet when he saw blood flow for real, he was,

unsurprisingly, unable to repress a shudder.

I-I'm going? Into that?

The arms of a marauder was sent flying from a sword slash; the next moment, a peasant had his foot pierced. Simply from looking at it, he felt pain course through him at the same place. Simply from being on horseback, his breathing was as uneven as though somebody was strangling him by the neck. He wanted to scream out loud, "Stop, please! Save me!"

Leo clenched his teeth hard. No cry escaped from him and instead, it simply reverberated hollowly through his insides. He urged his horse another step forward.

"Your Highness!" Percy shouted, and he and Kuon – who sympathised with his reaction – were about to surround Leo from both sides when –

"Forward!" he spurred his horse onwards as though to leave his companions with nothing but empty air.



Percy, Kuon and the riders of the Royal Guard hurriedly followed after him. Leading the way, Leo brandished his spear.

If I'm not able to go first now, there'll be nothing for me afterwards.

The resolve he strengthened in that moment was no temporary thing. For the past few days, every time the sun went down, he had told himself that over and over again. That he had to do it; that this was a stage on which he had to demonstrate his own skill.

The enemy also urged their horses forward, although a little too late. Their figures were rapidly approaching. There was no longer either pain or suffocation. There was only the path on which a single second separated life from death, and the strength of spirit to run headlong across it.

He took aim and thrust his spear at an enemy. It grazed the mounted warrior's breastplate. On the other hand, the enemy rider's spear struck hard against Leo's helmet.

Just as Leo's vision went black, a single point of light blazed within it, only to be scattered by the sound of horses' hooves. The next rider was already approaching right up to him.

The fight ended in barely any time at all.

"Are you safe, Your Highness!" Percy came rushing.

"Yeah," said Leo Attiel, removing his helmet. Blood was flowing from the area around his temple. Nevertheless, he had gotten away with an unexpectedly light injury.

The outcome of the battle was overwhelming victory. Upon being attacked by several dozen people, the marauders wavered then fled one after another. The group of riders had still held out, but the braves of the Royal Guard clustered around Leo. Percy's handling of the spear had grown even sharper and faster after experiencing real combat, while Kuon compensated for his scrawny physique thanks to the innumerable ways of fighting retained in his muscle memory.

Coordination within the enemy cavalry broke apart while several men fell from their horses. As luck would have it, one of those was the man in the iron mask who was thought to be their commander. Kuon jumped from his horse without a moment's delay. His speed in doing so was wholly characteristic of him.

“Don't kill him!”

In response to Percy's shout, Kuon simply sat astride the man in the mask, his blade thrust against the man's throat.

They had reaped splendid results from the battle.

Compared to them... Leo sighed in frustration as he wiped the blood from his temple. He had not been able to kill a single enemy. Quite the opposite: the spear attack from his second opponent had thrown Leo's posture off balance, and he too had almost fallen from his horse. Mortification at his disappointing performance kept flooding through him.

“You were magnificent.” When Percy called out to him, the prince uncharacteristically raised his voice in anger.

“Stop with the flattery. I wasn't even able to do anything.”

Percy smiled gently.

“Being the one leading the charge on your first campaign cannot have been easy.”

At Percy's words, even Kuon – who had left the man in the iron mask to the royal guardsmen – chimed in.

“The vanguard rider's job is to keep advancing until the end. And while he's running through, the riders behind him spear the enemies who have broken posture because of him. That's obvious,” he said.

Percy made an eye signal at him.

“...er, is how it is, Your Highness,” Kuon mended his speech at the very last moment.

At that, Leo smiled despite himself. In a complete reversal from his earlier regret over his disappointing performance, he now experienced a sense of

accomplishment and of satisfaction at having pulled off an outrageous feat that was completely unlike him.

“Also, when you, er, are unused to handling a spear, you should not, er, attempt to jab; it is... better to swing it to hit against them. When you thrust, you leave yourself, er, you leave openings. While you’re stabilising yourself in the saddle, like this, ...”

While continuing with his faltering lecture, Kuon was probably thinking to himself that *this prince is a menace*.

Percy burst out laughing.

Part 2

When Darren Actica received the report from those of his vassals who had escaped back, he was left literally dumbfounded.

The force which should have been more than enough to rout Savan's soldiers had been annihilated, and on top of that, his son Togo had fallen into enemy hands. Moreover, it had become clear that the one who had brought and commanded those troops had been Lord Leo Attiel, and that it was for the sake of building him a large-scale church that Savan's stone was being quarried.

Darren ground his teeth. It was obvious that Savan and the prince had read his movements and set a trap. His hatred was not only reserved for those two, however, and he dearly wanted to personally chop off the heads of every last one of the bunch which had shamelessly come scurrying home.

Still, the most pressing problem was Togo. It would take no time at all to reveal that the real identity of "Iron Mask" was Darren's son. Just when he was trying in vain to devise some kind of counter-measure, a messenger arrived from Savan.

Darren made up his mind. Accompanied by several attendants, he rode hard and arrived at Guinbar Castle just as the sun was setting.

Savan had him guided to the hall which was used for audiences. Although, for all that it was called a hall, it was a cramped room, longer than it was wide, that got crowded with just thirty people inside. There were a few hanging lamps, but it still felt gloomy and oppressive.

Sitting in the castle lord's seat, Savan thanked Darren for taking the trouble to come all that way. His manner was not at all appropriate for a meeting between castle lords of equal standing, and it was as if he were dealing with a subordinate. Darren desperately fought to swallow his anger and humiliation.

"This is a strange business. You say that an outlaw leader is using my son's

name?”

“Yes, exactly. Your honoured son, Sir Togo, is not with you? If you had brought him along, this absurd inquiry could have ended before it began.”

“Ah, yes, but his health is poor, and he is confined to his bed. My son is very frail, not at all like me. Him leading bandits is simply impossible.”

Darren had broken out into an unstoppable sweat. Savan offered a perfunctory show of concern for Togo’s health before continuing.

“Well then, just to make sure,” he clapped his hands and ordered the captured criminal to be brought before them.

Before long, a man with his hands tied behind his back entered the hall. Darren scowled: the man certainly seemed to be Togo, but he was still wearing that iron mask. They were sure to have torn the mask off of him and checked his identity when he was first captured, so they must have deliberately put it back on him. Were they trying to put psychological pressure on Darren by having him go through the whole process of having his son be exposed?

The man in the iron mask still didn’t say anything as he was brought forward. There was only one thing that Darren could do.

“It’s a different person,” he spat out after the first glance. “As I just said a moment ago, Togo is at my castle. Which means this can only be a completely different person. Good grief, just what kind of cunning snake is this that he would even use my son’s name?”

“Yet when he was being interrogated by the soldiers, this man seemed curiously well-informed about the Actica House, and the face under the mask looked a lot like your son’s.”

“In this world, there are those frightful beings known as sorcerers. According to what I’ve heard, they can take other people’s appearance and pull off large-scale magic tricks. In Allion especially, the centre of politics is overrun by those who use sorcery. Isn’t this just one of Allion’s tricks to undermine Atall?”

“Oh,” while Savan was glaring warily at Darren, Darren on the other hand was carefully scrutinising the surroundings. He could not see Lord Leo, who was said to be in Guinbar. As for Togo, perhaps he had already completely resigned

himself, as he only occasionally stirred slightly, without ever uttering a word.

Are you taking your father's feelings into account? Then just stay as you are, Togo, Darren thought with a prayer-like fervour. *For now, there's no other choice. But sooner or later, there will be a chance for me to rescue you.*

That was the direction that Darren's thoughts were running in, however Savan took the worst step of all those that Darren had anticipated.

"If it isn't your son, then you won't mind even if I have him executed on the spot, right?"

For a second, Darren stopped breathing.

Said otherwise, it was only during that one second that he hesitated. He had already made up his mind and prepared himself ever since leaving his own castle.

"No, I don't mind. This bandit was caught in your territory; do whatever you want with him." Darren spoke clearly, his face calm and his voice unwavering.

Savan was beaming as he nodded his head.

"I see. With that, all doubts have been cleared. I really must thank you again for having come. If you have time, why don't we have a drink? How about a cup of wine after the execution?"

"I'm sorry, but I too still have one or two trifling matters to attend to. I will be taking my leave."

Damn you... Darren was smiling, but his heart was boiling with anger hot enough to melt iron.

Of course Savan Roux must have known from the start that the man he had caught was Togo himself. On top of that, he was going to execute the son in front of the father's very eyes.

Damn you, Savan, you fucking bastard. You're only this cocky because the prince decided to help you on a whim. And where is Lord Leo? Bah! What does that childish brat think he can do, when even Sovereign-Prince Magrid fears me? One day, when your church is built, I'll burn it to the ground along with this castle, you bastards. You'll get your reward for what you're trying to do here.

It took everything Darren had to stop his limbs from shaking with fury as he turned on his heel to leave. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the man in the iron mask. It truly needed courage for Darren to look at him.

And yet –

Lord Leo!

Darren's startled gaze was pulled towards the direction of the man in the mask. At some point, Lord Leo Attiel had appeared close to where the masked man was. He was looking straight at Darren. While Darren hesitated, wondering if he should stop walking and greet the prince, Leo stretched his hand out towards the iron mask. He couldn't possibly be intending to reveal the son's face so as to watch the father's reaction?

Not even a demon would act that way. You think I'll fall for your tricks?

A set look came into Darren's face. Leo quietly plucked off the mask.

Ah! Despite his determination, Darren almost shouted out involuntarily.

When the mask was removed, the features bared beneath it were not those of his son. It was simply a different person whose build was very similar to Togo's. Darren dimly recalled that this was one of the marauders that his son had led. It was hardly surprising that he hadn't said a word until then since there was a gag blocking his mouth.

W-What is this?

Darren had just barely been able to hold back his agitation, but immediately afterwards, he was dealt the final blow. Feeling lightheaded, he took two or three staggering steps.

Togo appeared from behind the prince. Although there was a soldier on either side of him, he was not bound with ropes. But his eyes burned with an even fiercer anger than the one Darren had felt towards Savan, and moreover, it was turned directly towards his father.

This was planned!?

By then, Darren had come to that realisation. After placing the mask on a different person and making Darren believe that it was his son, Savan had

confirmed that he ‘wouldn’t mind even if the man is executed.’ And they had let Togo witness the whole thing.

Who could measure Togo’s grief, despair and anger? He had acted on his father’s orders, yet his father had betrayed him.

He was surely filled with resentment towards Darren. And left behind in this castle, he would soon learn the feeling of hopelessness; since his father had insisted that he was ‘a different person’, he was no longer Togo Actica. He had also lost the support of House Actica. From here on, he was no more than ‘a marauder who had ravaged Guinbar’.

When will I be executed? – It was obvious that Togo, his mind and body worn down by that terror, would be like putty in Savan and Leo’s hands.

He would probably plead before the sovereign-prince that he had gone to Guinbar on his father’s orders. If the testimony came from his Darren’s own son, then it would sound very credible. The political strength and influence that Darren had worked so hard to achieve would collapse. It was even possible that the sovereign-prince would take advantage of it to destroy the Actica House, which was a constant source of hindrance to him.

In other words, Savan and Leo had invited Darren here to threaten him: *if you try anything further against this territory, we will use our trump card.*

Darren avoided his son’s eyes. In these past few minutes, his glossy skin had lost its springiness and he looked as though he had aged ten or twenty years in one go.

Leo walked up to him as he was totteringly leaving the hall. Although taken aback, Darren had to keep up appearances no matter what the situation was.

“G-Greetings, my lord prince. Were you also here?”

“Even though you went out of your way to visit, it seems that it was a waste of your time and effort.”

“Y-Yes...”

Damned demon, what do you want now?

Even though Darren’s anger against the prince was reignited, it didn’t have

the same force as earlier. Up until now, he had judged Leo as being as worthless as Savan, but now he felt daunted when facing the prince, who seemed to have strangely transformed, as though possessed.

“But I’m glad you’re here, Sir Darren.”

“G-Glad? What do you mean?”

Leo explained that since he would be converting, they were in the middle of building a church in Savan’s domains. Darren had already known that for a while now, but he was just about able to feign surprise and to reply with: “I see.” The true surprise, however, was what was to come next.

“From what I hear, Sir Darren, you are also planning to build a new castle? I’ve talked about it with Sir Savan, and since we’ve gone to the trouble of starting to have the stone quarried, we were wondering if we couldn’t also cut out more to be used for something other than building the church. That being the case, we could sell you the leftover stone at a reduced price.”

W-What...

The two of them had already left the hall and were going down the stairs. They arrived in front of the gate. Leo suggested a cost ‘at eighty-percent of the market rate’. It didn’t seem like a particularly impressive cut in price, but a huge quantity of building stones would be needed to construct a castle, so it would mean a considerable saving for Darren if he purchased most of the materials from Savan’s territory.

“I-I am very grateful for your offer. Later... I will send a messenger to Sir Savan.”

“Please do.”

Having escorted Darren to the outside of the gate, Leo retraced his steps back into the castle, walking exactly as though he was returning to his own home. Darren turned around to glance at his retreating back only once.

“Just what is he, that prince?”

The almost aggressively gleaming fat seemed to have fallen completely from Darren Actica’s face, and his shoulders trembled.

Part 3

If you asked him 'what are you', Leo would have no other choice but to give you his name –

“I’m Leo Attiel.”

Recently, however, he had been wondering about it more and more often.

Is that really the case?

Am I really Leo Attiel?

He had repeatedly been wanting to ask that of himself. Which was mostly because, since his confrontation with Hayden Swift on the night of the banquet, he had constantly been on the move.

So far, everything was going as planned.

The first thing had been to visit the vassal-lords and other nobles to argue the need to reorganise Atall’s army. The reason for that had been the same as what he had earlier explained to Percy and the others: he wanted to ascertain how many people understood the danger that Atall was currently facing, to see how many shared his own anxieties at this point in time.

Just as he had expected, almost no one saw the pressing threat that was menacing Atall. It was exactly as Camus had pointed out: even though everyone, their faces pale, had gone to petition the sovereign-prince in person as soon as relations with Allion deteriorated even slightly, now that the banquet had created a friendlier mood, they had all gone back to their happy-go-lucky way of thinking, and no longer seemed afraid of anything.

That being the case, rather than having any sense of crisis management, they were like children who simply read the expression on their father’s strict face.

Leo didn’t find that entirely unreasonable. Seven years ago, there had been war with Allion, and the ones who had misjudged the situation had been those

of the ruling house. Or at any rate, that was how most of the vassal-lords saw it. Failure to discern Shazarn's internal situation and inability to predict the course of the war had led the country to receive a harsh blow from Allion. That, along with the affair of the dragonbone vein, had been one of the causes that had to lead the princely House's loss of authority.

Therefore, it was completely understandable that the vassal-lords, who didn't want to see the same mistake repeated a second time, had moved to criticise the sovereign-prince. However, if they were blithely unaware of the impending threat, then that was a completely different story.

Within all that, Leo had the good fortune of meeting Savan Roux, a person who had some sense of the danger that the Principality of Atall was facing. This wasn't based on predictions like Leo's thoughts were, but was an inevitable consequence of both the harm Savan had suffered from Allion in the past, and the geographical location of his fief. In addition to that, he had been put through bitter experiences by Darren, one of his compatriots.

Someone who feels the danger down to their bones will be ready to move at any moment, was Leo's estimation. Which meant that he would be far more ready to take action than those who saw no need to change the current situation.

That was why he decided that the first thing to do was to approach Savan. Then, while thinking about what would come after that, he had hit upon the idea of converting to the Cross Faith. The plan was not only to draw psychologically closer to Allion, but also to use the construction of a church to block Darren, and to earn Savan's trust all in one go.

– It was at around about that point that Leo had started to question whether he was really himself.

Not that he had any time to worry about it, instead pushing forward to fully implement the plan he had come up with.

To truly have Darren submit, I can't simply use my position as prince to keep him in check. Since he's sending soldiers, I have to retaliate with even stronger force.

With that in mind, he had deliberately hidden the fact that a church was being

built so as to lure Darren's soldiers.

It will turn into a fight. In which case, this is a good chance for me to experience my first battle. So I'll need soldiers that I can move around freely. If I only use the troops borrowed from the Royal Guard, it won't be enough to earn recognition.

That thought led him to recruit soldiers from among the people. At the same time, he steeled his resolve to ready himself for his first battle. This is repeating what has already been said, but during that short time, he did not have time to hesitate. What kept him preoccupied was always what would come after he had put it all into practice, and after convincing his father to build a church, he was not without regrets.

Saying I believed in the Cross Faith was insincere. I'm hiding my real intentions from Father and from my older brother. And even though I don't feel even a shred of piety towards the god of the Cross Faith... Right, you could say I'm even deceiving a god. How long will I keep up this lie?

When he was at the scene of actual fighting, his body and mind had once again been shaken. The brutal atmosphere; the fear that an arrow might come flying from afar at any moment and pierce his throat; it was completely different from when he had sat at his desk, turning over his thoughts. He wanted to curse his past self, to ask him why he had come up with a plan that had put him in so much danger.

And also –

There had been that situation that Leo had never imagined when he was sitting thinking at his desk.

The peasant militia that he had hired for himself.

Although the battle at the quarry had ended in complete victory, it had not been a fight without casualties. Five of the farmers had lost their lives, and more than a dozen had lost arms, legs or received similarly severe injuries. Since the victims' parents had not been told that their sons would be sent into battle, they were utterly astounded, and plunged into sorrow and grief. Father Bosc took the responsibility of offering them mental succour. Percy brought him to the parents of the fallen, and asked him to preside over their burial.

“Your sons have left for the fields of tranquillity. Please mourn for them. But please remember that those left behind in this world have their own duty. So that your sons may find peace, you too must reconcile yourselves to finding peace of mind as soon as you can.”

Even though the priest’s prayers and rituals, and the many words he spoke to them, truly could not appease their feelings, they did provide them with a support to lean on.

Nevertheless, among the village youths, growing ambition outweighed sorrow and grief. Regardless of whether they had lived or died, the young men who had taken part in the fight received money, and those who had killed even a single enemy soldier were given a far greater amount.

Moreover, rumours started being whispered to the effect that,

“The fact that farmers with no experience in warfare were able to win victory is thanks to the power and skill of Attiel’s second prince. Even though it was his first battle, he confronted the enemy like a god of war.”

Leo figured that the rumours had mostly been spread by Percy.

“I also want to stand next to Lord Leo holding a spear.”

“I’ve always thought that would suit me much better than a hoe or a spade.”

Many came rushing to apply to join Lord Leo’s troops.

From a balcony at Guinbar Castle, Leo looked down towards the young men who were gathered again today. Among them, there were a few who were his age, and their honest faces shone with hope and expectation. Leo himself knew the feeling of longing for a bright future in which you could become something other than yourself.

A soldier soon appeared before them and stated the same conditions that Percy given before, namely: they had to have brothers, and they had to be single. When Percy had previously suggested those criteria, Leo had been surprised, but they were meant to take into account that *there will definitely be victims in the fight. It’s best not to invite more resentment than necessary from the villagers.*

Leo hadn't really taken that to heart. Even though he had expected there to be victims, there hadn't been any sense of reality to it.

The men who did not meet the conditions started muttering one after another.

"Boo-hoo, quit oinking like pigs, you lot. All those who don't meet the conditions are to go home. And don't bother lying, we'll find out later and the money paid you will be taken back," the soldier barked. Incidentally, he too had been a farmer only a few days ago, but he had managed to kill two enemies in battle.

Leo quietly stepped away from the balcony.

Money was needed to hire soldiers. So were lodgings to station them in, provisions and also equipment. Leo, however, was not hiring them as professional soldiers. They would remain ordinary farmers, craftsmen or labourers who would perform their work as usual, while only occasionally being called up to train and do military drills. And they were paid when they responded to those calls.

You could say that Leo was stepping back from the system of a permanent army that he had spoken about to the nobles, but in his current circumstances, this was as much as he could do. Moreover, he had to ask Savan for the money to pay the soldiers. Now that the harassment from Darren had completely stopped, Savan trusted the prince implicitly and listened favourably to anything he said.

Gaining that trust also meant making his first ally among the vassal-lords, which was all according to plan.

Construction work on the church continued steadily and, about half a month after Leo had come to stay at Guinbar Castle, a simple chapel was completed. When that day arrived, the stones strewn around the building site were tidied up, the temporary scaffolding was dismantled, and decorations made from flowers were hung up all around.

Father Bosc had said that "labouring for free will earn forgiveness for many sins," and this had spread far and wide, so that able-bodied men from the

surrounding villages had gathered one after another, and the building work had been able to advance quickly.

The evening before the baptism finally arrived, and with it came one minor occurrence.

A single horse-drawn carriage arrived from Tiwana, guarded in all directions by soldiers. Florrie Anglatt was riding in it. She had come to celebrate her fiancé's baptism – Leo having also informed her that his religious conversion was intended to bring about a reconciliation with Allion – but for some reason, she did not step out of the carriage.

She would not reply at all, even when the soldiers or the people of Guinbar Castle called out to her from outside. Upon hearing that, Leo came running.

“Is it all right for me to come close to a chapel of the Cross Faith?” her shoulders trembled as she sat in a corner of the carriage.

Florrie's mother was a follower of Badyne. Although by no means a fervent believer, Florrie had been influenced by her, at least to the extent that she had been taught many of the charms and incantations characteristic of the faithful of Badyne. Ever-sensitive, she was apparently worried that treading on the holy ground of a different god would could bring punishment down upon her.

“God is tolerant. Besides, I would never believe in a god that would hand down punishment to a girl as innocent and upright as you. Come on, Florrie, I'll show you around the chapel.”

Leo held out his hand, but Florrie's mind had not been put at ease. Whereupon, Leo, suddenly and incomprehensibly, got down on all fours on the ground before the carriage door. Florrie, the soldiers and the castle personnel stared at him, astounded.

“L-Leo, what are you doing?”

“You do it too,” Leo called out to the soldiers.

They looked at each other, but since the prince had taken the lead in crawling on the ground, each of them, their expressions dubious, hunched over like he was. Florrie was open-mouthed.

“Just walk on our backs. Wherever you go, Florrie, I will definitely prepare a path of bent backs for you to step on. Because in that case, you won’t have walked on the ground, and even God won’t be able to say a thing about it. Come on, hurry up.”

Florrie’s face instantly went red. Her eyebrows slanted sharply downwards and she raised both shoulders.

Treating me like a child again! Just when it seemed like she was about to shout out angrily, all the strength seemed to drain from her body and she heaved a sigh.

“Leo, no matter how much time goes by, you’re still mean to me.”

“Where would you find another man willing to give his back to lift his fiancée?”

“Do stop it. I hate that kind of thing, Leo.”

As she spoke, Florrie jumped nimbly from the carriage. Fortunately, the event ended with only the prince’s back being trampled on.

They were blessed with beautiful weather.

From early morning onwards, crowds gathered around the brand-new chapel. Since a great many people had been hired to help with the large building-work, it had been widely talked about and those gathered there came not only from Guinbar’s castle town, but also from other neighbouring towns and villages.

Some stalls had also been set up. Many of them sold food, and the sugary scent of pastries wafted alongside the fragrant smell of roast meat. Now and then, you might catch sight of people who seemed to be performers, and musicians played their instruments here and there.

Rather than a solemn ceremony, it was more like a festival day, but according to Father Bosc, a baptism was “like the start of a new life, and it is best to have as many people as possible celebrate it with you.” Of course, he was also aiming to have people feel closer to the unfamiliar Cross Faith. Besides, even though it was a baptismal ceremony, the people would not be able to observe Leo’s

baptism into the faith.

The ceremony was currently under way, and Leo Attiel was shut away in the chapel while Father Bosc recited his god's catechism. The people were outside, eating and drinking whatever they liked best, chatting pleasantly, and waiting impatiently for the prince to emerge from the chapel.

Several nobles had also turned up. It went without saying that Savan, the lord of Guinbar Castle, was there, but so was Darren Actica. Other than Florrie, no had come from Tiwana, and although several elderly and distant relatives of the ruling House had shown up, jolted along in horse carriages, Leo's family members were not present.

Finally, there was one more vassal-lord: Bernard. His wife and child were with him; his still youthful wife was as beautiful as rumour claimed, and their little daughter, who had inherited both her parents' good looks, was truly lovely. They were the very picture of a happy family, and fit in perfectly with the splendour of the occasion, yet Bernard looked somewhat glum.

He had talked with Leo at the banquet and he remembered the impression he had of him at the time. Taking into account the announcement of his betrothal to Florrie, as well as his petition for reorganising the army, Bernard's thoughts had been that *it's easy to see that he wants to do something. This could be interesting, but I'll want to be watching him from as far away as possible.* Although enjoyable from a distance, Leo was dangerous enough to burn anyone who carelessly got close.

When he heard that Lord Leo was going to be baptised, he realised *that* prince wouldn't be doing it simply for the sake of it, and that there were certainly some intentions regarding Allion lurking behind it. Consequently, he had wanted to pretend to go sightseeing somewhere with no relation whatsoever to the ceremony, but his wife and daughter both insisted that: "we want to go to the prince's baptism."

His wife was from a small country west of Atall which was now part of Allion's territory, and she had been born and raised as part of the Cross Faith. His daughter, who was still only six years old, had also been influenced by it. Pestered by his wife, Bernard had even built a small chapel for his castle.

A letter, written in the prince's own hand, arrived for Bernard's wife and daughter.

Dammit, that was completely unnecessary.

Bernard cursed the prince but also himself for having revealed in the course of conversation that his wife and child belonged to the Cross Faith.

When his wife had received the letter, she had been deeply moved. If the prince joined the faith and a large church was built within the country, then naturally, the situations for adherents of the Cross Faith would vastly improve compared to what they were now. She even suggested that Bernard could maybe build a secondary residence near Guinbar, so that they could go and worship whenever they wanted to.

Completely unnecessary!

The ceremony within the chapel came to an end, and Lord Leo emerged from within, greeted by cheers.

It was probably a lingering trace of the ceremony that his hair and face were damp. Leo's expression was bright as he waved his hand. Recently, he had simply been tying his long hair into a single bunch at the back of his head, but today, it was carefully braided. Besides that, he wore a white cloak over his ceremonial clothes and, as he waved smilingly, he looked like a noble youth who had slipped out of a story, so much so that the young village women gathered there could only gaze at him in admiration.

Young men dressed in brand-new armour carried the flags of the Attiel House as they walked behind the prince. Accompanying and intersecting with those flags was another one of a blue cross on a white background.

Young girls dressed in many-pleated, sleeveless tunics were lined up along the path that Leo was following, and as they sang, they showered him in petals to wish blessing on his baptism.

For now, the baptismal ceremony had been completed.

Naturally, the construction of the cathedral continued. Lord Leo's baptism

had attracted a lot of interest, and there was an incessant stream of people from the neighbouring villages wishing to be baptised as well. Also, despite the fact that the construction work was still ongoing, pilgrims from all over had already started visiting the territory. Once they heard that people were flocking to Guinbar, merchants also travelled there in great numbers. And since large-scale building work naturally needed not only craftsmen, but also labourers for the manual work, there were many people who came looking for jobs, and who brought their families with them.

The result was that Guinbar's markets were thriving, and Savan received an amount of revenue that would have been unthinkable up until then.

After his baptism, Leo remained at Guinbar Castle. He had preparations to make for the next stage in his plan.

Savan, the lord of said castle, had no objections. He wept when Father Bosc offered a special prayer before the tombs of his two sons. The distrust and anger he had long felt towards the ruling House no longer included Lord Leo.

As for Leo, he immersed himself in his work for a while, but it was then that something outside of his predictions came to alter the situation.

The Dytiann Alliance took action.

Chapter 4: Pale Flames

Part 1

One of the castle lords who defended Atall's eastern border had received a letter from Dytiann, the gist of which was that they wished to send envoys to Atall's capital city, Tiwana. The letter was immediately forwarded to Sovereign-Prince Magrid.

More problems? The sovereign-prince felt like clutching his head.

Just when he thought that they had weathered the storm with Allion to the west, here came Dytiann from the east.

"We wish to give praise to Lord Leo for his wise and decisive judgement in bowing his head before the Lord's teachings. We wish also to request a chance to meet him in person and to converse with him," stated the message.

Leo had only been setting up measures to use against Allion, so the intervention of this new power was a problem for him too. Depending on how things went, it might force him to revise part of his plans.

In any case, they needed to probe around to find out what really lay behind Dytiann's request to send envoys.

Since the other side has suggested it, should I meet them in person? The thought flickered through his mind.

Besides, he did have a desire to appear on the political scene, where the situation appeared to be constantly fluctuating. His thoughts were similar to Percy's just after he had experienced his first campaign, yet Leo also felt that he had already stood out too much in the matter at Guinbar. So if he stepped

forward and declared that he would meet the envoys, it would not be favourably received.

If negative rumours such as *the prince is meddling unnecessarily again* were to spread, he would encounter difficulties in implementing his plans from here on. Yet even if he didn't meet with them himself, he needed to have a firm grasp on Dytiann's actual intentions.

So Camus headed towards Tiwana, holding in his hand a letter from Leo stating that, "I am sending a monk of the Cross Faith in my place. Would it be acceptable to have him sit in at the meeting?"

Dytiann was a group of countries tied together by the Cross Faith. If Camus was given the position of representative of Conscon Temple, then there would be nothing unusual about him attending the meeting, especially since, in all likelihood, Dytiann's business would be related to the temple. Lord Leo's conversion simply offered them a chance to seek out talks and was, so to speak, no more than a pretext.

Having arrived at that point, the one thing which caused Leo concern was Camus. When informed about the issue, he had seemed to brood over something for a moment. This usually responsive man had been plunged in thought with an almost agonised expression on his face, and even deeper wrinkles than usual carved into his brow. In the end, he had agreed, "if it's an order."

Camus had gathered skilled builders from throughout the land and had only just returned to the prince's side in Guinbar, so perhaps he really didn't like receiving orders in such quick succession, or else he wouldn't have been so reluctant.

Equally curious was that Sarah showed the same reaction. Even though she had not been ordered to do so, she accompanied her brother. Her normal way of doing things was to do whatever she pleased, but this time, she silently huddled close to her brother, whereas Camus made no objection to having his sister come along.

"They're exactly like soldiers going off to fight a hopeless battle," said Leo from on top of the castle ramparts as he watched the siblings leave. He

probably meant that there was a sense of despair about them. Percy was with him on the ramparts, and they exchanged an anxious glance.

Camus and Sarah continued across the plain in almost complete silence. That night, lying in a room of an inn at a relay-station town, within the pitch darkness, Camus stared up at the ceiling.

Dytiann, huh?

There were feelings he had been unable to stifle ever since Lord Leo had ordered them to attend the meeting. Confusion, and no small amount of sadness. At times, when he forgot to hide it, fierce anger showed in his face. The strongest feeling of all, however, was probably homesickness.

They had not yet revealed it to anyone, but Camus and Sarah were born in Dytiann.

To be more precise, they were from a small country which belonged to the Dytiann federation. Moreover, they did not come from the street: their father was from a powerful family which was close to the king, and he was also a domain lord who had established his hall in a village. Although they were a noble family, they were not very rich, yet even so, the two siblings, Camus and Sarah, lived a life in which they never lacked food or a warm bed.

Camus worked hard at his studies every day, whereas Sarah tended to slip away from her boring classes to run and play with the village children until she was covered in dirt.

Their own country included, almost all of the surrounding powers, whether large or small, had the Cross Faith as their national religion. Most of them were affiliated to the Church organisation that was centred around Dytiann Cathedral, forming a coalition that was both religious and military. The country where Camus and Sarah had been born and raised was no exception.

Yet when a power grows oversized, even one bound together by religious convictions, internal strife is sure to arise.

“The upper echelons of Dytiann’s church reek of corruption and greed.” With their slogan of “wresting God’s teachings back from those in power,”

movements opposing the church started to spring up all around. This was the first step that would later lead to the creation of the 'Holy Dytiann Alliance', and that initial stage brought with it the worst civil strife.

Camus and Sarah's country was also embroiled in the turmoil. The fires of war burned throughout the land and swallowed up countless lives.

The king entrusted Camus' father with a thousand soldiers to go and suppress those fires, but he fell into an enemy trap and perished in combat. Their hall was surrounded by enemy soldiers. In its front garden, their mother was burned at the stake.

The siblings were not yet ten years old, and attendants led them out of the castle to flee. In the end, however, they were still captured. They were declared, "agents of the corrupt Church of Dytiann, guilty of despoiling the people," and were almost executed.

However, unable to watch such young children be executed, a priest of the anti-Church faction took them under his wing.

His name was Tom. He brought Camus to the monastery where he was abbot, and had Sarah placed in a somewhat remote nunnery that also fell under his jurisdiction.

At first, Camus had furiously rejected the teachings that were handed down to them. Whatever flowery rhetoric you dressed them up in, weren't these the precepts that had killed his father and burned his mother alive?

He opposed Abbot Tom in every way, was constantly planning his escape, and was willing to use violence, yet the abbot patiently kept him company. He would scold him harshly, but he would also shed tears with him. Every time he cried, the abbot would hold the boy close; Camus could still remember the feel and warmth of Tom's woollen habit.

A year passed, then two.

It wasn't that he had forgotten the sorrow and anger of losing his parents, but the target of those emotions was changing. It was no longer aimed at a specific power, a specific teaching, or a specific person.

Why do people – especially people who claim to call upon the same god –

wage war like that? Why do they take from others like that, why do they satisfy themselves like that?

It expanded wider, and even into the realm of the philosophical.

Wasn't the simple life at the monastery enough? Every day, their stomachs were more than half full. They were assured of a place to sleep. Every day, they would pray during the pauses in manual labour, meditate, read the holy scriptures, debate the interpretations of ancient teachings – wasn't that enough, or rather, wasn't that the only way for humans to live?

For a kid, I was a convincing sophist.

When he thought about the past like this, Camus still unconsciously wanted to look away from the contradictions that had existed within him.

Although it looked as though the brunt of his anger had changed, he could not reconcile that with the bubbling, boiling blood that coursed within him. When he remembered their hall engulfed in flames, when he remembered his mother's screams, when he remembered how he had run barefoot along the flagstones, pulling his little sister by the hand, his irrepressible bitterness and his seething blood drove Camus to agony. There was no one he could blame, no one he could hate, no one he could hurt – at that thought, his feelings, having lost their target raged inside him.

When Camus was thirteen, a certain group came to the monastery asking for lodgings. They were priests travelling on a pilgrimage, but with them were also mercenaries who had been hired to escort them. One of them was a master at the spear. One morning, before the sun had fully risen and when he was returning to the cloister after the early prayers, Camus came across the sight of the mercenary training on a hilltop.

His body outlined by the day's first, faint rays of light, he vigorously went through his motions. Just when it looked as though he was moving as fiercely and incessantly as the wind, he would sometimes suddenly stop still. Camus watched, transfixed, as 'motion' turned to 'stillness', and 'stillness' to 'motion' in swift succession. Rather than being violent, to Camus' eyes, it looked holy and sublime. Every time the spear whistled as it was thrust through the air, it felt to him as though it was smashing the conflicts and doubts within him.

Before he realised it, he had drawn closer as he gazed at the man in fascination. “It’s dangerous, boy.” – He had not even noticed how close he had gotten until the mercenary rebuked him.

And it was also largely unconsciously that he had prostrated himself before the man and begged him to take him as his disciple. The mercenary was already about to turn fifty, and he turned down the “boy’s” request like he found it bothersome, but when Camus repeated his plea, as though on a whim, he decided that it might be interesting.

They started to wield spears together.

Fortunately – well, that word can't really be used here, but anyway; the destination that the pilgrims’ party was headed towards was in the middle of an insurrection at the time. *Let’s see how things turn out* – they said, and decided to stay at the monastery a bit longer.

Even so, they remained for less than a month. During that short period, Camus absorbed as many of the techniques that the mercenary drilled into him as he could. He was so absorbed in his training that he would pass out in the middle of it. His daily religious duties were also affected.

“How could you have dozed off in the middle of mass?” – The fact that he was learning spearmanship from the mercenary was something that he naturally kept hidden from those around him, the abbot included, so he was on the receiving end of more than a few sharp scoldings.

“I slacked off,” he would reply before eventually ending up in a cramped cell in solitary confinement.

Yet he did not abandon the spear. He did feel guilty about desecrating the sanctity of the place, but he felt that when he brandished a spear, the tempestuous feelings raging inside him were expelled from its tip. Imagining the ‘enemy’s’ figure and predicting that ‘enemy’s’ movements, he leapt left and right, backwards and forwards. When he saw the perfect chance, he once again thrust with the spear.

Right, in this case, the ‘enemy’ is none other than me myself.

I’m not wielding this spear to destroy anyone except myself. I thrust this spear

to defeat my own weak heart.

In which case, couldn't this also be seen as a way to bring his body and mind closer to God's teachings?

That was what he told himself to assuage his feelings of guilt.

On the last day, the mercenary practically didn't say a word and carefully watched from the side as Camus wielded a spear. Just as Camus lunged into the last thrust... in that moment, the mercenary was right before him. Camus was startled, but the mercenary effortlessly repelled his spear, then lunged into a jab of his own.

For a moment, Camus lost the awareness of control over his own body. He avoided the attack with the defensive moves that had been hammered into him in the past month, while preparing at the same time to jump towards the mercenary's flank, his waist and arms moving together to thrust forward the spear.

The sequence of movements was carried out without a single pause.

The mercenary shook his head and was about to parry, but then just before doing so, he leaped backwards. Drops of blood scattered and flew. There was a narrow scratch on the mercenary's left cheek. He wiped the blood away with his hand, licking it afterwards.

"You did it," he laughed. "How old are you again? Thirteen? If you were a bit bigger in size, that strike just now would honestly have given me the shivers."

After the mercenary left, Camus continued to train hard.

Before long, he turned fourteen.

Life at the monastery continued peacefully, but all around them, the fighting only intensified. Dytiann Cathedral, the centre of the Church, had already been captured by the anti-Church faction, which meant that what had previously been the "anti-Church faction" now transformed into the "Church faction", while conversely, the "Church faction", which had, until then, controlled that entire area, was being ousted as the "anti-Church faction".

That group, the "Old Church faction", so to speak, started to regain strength

in the region in which Camus lived. It was at around about that time that he and Sarah, his younger sister, met once more. Apparently, she had fled the convent after it had been attacked by “Old Church” soldiers.

The soldiers had neither faith, nor doctrine, nor ideals. Or perhaps it would be better to say that ideals had never had a place in this war. The Church of Dytiann was by then ruled by a man who claimed the title of “King of the Allied Countries” and by his younger brother, who called himself the Pope – and as you know, even the two of them would eventually quarrel in the future – and they were busy hunting down the remnants of the defeated armies, or else using that pretext to sweep away any opposition within the many churches that were dotted around the allied countries.

The troops of the “Old Church” approached increasingly near to the monastery. To Camus’ despair, Abbot Tom was unable to put any measures in place before the enemy had closed in on them. He merely sent messengers to try and talk to them, which meant that nobody was able either to fight or to flee.

Camus watched as that fortress of ideals and of faith in God easily collapsed.

It was set ablaze by enemy hands. Camus and his sister escaped together; it was the second time that they had run into the night, pursued by flames.

Anger welled up within him.

Abbot Tom was a truly good man, strong of heart and mind, but he was also the exact opposite of the soldiers who were laying waste to the land: a man of ideals only. Camus wondered if, when it came down to it, that wasn’t the same as having no ideals at all.

No matter how righteous the words or how pure the teachings, if all they’re good for is to wait to be burned in flames, then they can never be turned into ‘power’.

He faced the soldiers who were chasing after them, and for the first time, he swung his spear with the intent to kill. He did not feel that he was going against divine doctrine. It would be more correct to say that he did not have leisure to think, however – *If it can be forced into surrender by savages, then being holy isn’t enough.* Camus had twice been made to flee, and that thought now started

to emerge within him.

His hands that grasped the spear was full of strength. They were stained with the blood that was trickling from its tip.

I need 'power'. To do what is right, I need unstoppable 'power'.

Afterwards, Camus and Sarah left the countries within Dytiann's sphere and entered the Principality of Atall. While they were wandering around the various towns, constantly hungry, they heard about a land belonging to the Cross Faith that was independent from any other country and which even had the power to arm themselves when needed.

Conscon Temple.

The siblings' steps were naturally drawn to it. It was there that Camus met Bishop Rogress, who shared the same opinion as he did.

"To oppose power with power is both sorrowful and foolish, however power cannot be allowed to trample over our teachings."

Camus engraved that new ideal in his heart.

That was five years ago.

And now, after five years, he was going to meet with the past.

The meeting was held in a town in the east of Atall. The envoys had hoped to call on Tiwana, but the sovereign-prince had refused, stating that "this isn't a good time".

Allion was sure to pick up on any large-scale reception. Rather than it being a case of Atall being afraid Allion might learn of it – after all, even if Atall wanted to conceal it, if Dytiann had no such intention, then the news would soon leak out – it would be better to say that this was a defensive measure for when the information would eventually be known. At the very least, Atall wanted to show consideration towards Allion by demonstrating a difference in the way the envoys were received.

It was an almost painful effort to have to make, but that kind of consideration was crucial for a small country.

On Atall's side, the envoy was an elderly aristocrat acting as the sovereign-prince's representative. Assisting him were several retainers who resided in Tiwana, the patriarch of the Laumarl family being one of them, and Camus, who had joined up with them.

Camus' position there was given as "a novice monk from Conscon Temple and Lord Leo's surrogate, acting as a representative to Guinbar Church, which will soon become the base of activity for the Cross Faith in Atall."

Camus and Sarah returned to Guinbar ten days after departing from it.

When they had left, they had been strangely quiet, but by the time they got back, Camus was entirely back to being the same as before.

In other words, he was angry. Appropriately for the warrior monk with the savage soul, his eyebrows were bristling, and his face was flushed scarlet. Once they arrived back, he grabbed a spear and dove straight into training by himself, sweat flying, like he used to do every morning at Conscon Temple.

Once he was done, he headed to the room in the castle where Leo had summoned. There, the usual faces – Percy, Kuon and Sarah – were all lined up in row. After Leo had thanked the siblings for their trouble and treated them all to a meal, he asked them to go into detail about the meeting.

First came the members of Dytiann's delegation.

There was the commander of the Sergaia Holy Rose Division, Arthur Causebulk, a twenty-seven-year-old military man who was part of Dytiann's crusader army. According to Sarah, he was "very sexy," but, at the same time, "I can't shake the feeling that he's still very naïve and doesn't know much about the world."

Staring fixedly at his sister, Camus took up the story.

"The one you really need to keep an eye on is probably the bishop who was acting as his assistant."

He had introduced himself as Baal, a diocesan bishop. Smiling gently the whole time, he had taken the lead in all the aspects that Arthur, the official representative, neglected to address.

At first, the Dytiann side had talked about how delighted they were about Lord Leo's baptism and about the prospects for the friendly relationship they hoped to establish with the growing Church in Guinbar, for example by creating an environment where monks and priests could travel both ways, or by transferring relics.

After that, they broached the main topic.

"We intend to send reinforcements to Conscon Temple and would, if possible, want to leave them stationed there," Dytiann had said.

"When we send the soldiers of our crusader army, we would very much appreciate it if you could let them pass through your country," they had unequivocally requested of Atall.

It was within predictions.

Actually, when Percy had gone to the temple, Bishop Rogress' calm demeanour had made him suspect that *there might be reinforcements coming from Dytiann*.

Camus, however, was boiling with anger, as though to demand *why only now?*

Dytiann's national religion and the doctrine preached at Conscon Temple originated from the same faith. Upon hearing that the temple was being besieged by Allion's troops and was at risk of annihilation, opinion in Dytiann should have leaned towards sending armed relief. Still, it was hard to imagine that they would gain anything from clashing with Allion's military. And besides, the temple was sure to fall before long. Rather than risk playing a poor hand and earning Allion's enmity... better by far to wait and see.

However – the temple held out longer than expected.

For some reason or another, it seemed that Allion was unable to get the upper hand. At which point, perhaps the upper echelons of Dytiann had started to think that "we could make use of this."

Rumours that Allion was planning a large-scale eastern expedition never seemed to entirely die out, so the 'use' to be made of was as a foothold to block any advance to the east. If Dytiann could send a steady stream of soldiers and provisions to the temple, this might one day be able to serve as frontline base

against Allion.

Naturally, that plan required Atall's involvement. Going by geography, the quickest route by which to send staff and supplies was through the principality's territory.

"We would very much appreciate it if you could let us pass through your country." – Although the tone was courteous, beneath it was a combination of threats and urging:

Sooner or later, Atall will also be drawn into war. You'd better be prepared for it. If you leave things be, one of these days, Allion will gobble you up whole. Or perhaps not... maybe they'll peck away at you first.

Furthermore, if Atall stood by and did nothing for the temple, the pressure from Dytiann would increase, on the grounds that "your country bears responsibility for the fact that we were unable to protect our brethren of the same faith."

The problem was that given their situation, whether they cooperated with Dytiann or, conversely, whether they joined Allion against Dytiann, the one which would pay the heaviest price in terms of victims would unmistakably be Atall. Given that two huge powers were at a standoff against each other on either side of this small country, if ever it came to war, there was a very good chance that Atall's territory would be the stage on which they would fight.

The representatives from Atall had spent the entire time in a cold sweat.

Camus had tightly pursed his lips and remained silent; he understood that he was not in a position to offer any remarks of his own. Nevertheless, a thousand words were welling inside him, and he desperately held down the impulse to thrust them like a blade at Dytiann.

Even though up until now, you stayed indifferent to the suffering of the people at the temple, now that you see a benefit in it, you come barging in. And you even claim to be God's good faithful. How are you going to face those who died in battle? Ah, no – bastards like you would just stand in front of those endless rows of gravestones with tragic looks on your faces as you pray for their happiness in the next world. And all the while, you'll be counting the cost of each word of prayer.

His shoulders shook. The muscles in his arms bulged. He had always been a man whose emotions were easily aroused, and now, they were about to be unbottled.

Nothing's changed since five years ago. The powerful all dress up like servants of God while all they're looking for is their own gain. They burn down those who oppose them and force those who might be useful to them to obey. How am I supposed to believe that lot follows the same God!

Without his realising it, Camus' closed lips were about to open.

It was then that a girl who was waiting on the table used for the meeting pretended to clear away a cup and softly touched him on the shoulder.

When Camus looked up in surprise, it was Sarah. He had been about to lose his composure, but Sarah, while placing a fresh cup of tea before him, winked at her older brother. She had no doubt managed to slip in by using her position as "younger sister to the prince's representative." It wasn't hard to imagine that she had been worried Camus might get emotionally carried away, which was honestly disgraceful for him as the older sibling. That thought helped him calm down a little.

"Rest assured that we will, without fail, convey your country's request to Sovereign-Prince Magrid." For the time being, the delegation from Atall wanted to bring the talks to a close.

However, they did not have much time.

The Holy Dytiann Alliance demanded an answer within half a month at the latest.

Part 2

Hayden Swift arrived at a fortress built near Allion's eastern border.

It was the very same fortress that had been constructed to capture the temple, and he had kept about eight hundred soldiers stationed there. His cloak fluttering as he returned, the 'commander' received the reports of what had happened during his absence, although he barely registered them. His eyes were fixed on something far beyond the temple.

He had not obtained the king's permission to invade Atall. At the time, he had played the part of the understanding vassal, but there was of course no way that this man would have given up.

From here on, I'll focus everything on having Conscon Temple surrender. His eyes gleaming like a newly-sharpened blade, Hayden once more pictured the plan that he would carrying out from there onwards. Then, once the temple becomes a military base for Allion, I'll have soldiers garrisoned there 'for our defence'...

Hayden himself would stay on, as he planned to draw Atall's nobles to him. Then, he would have those who responded to his call rise in rebellion, on the pretext that "the sovereign-prince is acting as high-handedly as he pleases, as though the country belongs to him."

With his armed force stationed near the border, Hayden would be able to immediately send in soldiers, on the grounds that he was "assisting those who have risen in righteous indignation." He would fan the fires of civil war, and use their flames to capture Atall's capital city. Given that Atall would have fallen with very little effort, the king was unlikely to say anything even if he only received the report when everything was already almost over...

– Such were Hayden's plan for the immediate future.

He felt that, *no matter what work I try out, it isn't ever difficult.*

First, capture the temple.

That was nothing. *I just need to crush them with the difference in strength.*

If Allion's military commanders could hear him, they would burst into laughter, exclaiming that, *Hayden really thinks he can actually pull it off?* And as a matter of fact, rumours had reached him that a certain general had said something very similar.

But after all, they only had the limited intelligence of army men. To be sure, Conscon Temple was currently still going strong, but that was neither because of a mistake on Hayden's part, nor because he did not know how to attack. It would also be wrong to say that he had at first been overly cautious, out of fear of losing more soldiers than was strictly necessary.

The reason for all of it was simply *that's what I wanted.*

And that was all.

Hayden had changed.

All those who were close to him were agreed on that, and he himself was aware of it.

Nor is there any need to repeat what had caused that change – it was Florrie Anglatt.

The moment he first laid eyes on her, he had felt as though a throbbing new pulse had started flowing through his rusted blood vessels. As though time, which had seemed to stand still around him, had started moving to the creak of cogwheels turning.

Hayden had a wife and children, and before his marriage – as well as after it, too – he had accumulated who knows how many trysts with ladies serving at court and so on, yet he had never been fully engrossed in any of them. Whether it was romantic love such as it was celebrated in songs, or the stories told by his peers about how blind love had been their undoing, they were just wild and fantastic stories to him.

Yet the second he beheld Florrie singing unskilfully but still trying her best,

Hayden's mass of hard, coagulated emotions was instantly smashed. The plain truth is that it was his first love. And it was not directed so much towards the current Florrie as it was towards what Florrie would become in a few years time, when she would perfectly correspond to Hayden's ideal.

And that was why he was so impatient.

If it had been just an ordinary first love, he could have built a closer relationship with her father, Claude Anglatt, while concealing his feelings, and then, with time, he could have become more intimate with Florrie as well. A few years later, once Florrie had grown up, it would not have been very difficult to steal her heart.

However, it was the future Florrie that Hayden was so deeply in love with. Although one could assume that she would continue to safely mature into that ideal future version of herself, there was still that small chance of a 'mistake' occurring during the process of her growth into adulthood. The still incomplete Florrie was so close to his ideal that Hayden wanted nothing less than unimpeachable 'perfection'.

I have to have her by me, he resolved to himself. He would monitor Florrie's growth from close by so that it could continue unhindered by any static noise. He would cut away anything unsuitable as though pruning a plant, and would encourage the growth of what was pleasing to the eye.

Florrie's father, however, had obstructed that plan. He had turned down Hayden's offer of "having Florrie receive an education at the capital," and to make matters worse, he had confided that Florrie seemed to already have her heart set on someone. He had even hinted that the man in question was Leo Attiel.

As far as Claude was aware, there was no truth in what he had said about Leo and Florrie having feelings for one another. It was simply that he expected Hayden would give up if he were told that "her betrothal to the Ataltese prince will soon be settled."

Hayden realised that static noise was already interfering with her progress towards his ideal, but even so –

It's not too late yet. It absolutely isn't.

Exactly contrary to Claude's hopes, Hayden's love flared up even more strongly.

After that, he went to Conscon Temple as a mediator meant to mend the worsening relationship, although he returned to his own country shortly afterwards.

That was where it had all begun.

First of all, Hayden decided to make use of the temple. He pretended that the mediation had failed, and spread the rumours that Bishop Rogress had rained curses down on the royal family.

It was Hayden also who had persuaded the king to attack the temple. "You definitely have to show them," he had urged. In that way that he had built up antagonism between Allion and the temple. Next, he had gotten Atall involved in their relations.

And for that, Oswell Taholin, one of the vassal-lords who shared the southern part of the country, had been most helpful.

When Hayden had been working out a plan to seize hold of Florrie, he had met with several of the commanders who had been involved in the war against Atall seven years ago. He had been groping about for as many of the principality's weaknesses as he could find, which was why he had gone to see Hawking, who had been in charge of gathering intelligence about Atall's internal situation.

At the banquet, when Leo had spoken with some of the vassal-lords, one of them, Bernard, had admitted being invited into a scheme from Allion, and Hawking... well, Hawking was the very person who had been behind it.

It was rare for Hayden, whose sense of self-importance was ridiculously inflated, to take the trouble of initiating action, yet he had personally galloped to Hawking's residence to hear what the man had to say.

Hawking, a military commander, had lost his left leg in an earlier war than the one against Atall, so he no longer stood on the battlefield. However, thanks to his sharp mind, he had switched to espionage, and the king placed a lot of trust in him.

“Atall’s vassal-lords are a weak spot,” Hawking had opined. The sovereign-prince’s authority was teetering and since the vassal-lords were highly aware that they now had to protect their lands and people by themselves, it made them susceptible to plans from the outside.

That was especially true of Oswell Taholin, who appeared to be a man who could easily be swayed. Seven years ago, during the war, “if the time had come and we had given him the order, he would even have risen to cause trouble from inside the country,” said Hawking.

In the end, Atall had surrendered without there being any need to use that scheme, but Hawking had judged that Oswell might well be useful in the future, so they had continued to exchange letters and envoys. The commander was a man with a lot of foresight.

“Then, would you write a missive to this Oswell for me?” Hayden’s eyes gleamed.

“Oh? It looks like you’re thinking of something interesting. Very well, I’ll get in touch with Oswell and inform him about you, Sir Hayden. In exchange, and should it ever come to actual warfare, would you take my boy as a squire?” The commander replied, his eyes gleaming also.

Hawking had a sixteen-year-old son. The boy had a good physique and there would have been nothing unusual about his having already been to the battlefield. Yet even though wars followed one after another in Allion, by some inexplicable stroke of misfortune, he had never had the opportunity to be called to the front. His name was Randius.

At present, he was serving as an apprentice to Hayden and had taken an active part in the campaign against Conscon by mixing in with the marauders.

It was in that way that Hayden got Hawking’s cooperation and was able to approach the Atallese vassal-lord. He enticed Oswell with the prospect of funds and favourable treatment by Allion, and drew him into the plan. Not long after, Oswell urged Sovereign-Prince Magrid to send reinforcements to Conscon Temple.

Conveniently for Hayden, when pressure from Darren and others forced the previous sovereign-prince from the throne, Oswell had been one of those who

had supported Magrid in taking over the position. Consequently, the sovereign-prince felt a debt of gratitude towards him, and besides that, Oswell was an eloquent speaker, so Magrid accepted the plan and sent soldiers to the temple.

In other words, even that had been part of Hayden's scheme.

He had two goals.

First, after deliberately exposing the fact that Atall had sent reinforcements, Lord Leo's position in Allion, where he was being kept hostage, would deteriorate.

The second was to spread slanderous rumours to the effect that, "General Claude, who is in charge of Leo, is linked to Atall and the temple through that self-same Leo," in order to put the general in a difficult position.

Being an upstart, Claude had very few allies. If Hayden then approached him, Claude would have no choice but to rely on him.

That was all. In order to remove a rival in love and to place Florrie's father deeply in his debt – and for those reasons alone – Hayden Swift had caused the chaos at the temple. And not only that: one day, he was determined that one day, he would cast the Principality of Atall into the flames.

During the initial stage that was the fight to seize Conscon Temple, Leo and Florrie had fled to Atall, which inevitably meant that he had needed to rethink his plan. Yet Hayden's thoughts on that was that *in a way, I don't mind*.

His ardent desire for Florrie was no different from before, but another, greater, part of Hayden Swift had changed. Ambition such as he had never felt up until then had flared up within him.

I'm sure I have what it takes to leave my name in history.

Naturally, walking alongside him down his glorious path would be the by-then adult Florrie Anglatt.

Why not aim for an exhilarating future? For a heart-pounding daydream?

Life was going to be very enjoyable.

And for that, Conscon Temple comes first.

Now that the war had been stretched out, there was no longer any need to drive Leo and Claude into a corner. They would be swallowed up.

Still, if he recklessly dived head first, even though victory was assured, there would inevitably be casualties.

Thereafter, Hayden would prepare for war against Atall. Since his plan could not yet be openly revealed, he refrained from asking the king for reinforcements, so it was necessary to keep victims and sacrifices to a minimum.

I will obtain a swift and brilliant victory with almost no losses.

Of that, Hayden was certain.

Part 3

There was more to Camus' report. The warrior monk of the Cross Faith had received firm instructions beforehand from Lord Leo:

"Don't say a word during the meeting, and hand over a letter once it finishes."

The meeting proved a test of Camus' self-control but, with help from his little sister, he was able to get through it and, at the end, he handed over the letter, saying that it was "from the prince", just as he had been told to.

Even though it was no more than an excuse, Dytiann's ostensible motive was "to meet Lord Leo", so given that he had not attended the talks, there was nothing surprising about the fact that he had entrusted a letter of greeting to his representative. Yet seeing Leo checking with Camus that "You definitely handed over the letter, right?", Percy guessed that there had been more to the contents than just simple salutations.

What was in it? He would find out a few days later, when the usual group was once again lined up in one of the castle rooms.

"The day after tomorrow, I'll be going to Bernard's castle," said Leo.

This lay east of Savan's territory, and you had to cross Darren's domains to get to it. Leo explained that he had arranged to meet directly with Dytiann's envoys over there.

"Then, Your Highness, the letter that was handed to the envoys was about that?"

"Exactly. I told them that I wanted to meet with them and fixed a date to do so."

The envoys from Dytiann were currently staying in a town in the east of Atall, while waiting for a reply from the sovereign-prince. Yesterday, Leo had received a reply in which they agreed to see him.

As for what was going to be said during those talks...

“I intend to request reinforcements from Dytiann,” Lord Leo stated plainly.

Camus objected right from the start.

“That lot cloak themselves in God’s teachings, but in the end, they’re only thinking about filling their own purses. Even if their reinforcements are useful for a while, sooner or later, they’ll prey on the temple and on Atall.”

Meanwhile, Percy tackled the issue from a different angle.

“Are the reinforcements a request from His Majesty?”

As soon as he had asked the question, Leo sent him a sharp glance. It was a gesture that was clearly saying, “don’t ask anymore.”

Don’t tell me the prince decided that on his own! Percy was struck speechless.

Sovereign-Prince Magrid was probably still hesitating: stuck between Allion and Dytiann, he couldn’t give his answer thoughtlessly. Yet Leo, who had been given no diplomatic responsibilities, was saying that he wanted to join forces with Dytiann.

“Your Highness, please wait a moment,” Percy’s expression and tone of voice of course grew firm. “My prince, previously, you said that our only enemy was Hayden Swift. And that you were going to fight him and win. I... no, everyone here, believed those words. But if you allow Dytiann to intervene, then the war front will certainly shift. If several states are involved, then any attempt to bring things to an end will be vastly more complicated, and we probably won’t be able to avoid a full-scale war. This goes beyond defending the temple, and could lead Atall into an even worse crisis.”

“That won’t happen. I won’t let it happen,” Lord Leo’s expression had remained fixed for some time now.

For a moment, Percy did not know how to deal with this aristocrat who was younger than he was. *Is he ecstatic because a few things have gone as he hoped?* He wondered uneasily.

It would be great if he was simply restless; that was common in boyhood, after all. The problem was that Leo was seriously concerned about the country’s

future. And because he was brooding so seriously, the boy could not see his surroundings. He believed that he had to carry Atall's weight alone, and that only he was serious about protecting the country. But a boy's earnestness could sometimes give rise to danger.

Leo stuck his hand out before him as though to hold back Percy's fears.

"Won't you hear me out first?" said the prince.

While Percy, Camus, Kuon and Sarah listened in attentive silence, Leo Attiel talked about how he saw what would happen from now on.

Percy Leegan was astounded.

Back in that room at an inn in Tiwana, when Leo had revealed that he would be luring in Darren's soldiers and defeating them in order to obtain allies and soldiers of his own, Percy had genuinely been amazed. This time, it went beyond that. It was no longer simply on the level of worrying that the prince was selfishly allying himself with Dytiann, or that he was calling for reinforcements without consulting anyone. Percy didn't realise it, but his hands were shaking.

Sarah was staring wide-eyed, and even Kuon, who was usually indifferent during these kinds of talks, could not hide his astonished expression.

Leo had revealed to them all of his plans.

"You can't!"

It was Camus who vigorously leapt to his feet in that instant. He had not been seized by sudden fury. Actually, Percy thought that he had endured remarkably well to have listened until Leo had finished talking.

Leo, for his part, responded with perfect calm.

"Why can't I?"

"That... That goes too far. It's too despicable! And Dytiann, who is being asked for reinforcements... and Bishop Rogress..."

Camus was so worked up that his words weren't coming out clearly. Yet

Percy, and all of those to whom Leo had confided his ploys, understood what he was trying to say.

At the same time, Percy Leegan was at a loss.

Was the young man who was taking Camus' anger head on really the same one they had rescued in the mountains of Allion? His figure simply did not overlap with the forlorn boy who had descended the steep paths while pulling Florrie by the hand.

"I-If by some complete fluke that actually worked, then with that kind of battle, those who fought and died for the belief that God's authority would one day shine upon the whole world wouldn't be able to rest in peace."

"Oh, 'won't be able to rest in peace'? Then would the souls of the dead find comfort from charging into what they know is a hopeless fight, armed with their faith alone, only to be annihilated?"

"That's..."

"You yourselves once told me this: fighting is great and all, but there's no meaning to it if you don't win. So I tried to find a path to victory. And other than this, there is no way to defeat Hayden Swift and to prevent the front lines from extending any further."

"B-But... It's going too far. Your way of doing things is even worse than that godless Allion, or than Dytiann, which pretends to love God just so that it can profit from it. I can't go along with it."

Camus was almost grinding his teeth. Opposite him, Leo stretched his hand out towards the armed monk while pressing him verbally.

"Then, Camus, tell me. If there is a way to win without losing any lives except enemy ones – so: a method without bloodshed in which everyone would agree to lay down their spears – please, by all means, tell me what it is."

"I don't know!"

In a way, it was almost invigorating; Camus let out that single yell before turning his back on Leo so swiftly it almost caused a breeze.

"Where are you going?"

“I have no answer to your question. I can’t come up with any other plan that would work. But at the same time, I can’t betray my own beliefs. I can’t work with you any longer. I’m taking my spear back to the temple. I’ll fight in my own way. And you can laugh that it’ll just mean dying in vain... dying defeated. I bid you farewell.”

“Wait.”

Faster than Percy or Sarah could cry out to him, Leo had shouted out and thrown himself in front of Camus. When the warrior monk tried to pass to his left or his right, Leo moved to stand directly in his way. It would have been a comic scene, and completely inappropriate for the atmosphere, except that both of them were facing off against one another as though there were drawn blades between them.

“Please move aside!”

“I won’t.”

Their expressions were filled with the hostility of those facing an enemy.

“Camus, you seem to think that it doesn’t matter if your own blood is spilt, but how many lives do you think you can save with just the blood spilt from your body? Even if you are all resolved to sacrifice your lives so that there will be no other victims, the end result will be that you won’t have saved anybody.”

“Are you saying I should look at the big picture? What do you think a sheltered, ignorant noble can teach me?”

“Right now, I’m seeing more than you are, Camus.”

“What does a lordling who has never seen his friends die in front of his eyes think that he understands?”

Percy half-rose to his feet. The quarrel was going around in circles.

Wasn’t it strange? Previously, Camus had cursed at the vassal-lords, calling them “blind” for not seeing that Allion was a threat. Yet now that it was time to fight, it was Camus who was indignant after having been shown a path to victory, and who was being criticised by Lord Leo for being “blind”.

Percy didn’t know what was right in this situation, either. Confused emotions

were running rampant in that room. Anyway, what everyone, himself included, needed right now was time to cool their heads. As Percy was watching, trying to find a chance to intervene, he saw Leo's hand go to his waist and unsheathe his sword. The blade was one of those slender and curved ones that were widely used in Atall.

Camus, on the other hand, was unarmed. Given that he was not an Ataltese soldier, it was only natural that would not be allowed to carry a weapon into the castle. For a second, his expression went stiff before turning into a faint and eerie smile.

"You're going to kill me? Fine, do it. If you kill those who won't do as you say, then you're no better than Allion."

"Big Brother!" Sarah shouted out.

Kuon was also in position to spring up.

Percy held his breath.

"No," Leo smiled and turned the sword around, pushing the grip into Camus' hand.

The warrior monk's thick eyebrows drew together at almost the same moment that Leo let go of the grip. Out of reflex, Camus caught the sword which was about to fall to the ground. Again almost at the same time, Leo's two hands covered Camus' so that it looked like the two of them were holding the sword together. Whereupon, Leo took a step forward, placing himself in a position where it looked like the blade was resting on top of his shoulder. Before Camus had time to react in surprise, it was already too late.

"*You will kill me,*" said Leo.



Part 4

“W-What?” Camus blinked in confusion.

Leo stared straight into his eyes.

“I revealed my whole plan to you. Since you object to it, I cannot allow you to leave. But having said that, I can’t kill the protector who saved my life, either.”

“T-That’s ridiculous. Do you think I’m the kind of man who would spread word around? I won’t tell anyone. So...”

“No. I can’t put this plan into effect without everyone’s approval. I absolutely need all of you to lend me your help. So if you’re saying that you can’t endorse the plan – since it means following the same fate anyway – I would rather you killed me here and now.”

“W-What are you talking about? You’re probably thinking I won’t do it. How like a noble, with your exaggerated play-acting to make you look...”

“Kill me, Camus.”

Leo took another step forward. The downturned blade pressed against his neck. Even when Camus hurriedly tried to step back, Leo followed after him.

Camus’ back hit the wall. And Leo still continued to advance.

Bah – Seething with irritation, Camus tried to forcefully tear the blade away from Leo. Camus was by far the stronger of the two, but Leo was desperate. He firmly planted his legs on the ground and put his strength into his shoulders. The tip of the curved blade grazed his cheek and ear, swiftly opening a red line along its path, from which thick drops of blood started to trickle down.

Even Camus’ blood ran cold and he stopped moving.

“Prince!” Several voices overlapped.

“Show me, Camus,” Leo, on the other hand, spoke quietly. “I’ve already

shown you my resolve. Now it's your turn to prove your determination. If you have enough determination to cut me down here and now, to be chased out of Atall and yet still head towards the temple to die a brilliant death, then prove it to me."

"P-Prince, stop," Camus groaned as Leo took yet another step forward. The tip of the sword was now at the nape of the prince's neck.

"It would be one thing if you were the only one to die. But what does defeat mean in this case? It means this country will fall, the temple will go up in flames and countless people will face death and destruction. If you claim that you're willing to bear that responsibility, then prove that your resolve is greater than mine, O Monk," said Leo.

Percy could no longer utter a sound as he watched this scene unfold. It was then that he noticed that the two who were facing off so closely had something in common.

Camus was gritting his teeth and looked as though he was in the middle of enacting a fight to the death, but he was, at heart, a very honest man. While his emotions were raging, what lay under the surface was easy to see: showing beneath his expression was a vulnerability – a sense of inferiority, so to speak – born from the fact that he could not offer a straight rebuttal or counterargument to the prince's plan.

Then, there was Lord Leo Attiel. His usually gentle countenance had changed entirely, and he looked close to anger. Yet if one looked closely, his eyes which were supposed to be glaring sharply, and his lips which were supposed to be set firmly were all trembling ever so slightly.

In terms of their positions, their opinions and the road they were following, the two were completely different. It was as if those very differences were what had caused them to clash with each other. And yet –

Their positions and their opinions are different, but at the very least, the inner conflict that they both feel is probably the same. They can clearly see the road they're going to follow. They're also prepared for the need for sacrifices to be able to take a step along it. And they're probably a lot alike in how they bitterly regret that they can't pay the price of sacrifice alone, thought Percy.

It occurred to him that it wasn't limited to those two, and that there was a part of him that also overlapped with them. *Oh, I get it.*

With that thought, a light suddenly flickered within his mind.

There was another scene like this... When Lord Leo said that he was going to 'defeat Darren so as to fight Allion', Camus' response at the time...

Percy had felt that those two might one day cause calamity to befall Atall. He had felt impatient. It would not have been surprising if he himself, exactly like Camus was right now, had outright opposed the prince and stood before him.

Yet back then, for some reason, Percy has not given vent to his emotions.

What he now *got* was what that reason had been.

Percy stood up and stepped towards the two of them.

Camus' eyes turned towards him; drenched in sweat, the monk seemed to be pleading for help.

“Get the prince away from me, Percy. I'll never tell anyone what I saw and heard here. True, we haven't known each other long, but you must know me enough to believe me when I say that. So let me go!”

Leo's eyes also looked towards Percy. Both their gazes were definitely alike.

Percy got so close to the two of them that he could feel their breath. And from there, he did something completely different from what Camus had hoped and Leo had expected.

He clapped them both on the shoulders. “Interesting,” he added, as he did so.

“What is?” Camus glared, his face covered in sweat. The anger he had been directing at Leo now seemed to be turned at full force against Percy.

Who remained undaunted.

“Don't you think so, Camus? Or actually, you might have thought it more than once. Back then, you know. Back on Mount Conscon, when were giving our all in a fight that we couldn't see the end of, and I suggested attacking Allion's headquarters. Thinking about it now, that was a really reckless, and foolish, and childish suggestion, huh? Well, no, there's no 'thinking about it now' about it.

We already knew it back then. Me, you, Kuon, Sarah – everyone understood it. But... everyone thought it sounded interesting, right? Better to do something outrageous than to gradually let ourselves be driven into a corner. Rather than sit around waiting to be killed, better to give our lives of our own free will.”

On either side of the blade, Camus and Leo's gazes were now turned solely towards Percy. Kuon and Sarah were the same.

“And it was the same when you, Prince, Camus, were agreeing excitedly about going to defeat Darren's soldiers. I should have stopped you. Deliberately inviting internal conflict when the country was in danger was simply too stupid. I should have objected clearly, just like Camus is now. But... I couldn't do it. You understand, don't you Camus? Back then, you probably went along with the prince because you were thinking the same thing. Yep – that it was 'interesting'.” Percy smiled without even realising it. Although he had felt danger emanating from the prince until just a few moments ago, Percy was now in a position akin to that of supporting the prince as he walked along a narrow tightrope. Or perhaps it was better to say that he would advance with him, ready to cross the rope together.

Anything's fine, I don't mind.

He could perceive his own true feelings. He could tell what he should do, and what he wanted to do. What could be more joyful for a young man?

“I hit the bull's eye, didn't I, Camus? True, we haven't known each other long, but I least know you well enough for that. Yeah. 'Interesting'. I thought so again too. This is Lord Leo, who flew over the predictions made by the sovereign-prince and the vassal-lords, and who was going to stand alone against Allion. No matter how far it went off the beaten track, no matter how ludicrous it seemed, you thought that was far more 'interesting' than not doing anything, and just waiting for some change to happen in a situation that was created by someone else.”

At some point, Percy's hands had extended towards Camus and the prince's shoulders, and gradually started forcing the two apart.

Percy then abruptly asked Camus a question.

“Camus, what do you fight for?”

“W-What do you mean, ‘what’? At this point, ‘what’... that’s,” while Camus’ tongue was getting itself tangled up, Percy substituted in his own words.

“To win,” he finished the sentence. “I also want to fight to win. I want to bet my life believing that victory is within reach. I have no wish to fight if victory is impossible; if I died in that situation, it would just be dying in vain.”

Camus’ eyes were dark with anger. He breathed in, looking like he was about to give an immediate retort, yet his voice did not come out, and all he exhaled was a helpless sigh.

Percy did not miss that cue. He pushed hard on Camus and Leo’s shoulders, forcing them away from one another. As their entangled hands separated, there was the sound of the sword clattering to the floor. The noise was unexpectedly loud and, in response to it, a voice came from behind the door.

“Your Highness, is something wrong!” The soldier on sentry duty burst in.

He was still very young, and Percy remembered his red hair and freckled face.

“It’s nothing, Rhoda. We were just playing about a bit,” Lord Leo laughed and picked up the sword which had fallen to the ground, returning it to his waist.

The boy called Rhoda was one of the militiamen who had been recruited in one of the villages. Despite his gentle appearance, he proved to be quite skilled, so he was even made a commanding officer. Most of the farmers had returned to work in their villages until they received orders, but a few of them, Rhoda included, had been hired to help guard the castle’s surroundings.

It was obvious to any onlooker that he adored the prince who had changed his life. He gazed at him as he would a god. Although the red-haired boy wasn’t happy with it – he had heard angry voices coming from inside the room – since it was the prince’s command, he obediently withdrew.

“Your Highness, the blood...”

When Percy pointed it out, Leo brought his hand to his cheek. His skin had been slightly torn, and blood was oozing out from under it. He quickly wiped it away with his hand.

That same hand was suddenly seized hold of by Camus. The gesture appeared

insolent, but Leo said nothing. Camus bowed his head. He seemed to squeeze a few words out, but not even the nearby Percy could make out what they were. Camus spoke once again, this time opening his mouth wide.

“You’re asking me to betray them,” he said. “The temple, the bishop, my native land... And my own future, I who had dedicated myself entirely to God.”

His native land? Percy frowned. This was the first time that he had reason to guess that Camus might have been born in Dytiann.

“And you’re threatening me with the fact that if I don’t betray them, it’ll usher in even greater destruction.”

“...”

Camus kept his face turned down, without as much as looking at Leo, who was nodding silently, as he painfully bit out his next words.

“Victory.”

Then –

“Can you promise victory, boy?” he continued.

Percy was on the verge of reproving him for his insolence, but Leo answered without a moment’s hesitation.

“I promise.”

“You’re telling the truth, right?” Camus gripped his hand with all his strength. Leo’s expression became ever so slightly distorted. “I... I can’t take any more. I can’t run away a third time. I would rather die than run away again. But... like Percy said, it would probably just be a useless death. But, boy... To win... You say that there’s a way to win. There’s a way to finish this without having the true teachings and the righteous way of doing things be burned and smashed and destroyed?”

“Of course,” through the sound of bones cracking and crunching, Leo nodded with no change in his expression. “But in exchange, please lend me your help, all of you. I am powerless, so please give me your recklessness and your strength.”

Who’s the reckless one here? Percy thought, but out loud, he answered with a

clear “Aye,” and placed his hand over theirs.

Camus’ was shaking. Finally –

“In that case, I pledge this body of mine... no, I will even entrust you with my soul, Your Highness. Forgive my rudeness.” As he said that, he fell to his knees, completely drained of all strength. Since their hands were still clasped, it looked from the outside as though Camus was kneeling before Leo Attiel.

Percy felt stimulated, as though the warmth from the overlapping hands had entered into his bloodstream and was coursing through him.

“Come over, Kuon. Sarah,” he called out to the two who were half rising to their feet.

He took both their hands and placed them on top of the ones which were covering Lord Leo’s.

“It really is interesting. Don’t you think so, Camus? Kuon? Sarah? A ‘powerless’ prince is asking for help from us ‘reckless’ ones. And he says that even though nobody has ever heard of us, he can win against Allion with our assistance. Isn’t that interesting?”

As he uttered those words, Percy felt happy from the bottom of his heart.

Chapter 5: Assiduously Running About

Part 1

While Sovereign-Prince Magrid was having a hard time dealing with Dytiann, his son Leo was meeting with its two envoys under the pretence of being ‘the sovereign-prince’s representative’.

Just as Percy had identified, it was done entirely on the basis of the prince’s own judgement.

The meeting place was in a room of Bernard’s castle. Leo had told even the castle lord that he intended to “exchange greetings with the envoys,” and had certainly not informed him that they would be discussing policies as their country’s respective representatives.

Dytiann’s representatives were, of course, the same as last time: Commander Arthur Causebulk of the Sergaia Holy Rose Division, and Bishop Baal. Just as Sarah had said, Arthur was a very handsome man, and even his demeanour had a romantic appeal. Said otherwise, he did not seem like a soldier. Bishop Baal, meanwhile, was a skinny man of about forty.

Neither of them had stopped smiling since they had introduced themselves, but the nature of both those smiles were very different. Arthur’s was like a child’s: it didn’t hold a speck of malice or ill-will, and had all the warmth of one who lived in a safe and sunny spot, sheltered by adults. Baal on the other hand wore a reassuring smile that was entirely becoming of a priest, but his eyes were harsh.

When Baal’s hand had been stretched out in greeting and Leo had first met

his gaze, he had felt cold, instinctive chills run across his skin. He had lowered his gaze in spite of himself, as though loosing strength.

Oh my... Baal, for his part, looked at Leo as he would at an ill-mannered child.

Camus, who was sitting with the prince, cleared his throat and they cut to the main point. Camus, acting as the prince's representative, had previously handed over a letter allowing them to set up this meeting because, as Leo started to explain, "I have things that I very much wish to speak of to you alone."

Which meant – in short – that this was a matter which would not be revealed even to the long-time retainers. Leo additionally announced that they were prepared to receive reinforcements.

"Oh, then His Majesty the Sovereign-Prince has already made up his mind?" Arthur's joyful behaviour made it look like he was about to clap his hands at any moment.

Upon enquiry, it appeared that Dytiann had three large air carriers at the ready. Each ship could carry three hundred soldiers, and they could send them in sequence to the temple.

"Three hundred..." Leo said in genuine admiration.

Even the largest ship in Atall could not hold more than a hundred on board.

"Then, about these arrangements..."

Baal seemed to want to bring the discussion to a close, but Leo's attitude towards Dytiann's envoys now turned imploring.

"Previously, my father Magrid also sent reinforcements in response to the temple's plea for help, as he could not bear to watch while God's innocent faithful were harmed. Yet within our country, there is an immoral group which opposed that decision."

The vassal-lords.

According to Leo, "they only think short-term and are afraid of Allion," so this time again, they were sure to pour cold water over the sovereign-prince's decision.

"Sooner or later, we will manage to persuade the vassal-lords, but since this is

now an emergency, time is precious.” Therefore –

“When you head towards the temple, couldn’t you sail along the northern side of our territories, near to the capital, Tiwana?” Leo suggested.

Travelling in a straight line from the westernmost town in Dytiann to the temple would mean passing through the domains of the vassal-lords. This, according to Leo, would be a problem.

Baal and Arthur exchanged glances and this time, both of their expressions read: *oh my*. And they did so much more openly than before. They had clearly decided that in this situation and with this person opposite them, there was no need to conceal their inner thoughts.



So is that why they deliberately fixed a second day for a meeting?

For all that they're supposed to be the ruling House, they can't even unite their retainers, hmm.

"Well then, we'll do it that way," Baal accepted Leo's plan, a faint look of contempt on his countenance. "I am in admiration before your determination; both the sovereign-prince's, who wishes to help the temple however he may, and your own high-minded nobility, Lord Leo. Since you in particular have also received baptism, I hope that we will hereafter maintain friendly relations."

Baal's attitude was nothing but solicitude. Across from him, Leo looked relieved at having his proposal be accepted so easily.

"We will provide you with soldiers to guide you during navigation. Let us together protect God's teachings from the hands of the wicked."

In less than an hour, the conference drew to a close.

– It was after Leo and Camus had left the room.

"Filthy."

Bishop Baal wiped away the smile he had worn throughout the meeting, and crossed himself with a look of deep loathing.

"A truly repulsive creature was here. Do you know it, Arthur?"

"Lord Leo, right? Lord Bishop, you seem to have hated the prince since even before the meeting."

"But of course," Baal rose from his seat and opened a window, as though to say that he could not stand the stench Leo had left behind. "That youngster doesn't know a single tenet of the faith and doesn't plan on learning any from hereon either; he only converted to observe Allion's mood. In receiving the gospel only to protect himself, he blasphemes against God."

"It can't have been something the prince thought of himself though. Surely his father must have forced him to it. And when you call him repulsive and a blasphemer, aren't you being a little harsh on him?"

"You're being very soft. Did you take a liking to the prince?"

As the bishop harrumphed, Arthur shrugged with an openhearted laugh.

“I sympathised with him. Did you see? Lord Bishop, it looked like he couldn’t even make eye contact with you throughout the entire meeting. Your face must have been terrifying.”

“Now you’ve gone and said it, Arthur,” the bishop chuckled in the depths of his throat. “Blaspheming against a bishop will earn you an eternity of roasting in the fires of hell.”

“Oh, scary. Lord Bishop, please, I beg of you, forgive me my sins.”

“Fine, kindly kneel.”

The exchange between the two of them had the air of young men joking around together. They had known each other for a long time: Baal had originally spent many years as a secretary to the previous commander of the Sergaia Holy Rose Division – in other words, to Arthur’s father – so he had known Arthur since the latter had been a child.

Their relationship between the two of them, however, did not stop there.

Even Lord Leo had sensed it.

After the meeting was over, the prince and Camus exchanged a few brief words of greeting with Bernard and his wife and child, then quickly left the castle. Leo looked pale.

“Pitiful,” glancing at him, Camus had a hard comment to offer. “If you let that frighten you, you won’t be able to act out your part. Or do you mean to say that you took Sarah’s nonsense seriously?”

“So you say, Camus, but you saw that bishop’s eyes too, didn’t you?” Leo looked like he was about to start shaking at any moment.

Sarah, who had been present at the first meeting, had previously shared her impression of the two envoys.

“I’m willing to bet that those two have a *thing* going on.”

“A *thing*?”

Kuon’s expression was boyishly blank, and Sarah pretended to flick the bridge

of his nose.

“It means they have a very deep relationship. Those two, when they thought that no one would notice, well, they kept exchanging these sweet glances. Just looking at them made me feel exhausted.”

“Sarah!” Her brother had to scold her about going on endlessly about ‘that’ kind of topic.

According to what they heard later, in Dytiann, there were plenty of ‘those’ kinds of stories within the upper echelons of the church. Which was why Leo had been unable to bear Bishop Baal’s gaze, which had seemed to be appraising him. While he could fight against the swords and spears of enemy soldiers, this was a type of threat he had no experience with.

– Anyway, just as Sarah had noted, the two envoys from Dytiann enjoyed their sweet exchanges as soon as it was just the two of them.

“At any rate, forget arguing with Allion or with our Dytiann, it looks like Atall’s ruling House can’t even find firm ground to tread on under its own feet. There will be plenty of opportunities to take advantage of in the future. Simply learning that is already a good result,” Baal was in a good mood, having already laughed his fill at the prince who was no longer present.

“This departure for the front is an unparalleled opportunity for you, Arthur. I can’t come with you because of my work in the diocese, but the preparations will be flawless.”

“Really, when is the good bishop going to stop treating me like a child? It’s fine. We just need our troops to set up camp within the temple, right?”

“Exactly, it’s all good as long as you can arrange for our soldiers to be permanently stationed there. Even Allion can’t have sent that many men. They’ll pull back for the time being at least once they hear that Dytiann is taking part in the battle. After that, between Allion and us, it will be a contest of manoeuvring according to political influence. I beg of you, don’t try to do anything heroic. I will definitely arrange a stage for you to stand out on, Arthur.”

“I know, Bishop. Everything is in accordance with God’s will.”

During the meeting, both Dytiann and Lord Leo had gotten their proposals accepted, so to all outward appearances, it was a success.

Leo, however, did not have the leeway to rest on his laurels and be satisfied with these results. No sooner had he returned to Guinbar Castle with Camus after the meeting than he headed back out of Savan's territory, this time taking Kuon and Percy with him.

"He certainly is busy," Savan said, his eyes wide with surprise.

Yet if he had heard where Leo was headed to next, he would not simply have gone wide-eyed: the shock would have drained the blood from his face and he would probably also have set off with his soldiers, to try and stop Lord Leo at all cost.

Part 2

A few days later.

After crossing several mountains to the southwest of Savan's territory, and stepping over the national border, one arrived in the domains of the Allian general, Claude Anglatt.

South of that territory, across even steeper mountains, stood a hastily constructed fort. Allion had built it to topple the temple, and its commander had long been absent, but now, Hayden Swift had returned.

He had not brought fresh troops, and the less than a thousand soldiers that were stationed in the camp was the sum total of his forces. Equally, they had not been ordered to pull back, which meant that Hayden intended to continue this war.

In that case, he could pay a little more attention. Claude was irritated.

He had set soldiers to guard the way between his territory and the fort. Although these mountains looked impossible to travel through on foot without excellent equipment and know-how, two hundred soldiers had previously emerged from them to save Lord Leo. That was apparently thanks to a mercenary who had himself been born in a mountainous area, but since he alone had done the guiding, it meant that there existed a route which was virtually a blind spot, even for the locals.

Even though his headquarters had only narrowly avoided being attacked, Hayden seemed perfectly unconcerned by it. Instead, it was Claude who was setting up precautions.

"It would take pretty big guts. Me, if I had a mistress who shoved a blade to my neck, I wouldn't go and sleep snoring next to her the very next night." Claude laughed at the retainers through the use of unfunny metaphors, yet no sooner had he stretched a surveillance net throughout the mountains than he

caught prey.

And it was big game at that.

When it was brought in front of him, Claude was once again left irritated; the captured prey was Leo Attiel's group.

Leo and the others were more or less made up to look like pilgrims of the Cross Faith, but they surely could not have believed that alone would deceive the sharp eyes of Allion's soldiers.

Actually, although he was a captive, Leo's expression was cheerful. He had been intending from the start to meet with Claude. The fact that he had not gone through official channels was because there were certain considerations which meant that he did not want anyone else to know about it.

"Good grief, all these braves gathering in my surroundings," said Claude while picking his nose. Instead of a show of contempt for the one opposite him, it was proof of familiarity towards someone who was, in fact, practically family.

They were in a room at the castle. The sun had already set, so lamps and candles were needed to light it.

"Well, I was thinking I needed to present my greetings to you, Prince, at some point. The order has just gotten a bit reversed."

Rumours of the betrothal which had been announced in Tiwana had already reached Allion. Not surprisingly, Leo could not stop himself from blushing and lowering his head.

"I-I'm very sorry. It was inconsiderate of me not to have gotten your permission, Sir Claude."

"I'm amazed. My sons were in uproar, going on about 'our little sister has been kidnapped by Atall'. If they knew that Lord Leo had nonchalantly come sauntering back, they'd be sharpening their swords in their rooms around about now. I advise you not to wander down any unlit streets at night."

"Y-Yes," Leo was finding it decidedly hard to lift his head.

Claude was talking as if it were a joke, but the reality was that he must be

feeling at least somewhat humiliated because of his daughter. If nothing else, people were gossiping about how, “Claude must be connected to Atall,” and “that’s why he let the prince escape.” Then on top of that came the news of a betrothal between his daughter and the prince, and the criticism from the capital must have grown even stronger.

Claude, however, laughed it off heartily.

“My wife, Ellen, was the only one who smiled about it: she said she’d know it would happen sooner or later. As for me, as a parent, I’m just not sure. Is this man good enough for Florrie?”

“T-That’s...”

Claude listened with a fatherly expression to what Leo told him about how Florrie was living well in Tiwana. Still, they did not have much time for idle chatter.

“Now then, you won’t have sneaked into my territory just to tell me about your engagement. What’s your business?”

Leo looked towards the soldiers and stewards who were in the room with them. Claude took the hint and ordered them out. Leo’s two attendants remained in the room – although they had of course disarmed before entering the castle – but Claude himself was a ‘brave’, and had no fear of letting them remain.

Being one of the attendants, Percy watched as Leo broached the main topic.

This is going to be a re-enactment of what happened back then, huh? He thought to himself. ‘Back then’ was by no means far in the past; what he meant was the scene in which sparks had flown when Lord Leo and Camus confronted one another head-on. *There will probably be more and more of those kinds of scenes from now on.*

That was the presentiment Percy had as he watched Claude Anglatt’s expression change from over Lord Leo’s back.

The general was experiencing the same feelings as the people who had only known Leo for a short amount of time.

In other words, he was feeling the same amount of surprise as Percy had; just as Darren had, he found himself filled with doubts – Is this boy who is spouting this nonsense really the same Lord Leo who stayed in my domains for six years? –, and, just as Camus had, he ended up feeling enraged.

“Hang on, Leo,” Claude held out his large hand to interrupt the prince’s talk. “What are you saying? Are you planning on telling me about some fantastical story you saw in a dream?”

“No. I’m telling you about the plan I intend to carry out from hereon.

“No, it’s a dream,” while Claude’s eyebrows rose in anger, his lips alone somehow managed to retain the shape of a smile. “Because if you aren’t talking about a dream, I can’t just keep silent and let you go. Leo... you, what you’re saying is that you’re going to betray me... betray Allion.”

“You’re wrong,” Leo shook his head.

“How am I wrong!” Claude finally roared. “Even if you’re getting engaged to Florrie, do you think I’m the kind of man who would betray my country for my daughter and my future son-in-law? Leave, Leo. Go back to Atall right now! If you don’t, I’ll cut off your head with my own hands!”

As Claude spoke, he actually seized hold of the broadsword which had been hanging from the wall. In that instant, Percy and Kuon, who were both behind Leo, prepared to leap into action, but Leo spread his hands either side of himself and stopped his retainers.

“Wait. Sir Claude, please wait!”

Still in the same position, Leo stared straight at Claude. With his eyebrows drawn together and his teeth tightly clenched, his expression was desperate. He seemed to be declaring that even if Claude came at him with the broadsword, he would not move a single step.

“Sir Claude, you would never betray your country. I came here today because I was convinced of that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“General Claude Anglatt, this isn’t betrayal. On the contrary, you will be

protecting the country from a threat.”

“Yeah, and I’m asking you what you’re on about,” still holding the broadsword, Claude clicked his tongue in irritation. “Do you want to talk ethics? You’re right, there’s no morality in Allion attacking the temple a second time like this. So do you want to say I should support Atall to end this unjust war and become a hero and saviour of Allion? Don’t be ridiculous!”

Claude had his doubts about taking military control of Conscon Temple and he suspected that, on the whole, this entire war had probably been started solely at Hayden’s behest. He also believed that it would be best if every plan attempted by the newly-returned Hayden and his troops could be thwarted. Nevertheless, it was unthinkable for Claude to actively support the enemy side.

“Spare me the fake concern, Leo. You’re far more educated than I am. But you still won’t convince me with the clever way of speaking that you’ve gotten from your learning. Go back to Atall. I won’t tell you to give me back my daughter; Florrie has chosen her own path. So...”

“Please wait!” Leo’s voice flew like an arrow.

Ah! For a fleeting second, Claude, a general famed on the battlefield, had the illusion that a bolt was flying straight towards his face.

Leo rose from his chair and tramped up to Claude, who still had the broadsword in hand, then swiftly knelt before him, his cloak swaying. While Claude stumbled a few steps forward, the prince raised his face towards him.

“I am not talking about ethics or morality. General Claude, with your own hands, you will drive back a ‘foreign enemy’ aiming at Allion,” he flatly asserted.

Claude stared down at the boy’s face. He was pouring with sweat in the glozing heat. The boy continued to look up at Claude.

This little guy... Claude once again felt the same misgivings. They were of the same kind that Darren, Percy, and perhaps even Leo himself held.

Someone who was insignificant right up until yesterday hatches out today and turns into a different person even while the eggshell is still clinging to them – I’ve seen guys like that a few times on the battlefield. Are you one of them? Just what kind of battlefield did you experience in Atall, Leo? No, if it comes to that,

even this foreign country that Allion is to you might have been a battlefield.

He didn't understand. And talking about something else that he didn't understand...

“A ‘foreign enemy’? What foreign enemy? The only enemy Allion currently has abroad is Conscon Temple. Or Is Atall taking part in the war again? Is that who you're talking of driving back? You, Lord Leo of Atall?”

Claude found it incomprehensible. Lifting his gaze a little, he fixed his eyes on Percy and Kuon, who were arrayed behind Leo. They – Percy especially – were watching what was happening while apparently holding their breath, and also holding themselves back. They had probably resolved to leave this to Leo. Such was the relationship between lord and vassal.

The general heaved a deep sigh and returned the broadsword to its original position. In exchange, he stretched a brawny arm out towards the prince.

“Let's both sit back down, Leo... sorry, Lord Leo. I'm only saying I'll listen to what you have to say. But that also means that there's no going back. No matter how I try, I won't be able to laugh it off as a joke or a dream anymore. If, once you've finished speaking, I judge that you're a threat to me and to my country, I'll simply have your head – and that, even if it means that my daughter will hate me for the rest of her life,” said Claude, holding out his hand to pull Leo up.

There was no longer the relaxed attitude of those who had been like family for six years. Nor was there an atmosphere like the one between son-in-law and father-in-law.

“Understood,” yet Leo Attiel's face was bright as he took the hand that helped pull him to his feet.

While Leo, Percy and Kuon had headed towards Claude's castle, Camus and Sarah had returned to Conscon Temple.

The road Leo and the others had taken was not an easy one, but rushing along mountain paths at night made it a difficult journey for the siblings. They were covered in mud and sweat by the time they arrived at the temple which they

had both been missing. The situation there was likewise in a sorry state.

Even though Allion's troops had been without their commander, they hadn't gone easy on the temple. They had sent out soldiers around the base of the mountain to cut off the supply of food and funds. They quickly pulled back when the temple's side attacked them, but no sooner did they do so than they then started firing from cannons placed at the foot of the mountain, whose existence they seemed to have suddenly remembered.

What wasn't cut off was the flow of deserting soldiers escaping from the temple, which they believed no longer had any chance of winning. For a time, the temple had clamped down hard on fugitives, but thoughtlessly keeping soldiers who had lost their spirit meant that they had grown violent.

"Then give us food. Hand out money. Show us a path to victory!" they had raged.

With soldiers like that on the inside, there was no longer any way to keep fighting. There was no other choice but to allow them to escape. Almost all of the bandits and marauders who had light-heartedly come to the temple as mercenaries had already vanished. Those left were little more than the Ataltese troops led by Nauma Laumarl, who reluctantly remained because of the sovereign-prince's orders. To be more specific, losses due to the repeated battles and to the departure of Percy's unit meant that the original five hundred soldiers were down to three hundred.

Apart from them, there were about two or three hundred warrior monks. Even the nuns at the monastery had grabbed spears, saying that "if the time comes, we will fight", but the current circumstances meant that they could not even get one proper meal a day, so their energy, which had once had the force of a forest fire, would soon be extinguished as though put out by heavy rains.

Naturally, there weren't only monks and priests at the temple. The people who had originally been living on the outskirts of the temple were also present, and there many too who had fled there from the villages at the foot of the mountain. As he passed through the streets, Camus repeatedly heard the wails of children, and could sense the listless gazes of the adults.

Camus called on those of them that he knew by sight; more than half of them

had already passed away. The more elderly among them had apparently declared that, “once this old deadweight is gone, at least there’ll be one less mouth to feed,” and, so saying, they had pushed their old bodies into going to fight the enemy, and had fallen in glory.

He pretended not to see how Sarah’s shoulders shuddered and heaved up and down throughout the entire day.

The sun had set by the time he met with Bishop Rogress. Camus told about how, although their surprise attack on the enemy headquarters had ended in failure, and they had – for a short time – been captured, they had ultimately saved the Ataltese prince and had crossed over to Atall.

“To protect the temple, His Highness, Lord Leo, was baptised into our God’s religion, and is moving in various ways.” When he heard that, the bishop made the sign of the cross in front of his chest.

“Everything is in accordance with God’s will.”

“Nevertheless, Bishop, Lord Leo can only make use of a limited number of soldiers. We cannot be optimistic about the chances of victory.”

“Have faith in the Lord’s will. By complying with it, we will, at the very least, live lives we need never be ashamed of,” said Bishop Rogress.

As was only to be expected, the bishop’s plump face and figure were starting to look gaunt, yet both his posture and his manner remained firm. He presented the appearance of the ideal priest, and Camus should have been deeply impressed by it.

For some reason though, this time, Camus felt strange about it.

He was reminded of Abbot Tom, who had spared his and his sister’s life, and who had taken them in right after they had fled while their family home burned down. The abbot’s heart had been full of splendid ideals; but even though he had ideals, he had no power. Which was why, when Camus was driven out by fire and forced to flee, pulling his sister by the hand, for a second time, he had come to this temple, which had both ideals and power.

Even though Rogress and Tom were each supposed to have given him a completely different impression from the other, at that moment, Camus could

see their faces perfectly overlapping with one another.

What am I thinking?

After taking his leave from Rogress, Camus shook his head quickly. Still, he could not shake the thought. It was as if there was an area in his own mind that he had not been aware of, in which a devil was crouching, with its black wings folded.

He remained plunged in thought until morning.

The next day, the two siblings were busy doing what needed to be done to fulfil the purpose of their separating with Leo and returning to the temple. Camus had hoped that he might forget if he immersed himself in doing something, but the devil wasn't so easily driven away.

The next day again, he did something which he himself found hard to believe. Still possessed by that devil that he was deliberately pretending not to have noticed, he intended to act according to the orders he had received.

He himself could not understand why he, a devoted servant of God, could temporarily throw away his own faith.

“Surrender?” In a corner of the chapel, the bishop opened his narrow eyes just a little wider.

“These are not naturally not my own words,” said Camus. “It is just one possibility among the tactics that Lord Leo brought up. Although even if we call it a surrender, it would – again, naturally – only be temporary. The important thing is to make sure that Allion’s attention is focused on us.”

Camus spoke dispassionately, his face expressionless. The morning sun penetrated through the gaps between the pillars, and the two people’s shadows stretched out long.

“There are many faithful within Allion, and public opinion is conflicted about the temple. Not even Hayden would dare to harm believers who have surrendered... is the idea.”

From start to finish, Camus had presented it as ‘Leo’s opinion’. This was by no means a lie: among the points listed in the plan that Leo had presented – to

which Percy and Camus had added one or two considerations for analysis – the possibility of having the temple surrender had certainly been raised. The idea behind it was to attract and focus Allion’s attention on it. However, it had soon been dropped from the list of possible courses of action since there were just too many unknown factors – for example, even if their surrender successfully held the enemy’s attention, it was nonetheless impossible to tell whether Allion would let the populace and the faithful go free immediately, so on Leo’s side they would not be able to count on having Ataltese soldiers attack from the mountains . Yet for some reason, Camus talked about it to the bishop as though it were still a valid option.

Rogress’ reply was both swift and simple.

“I have no intention of doing so.”

“But, Bishop...”

“I believe I have already told you: it is our duty to comply with God’s will. Even if only temporarily, even if as part of a plan, we cannot surrender to His enemies. Even if we should be defeated by Allion, whose might is so much greater than ours, the dauntlessness we will have shown by betting our own lives will surely reach the Heavens. And if so, God’s words will cross over our mountains, and in every city and citadel, they will ring out like the tolling of bells.”

Camus said nothing further, and respectfully lowered his head. After putting his fingers in blessing to Camus’ forehead, the bishop left the chapel.

“Defeated”... you say?

His head still bowed, Camus stayed a long while scrutinising the floor at his feet.

Arrogant though it might have been, he had been ‘testing’ the bishop. Even if he had not gone along with the plan of surrendering – just as Leo and Camus themselves had not – Camus had wanted to know by what kind of process he would reach that decision, and to see for himself what were the bishop’s inner thoughts.

Did he have determination? Was he prepared to drive away the enemy?

He was prepared.

Prepared to sacrifice himself for God.

Prepared *only* for that.

I believed this temple had power. That it was strong enough to drive back an unjust use of strength, that it had enough power to act upon God's will. So I was fine with dying for it, as long as I could help it, even if just a little. If it meant that victory was within reach...

Camus imagined that perhaps, when he had been younger; Bishop Rogress and the god he believed in had also been harmed by unjust use of power. And maybe that was why, with Allion's cooperation, he had built up his own armed force and economic territory.

And in truth, he had fought against Allion.

But here too, if it had to be said, he had *only* fought.

Perhaps he had never once believed that they might win. In this holy sanctuary that he himself had built, he would continue fighting without retreating before the use of strength, and perish. What counted more than anything else was that he would sacrifice himself for God's teachings.

The scattered words and doubts within Camus' heart were slowly taking shape. But that shape differed from the simple violent thoughts that he had previously held.

He had Percy, who had suggested the reckless plan of carrying out a surprise attack on the enemy headquarters; and Kuon, his treasured disciple with whom he fought side-by-side; and Lord Leo, who was going to use the most outrageous tactics to overturn the current situation. All of them longed for victory.

And also, on the palm of his hand, he could still feel the sensation of Sarah's very young hand, when he had pulled her along. He didn't want to see people burned in flames anymore. He couldn't bear to flee from the fires anymore.

"... so after all, Bishop Rogress, you too..." he mumbled vacantly.

After which, he said nothing further.

Part 3

Hayden was confident that the temple would fall. It would, moreover, be a perfect victory, as rapid as possible and with as little damage to his own troops as possible.

For one thing, there was the intelligence from their spies within the temple. They said that the temple had been lured out by Allion into placing their cannons at the foot of the mountain. Since the warrior monks were also concentrated in the areas surrounding the guns, the corollary was that there were many passageways that were apparently completely undefended. It had been arranged that when they received the signal, the spies would guide Allion's soldiers to those locations.

Soon after receiving that information, Hayden was planning to move his troops for a large-scale offensive. Originally, the temple should already have fallen by now, but back when he had received news of Lord Leo and Florrie's escape, Hayden had been left with no choice but to postpone its capture. He had even gone so far as to leave the headquarters and depart for Tiwana.

He had not, however, given the order "not to do anything" while he was away. Just as Camus had guessed, they had continued to send out soldiers to cut off the temple's supply lines, and to sporadically cause skirmishes in the villages at the foot of the mountain. The reason for that last one was because they wanted to force the enemy to maintain fixed gunnery positions.

Just as Camus had also seen, runaways were escaping the temple one after another. A spy mixed in among them had brought one more piece of information, and his report was the second reason why Hayden was convinced that complete victory was within reach.

"Oh-ho, so Atall's soldiers have finally pulled out?" Hayden smiled as he sat back in his chair in a relaxed pose.

Of the Ataltese reinforcements which had come rushing, about three hundred had still remained at the temple, but they had finally left the day before. Apparently, they had streamed down the mountain like the remnants of a defeated army.

Hayden chuckled to himself. Even if the sovereign-prince had wanted a little longer before deciding when to quit, there was no more time left.

Incidentally, among the information that Hayden had collected, there was also some concerning movements within Atall itself. There was no evidence that they would be sending in any fresh troops. The Ataltese aristocrats had jumped at the bait called 'peace' that Hayden had prepared for them, and were savouring its false flavour. As for the sovereign-prince, he would have no thought of defying their opposition and sending soldiers to defend a temple with which he did not actually have any connection.

And also... among the topics covering Atall, there were reports concerning Leo Attiel. He alone had called for a reorganisation of the armed forces, but he had tragically failed and had thereupon immediately been baptised into the Cross Faith. Actually, rumour had already spread within Allion that his conversion had served as the pretext for building the first large-scale church within Atall's domains.

So Atall's ruling family does have a connection to the temple after all – there were many voices that cried out in anger and suspicion. Yet many of the adherents of the Cross Faith within Allion had favourably received the news of the prince's baptism.

It made Hayden want to laugh.

Don't you care how you look anymore?

Was he hoping to win over public opinion in Allion thanks to his religious conversion? Certainly, there were many who viewed it with favour, but that would not be enough to sway the country's policy. Being baptised into the Cross Faith and establishing a diocese within the country was a shoddy, hastily thought-up plan that could not possibly halt Hayden's momentum at this point.

Ha.

On the eve of his departure for the front, Hayden felt like laughing as he inclined his wine cup towards him. Yet for some reason, he couldn't laugh. For a moment, he was bewildered as he couldn't understand why that was.

He pondered for a while.

Silence reigned inside the fortress. While this might have seemed strange, it was the proof that every unit had already completed their preparations for tomorrow's assault. As was Hayden's habit, he kept both those of lower rank and the pages waiting in attendance at a distance, so he was alone. While hearing the faint hum that was the voices of insects, he arrived at his answer.

I see.

Hayden looked down on Leo's plan. That was a fact; yet, at the same time, he was inclined to admire Leo Attiel. During the banquet in Tiwana, Hayden had provoked Leo; yet in and of itself, that had not been necessary. To be sure, Leo had committed the crime of taking Florrie away from Allion, but that was only a temporary thing. If the banquet had ended peacefully, he would have been able to bring Florrie back with him on the ship, and, very little time later, he would have destroyed Atall.

Leo, however, had responded to Hayden's provocation.

He had publicly announced his engagement to Florrie. Moreover, as he trod down on Hayden's foot, he had fired off these words: "Are you saying that your power can take the place of a proper cause, and get the army to move? Then show me. And I'll show you how I turn the tables on you."

Hayden had been engulfed in intense fury but, looking back on it after he had left Atall, he realised that Leo's words had been no more than childish defiance. With no concrete plan to go on, he had simply blurted out how much he wanted to oppose Hayden. Which was why, when he was having his audience with the king of Allion and reaffirming his right to military command, Hayden had believed that, *a brat of no more than seventeen, who isn't even the heir, won't be able to do anything. He can just wait and shiver. I'll make him regret his words from the bottom of his heart when I march the troops upon them.*

Yet Leo had shown movement. At least compared to those Ataltese nobles who were indulging in the bait known as 'peace', he still had the will to oppose

Allion. He was not just 'waiting and shivering'. Even though, when Hayden had first met him at Claude's castle, he had been no more than an insignificant hostage.

If I can say that you, who was supposed to live out your life as a worthless hostage, was the one who shook me awake from where I was sleeping in the ocean that is Allion, perhaps it can also be said that I was the one who woke you.

Hayden felt an oddly profound emotion. He was even relaxed enough to be able to objectively think of it as strange.

I'm drunk, he put down his wine cup with a forced laugh.

Even if he admitted that he was increasingly feeling something like a connection to Leo Attiel, there was no point thinking about it too deeply; in the end, Leo amounted to no more than one who would be engulfed by even the smallest of waves born from the ocean that was Allion.

But I'll remember you, Leo Attiel, Hayden closed his eyes. *I'll take your head as Atall's palace goes up in flames. But, I will be the only one who will remember your name, since it won't be left either in history or in people's memories. That is the least I can do for you, you who woke me up, as a show of thanks... and as your eulogy.*

He soon started to snore softly, before being awoken again by the pages.

Until that day arrived, Leo Attiel was running about making preparations.

He had met with Dytiann's envoys, had snuck into Allion's territory, and had spoken with Claude Anglatt. Concurrently to that, he was pushing along another strange item on his agenda.

In the western part of Savan's territory – which was to say, everywhere that was close to the border with Allion – he had encampments hastily constructed.

The one whose cooperation he called upon was Bernard. Most of his territory was covered in forest, so Bernard served both as a domain lord and as the forester for the woodlands owned by the ruling House. Using the authority of

the princely house, Leo had him cut down trees and have them transported to Savan's lands.

Up to something weird again, thought Bernard, but his wife, who was an ardent believer in the Cross Faith, did not stay silent when she heard that the wood was to be used to build lodgings for the craftsmen working on the church, as well as for sheds in which to temporarily store the stone. Partly at his wife's instigation, Bernard had hurriedly started work.

This is a digression, but before returning to the temple, Sarah had once paid a visit to Bernard's wife. As women dedicated to the same faith, they had a lot to talk about. The topic of the war at Conscon Temple was also brought up, and it left Bernard's wife deeply worried. "Why can't our country help the temple?" her words were unusual for a woman from Atall, or rather, they came dangerously close to stepping into the domain of politics. Because of that and because he intended to build a base to allow the Cross Faith to conduct large-scale activities in Atall, Leo had become something of a hero to Bernard's wife.

Leo now had a huge quantity of timber to hand, but most of it was used not to build dwellings for the craftsmen, but to construct encampments.

Although even if they were called encampments, they were nothing more than structures with roofs that could house several dozen people. As for what they were used for, it was to lodge Leo's five hundred militiamen – who, incidentally, had pitched in to build the camps.

They were joined by regular soldiers. Not, however, the Royal Guards that Leo had brought with him from Tiwana. Since those were no more than guards for the quarry who had been left to him by the sovereign-prince, Leo had sent them back to the capital once they had successfully drawn out Darren's soldiers.

The regular soldiers in question were the three hundred led by Nauma Laumarl. Having been left for so long at Conscon Temple, they had been waiting impatiently for orders from the sovereign-prince, and finally been given permission to come down from the mountain. In actual fact though, Sovereign-Prince Magrid had not issued any such orders.

Leo Attiel had given Camus a dagger bearing the crest of the princely house

on its hilt and, along with a letter, it gave the impression of being an order from Magrid that allowed Nauma and the others to descend from the temple.

Once they crossed the border, they had, for the time being, been guided to Savan's nearby castle, where they had stayed a night to "recover after your long campaign". Given that their impression of Savan Roux was that he was merely 'an impoverished vassal-lord', they were astonished by the magnificent reception they received.

Right, His Majesty the Sovereign-Prince must have given Savan the money to thank us for our services. We had a hard time of it, and His Majesty appreciates it, now that he was tasting civilised food and drink for the first time in a long time, Nauma was intoxicated.

The next day, while they were in the middle of getting ready to "return to dear old Tiwana," Leo Attiel showed up. That too came as a surprise to Nauma. Which was understandable, since he was completely ignorant of Atall's current internal situation, but yet another shock was in store for him.

"I'll be taking charge of all the soldiers under your command, Nauma," the prince announced.

Nauma himself was ordered to remain as captain to the men. Well, even if it was presented as "an order from the sovereign-prince", that was, of course, another of Leo's lies. In all honesty, he did not actually have any further need for Nauma himself, but if he returned like this, the sovereign-prince would find out that Leo had acted on his own to have them withdraw from Mount Conscon.

"P-Please wait. What does His Majesty intend for us to do now? Have we not made peace with Allion?" Nauma asked, but the prince stuck to it that it was "an order from my father, the sovereign."

While Leo was explaining that he would be taking overall command of the troops, Nauma found himself unintentionally doubting his liege's sanity – *His Majesty must have been caught between Allion and the vassal-lords, and had to try and do something.*

But anyway, if it was an order, he had no choice but to obey. Muttering complaints the whole time, he divided up the soldiers into a number of units,

and sent them off to the encampments.

That evening, Leo Attiel was in the chapel. He had received information that Hayden Swift had returned to the frontlines. The attacks on the temple would start up again soon.

Camus and Sarah were at that temple now. Percy had headed to a different location, and was waiting for Leo's signal. Kuon had been entrusted with an elite unit, and he too was waiting for the prince's orders.

And Leo Attiel was also waiting. While soaking up the atmosphere in the simple and still completely unadorned chapel, he had one hand on the sword at his waist. His other hand was on his chest, and he could feel the beat of his heart against his palm.

The wind was blowing, and the candle flames were flickering. Leo's shadow also seemed to sway, then it turned into that ominous, stagnant *sludge*, a one-dimensional figure that stood right before him, thrusting its black, featureless face at him.

Will you do it? It spoke in its silent voice.

"I'll do it," said Leo.

People will die. A great many people. Foolish little prince. Countless lives will be lost which wouldn't have needed to be if only you hadn't provoked Hayden. And you too will plunged headlong into hell.

"If I don't take action, sooner or later, Atall will fall."

Excuses, excuses. Their corpses won't want to listen to those words from you, Little Prince.

"If they don't want to listen, then they don't need to listen. Somebody has to make a change. Somebody has to force things to move."

Who was Leo speaking to?

"The relationship between the ruling family and the vassal-lords has collapsed simply because the ruling House wasn't able to show the necessary strength when it needed to. As the ruling family lost power, the influence of the vassal-lords increased inversely to that. That's why they can't give a single order that

doesn't profit the vassal-lords, and can't make a single move."

In other words –

"Ultimately, the ruling family is to blame for Atall's current weakness."

– was what he was saying.

"And that's why," the moment Leo said it, the *sludge* returned to being a shadow. "that's why, I will do it."

Chapter 6: The Battle of Conscon

Part 1

Hayden Swift had mobilised his troops.

During the night, rows of armour illuminated by the light from pine torches approached Mount Conscon in a scarlet wave. Near dawn, the first two hundred soldiers advanced to the foot of the mountain. The trumpets sounded, and battles cries welled up with so much force that they drowned out the instruments.

The temple side responded in kind. The warrior monks, who were gathered at the base of the mountain, hurriedly came into view. Arrows were shot, then came the sound of gunfire.

Allion's side drew ever closer, raising their shields before them or using the cover of trees to protect themselves. Yet they did not push in any deeper than necessary.

Meanwhile, five hundred soldiers were making their way to the back of the mountain. This group did not raise any loud blast of trumpets. Instead, they approached stealthily. Once they were near the mountain, they put out their torches and stopped moving. They silently hid themselves low and, for a while, it was as though the five hundred men had transformed into a single beast, observing its prey from the cover of tall grass.

When the sky started to turn purple, a change occurred on Mount Conscon: a plume of smoke rose from its summit.

It was a beacon fire.

There had been no movement up until then, but even now, Allion's soldiers showed neither surprise nor restlessness. After all, it was not an action taken by the temple, but by spies from their own side. The rows of armour rose as one.

As per arrangement, a man came to meet them in the grove of trees, a lantern in his hand. He was dressed like a warrior monk, but was actually one of the agents they had sent in, and he would be guiding them from there on. Since the beacon had been lit, it meant that the fighting had already begun on the other side of the mountain. Their unit at the back of it would use this opportunity to attack the temple from the rear.

Meanwhile, there was another person who watched the beacon from a forest that lay to the west of Mount Conscon.

Percy Leegan.

There was a small hill within the forest, at the summit of which a ship was anchored. On its hull was the crest of the Dytiann Alliance: the crossed swords of Saint Mars and the purple scarf that symbolised the lady Saint Brizanica. On the other side of the ship, the crest of the Sergaia Holy Rose Division was clear for all to see.

It was, of course, one of the ships sent by Dytiann as reinforcements for the temple. Arthur Causebulk, the division's commander, and three hundred of his soldiers were on board.

At first, Percy had been unable to conceal his amazement at the sight of a ship that could carry that many people. In terms of speed and capacity for high-altitude flying, it was inferior to Atall's twenty-men air carriers, but in terms of its overall size, it was nearly twice as large as them. It was practically on the same scale as seafaring warships.

– Ten days earlier, Arthur had set sail from Dytiann's sphere of religious influence and, as Atall had requested, he had not headed due west, but had navigated along the circuitous northern route, in order to avoid urban areas as well as the territories of the vassal-lords, and so also to avoid causing anymore unwanted commotion.

It was a voyage that had the officers on Dytiann's side store up a pile of complaints, since – *it's all because Atall's ruling House is weak and cowardly*

that we have to put in unnecessary amounts of time and money. Ether, which was needed to keep ships afloat, was by no means a cheap commodity. But their commander, Arthur Causebulk, had a relaxed personality.

“Sightseeing from the sky is nice too,” he said, without a trace of irritation. “Isn’t this idyllic view of Atall just amazing? Oh, Sir Percy, come over here too. Come and see what your country looks like from the sky.”

He had taken a liking to Percy, whom Leo had sent to act as the ship’s pilot, and was always calling out to him. Not only that, he familiarly slung his arm around Percy’s shoulders, and seemed about to touch his hand. While maintaining an outwardly gentle demeanour, Percy Leegan inwardly felt a sense of impending crisis such as he had never experienced before.

Apart from that personal threat, the navigation itself went well, but now that they had crossed west of Atall’s border, they met with an unexpected impediment. Once the ship was moored by the riverside, Percy had ridden to the neighbouring villages to gather information, and had confirmed that the overall situation had not changed much since he himself had been fighting at the temple.

Soldiers from Allion appeared sporadically within the temple’s vicinity. It seemed increasingly unlikely that the base that Percy himself had once snatched away from them would have been left untouched.

“In the circumstances, it won’t be easy to bring the ship closer,” warned Percy.

Allion’s troops might have cannons, and there was a chance that they might have brought several with them on location. A large, slow-moving ship would become an easy target.

“In that case, should we continue on horseback?” Arthur asked with a reluctant expression.

“No,” Percy’s expression grew thoughtful. “We have information that Hayden, the commander, has returned to his troops. There’s a high chance that the enemy will begin a large-scale attack on the temple.”

He unrolled a map of the neighbourhood on the bridge.

“If the ship makes a large detour to the north and allows Allion’s troops to pass first, we could then thrust at them from the rear.”

Arthur’s officers did not look favourably impressed by Percy suggestion. *There’s that rumour that Atall has withdraw its soldiers, so are we going to be the only ones fighting?*

That thought showed on their faces, yet originally, it was Dytiann which had approached Atall with impassioned speeches about how they wished to send reinforcements to the temple, and how they were compelled to defend God’s teachings. Having come this far, they could hardly announce that, “no, us taking part in actual fighting is a completely different matter.”

Only Arthur’s eyes brightened like those of a child.

“Interesting. So with what you’re suggesting, even though Allion’s troops are planning to encircle the temple, they’ll end up being the ones attacked from behind, huh?”

Bishop Baal had emphasised that he must not “try to be a hero,” but it had been barely a year since Arthur had taken over the Sergaia Holy Rose Division from his father. Although he was twenty-seven, he had not yet taken part in a real battle. Which was why the higher-ups in Dytiann had judged that this mission would be good experience for him, and why they had entrusted him with newly-built ships when they had ordered his departure for the front – essentially, Dytiann’s take on the situation was that, at least until the next dispatch, things would not turn into a large-scale war of attrition.

Arthur did not find this in the least bit amusing. He was also displeased because it seemed that his own strength was really being made light of. Which was why he was greatly tempted by Percy’s strategy.

Besieged by an overwhelmingly large enemy force, the temple was in a precarious situation. And then, amidst the wails of grief and despair coming from countless monks and townspeople, Dytiann’s troops came rushing, their horses’ hooves dashing lightly across the ground. Charging in the lead, his silver armour gleaming, was none other than Arthur Causebulk!

Arthur ecstatically imagined a scene which was like something out of a heroic saga.

The result was that on his orders, the ship veered off its intended course and took a large detour to the north, and while keeping Conscon Temple within sight to its south, it positioned itself west of it. On the map, they found a dense forest about twenty kilometres west of the temple. When airships were sent to investigate, they found that there was a hill within it that would just about allow the air carrier to land and to set sail. They let down anchor there for the time being. A scouting party was sent out to check the surroundings.

– Five days later, they confirmed that Allion’s army had started making its advance, and was moving towards the foot of Mount Conscon.

“Now is a good time,” Arthur Causebulk left the bridge, looking exhilarated.

Not long after that, Percy confirmed that the beacon had been lit.

It was finally time to spring into action. He gave the order for his men to all grab their weapons.

The ship did not have extensive stables, so they had only taken a few horses with them, Arthur’s included, but it wouldn’t be a problem that they did not have many cavalrymen. Simply having Arthur galloping in the lead, brandishing Dytiann’s flag, would leave the enemy dumbstruck.

No, it wasn’t just the enemy: once they heard how he had heroically routed the enemy on the battlefield, his family and the older soldiers who had belonged to the division since his father’s time, and who usually spent their time nagging Arthur, would all be amazed.

At that moment, Percy, who had guided them to the temple and who was the first to have finished arming himself, appeared on deck.

“Sir Arthur, I pray that the fortunes of war be with you.”

“Oh? Aren’t you coming with us?”

“To tell you the truth, we were expecting something like this, and there are troops lying hidden west of Atall’s border. I will go and give them the order, and we will be following behind you.”

“I see. Atall is certainly shrewd,” Arthur was genuinely delighted.

Since Atall was launching into a military attack on Allion, it meant that they

had given in to Dytiann's threats. Bishop Baal would be pleased as well; even if, after this, they were to clash swords with Allion, the main battlefield would be either the temple or Atall. Dytiann would be able to send successive waves of soldiers to thwart Allion's eastern ambitions without having to worry about seeing their country burn.

"Then see you later, on the battlefield."

"Yeah, later, on the battlefield."

With the help of a subordinate, Arthur donned his armour, placed a brand-new sword at his waist, and had his horse brought out from the onboard stable.

His men, over three hundred of them, had completed all their preparations. Outside the ship, they arrayed themselves in ranks, and Arthur rode before them.

It was early dawn. Although the forest was still dusky, the twinkle of stars was vanishing from the sky above.

The timing is perfect. Now then, the next step was to call out and to go charging out from the forest...

There was a whistling sound, a bit like the chirping of an insect.

A sentry holding a pine torch was the first to collapse. An arrow stood quivering in his neck.

The whistling sound was repeated again and again, and arrows pierced all around the troops' surroundings.

"What!"

Just as Arthur cried out, an arrow struck the ground at his horse's feet. The horse neighed loudly and reared upwards, its forelegs raised overhead. Arthur was almost shaken from the saddle, but managed to desperately hold on its neck.

"Grab your shields!"

"Enemies, enemies!"

The ranks of soldiers, which had only just assembled, fell into disarray as

voices roared in jumbled confusion.

Enemies. Enemies, they say?

Both arms still wrapped around his horse's neck, Arthur restlessly swept his gaze around his surroundings. He started: fire was burning right in front of him. Or no – as Arthur ran his eyes over one place after another, what he saw were lit flames that shone upon the armour of soldiers positioned throughout the forest.

Arthur, who had been planning on attacking the enemy from behind and leaving them dumbfounded ended up being the one struck dumb. Allion's flag fluttered above the bowmen. In no time at all, Arthur and his group, with the air carrier at the centre, were surrounded. Among the soldiers, some attempted a counterattack, while others fled inside the ship.

However –

“Fire, fire! Kill every last one of those eastern savages who've come trampling into Allion's territory!”

Just when the volley of arrows seemed to have ended, gunshot replaced them. Blood spurting, soldiers collapsed all around him, and Arthur Causebulk's mind went blank.

“Young lord, my lord! Escape to the ship!”

When the vassal who struck his horse's flank as he said that suddenly had his wide-open mouth pierced through by a bullet, Arthur didn't even have the time to feel anything about it.

From a position overlooking the ship, Allion's commander gazed down at Dytiann's Sergaia Holy Rose Division, whose ranks had completely fallen apart.

That commander's name was Claude Anglatt.

Part 2

Percy Leegan had the feeling that he had heard a gunshot behind him, and he turned to look back while on horseback.

He immediately brought his attention back to what was in front, however, and continued eastwards.

Percy was, of course, acting on Leo Attiel's orders. Speaking of Leo, and although this hardly needs repeating at this point, he was the only one in Atall who intended to fight Allion. It is also an established fact that, compared to Allion, his military force was pitiful. Therefore, the reinforcements from Dytiann, which, taking the long-term view, was a country that was far more likely to prove dangerous to Allion than Atall was, should have been something of a godsend for Leo and his group at this time.

Yet Dytiann's ship had been caught in a surprise attack, and Claude was the one commanding that offensive.

Percy, however, did not get his horse to slow down. *This* was all according to plan. And *this* was one of the things that Camus, the warrior monk from Conscon Temple, had so strongly objected to when Leo had confided his plans to them all.

When Percy had first heard it, he had not been able to repress a shudder. According to Leo:

"We will deliberately guide the reinforcements from Dytiann close to Sir Claude's territory, and we will have him defeat them. Oh, and we need to tell him about it beforehand."

"The important thing here is to make use of the fact that Dytiann trespassed onto Allion's territory, and to manufacture the reality that Sir Claude defeated this 'unexpected foreign enemy' before they had time to do anything."

With that, Claude Anglatt would become a hero who had protected Allion. At the same time, it would throw cold water over Dytiann's enthusiasm, given that they were hoping to reap all the benefits without running any risk of injury to themselves.

"We'll approach Sir Claude with the offer of leaving him that accomplishment," Leo continued.

It was only natural that Camus should have objected. He had no kind feelings for Dytiann – that too has been said repeatedly. Nevertheless, pulling Dytiann in by pretending to be their allies while actually plotting to stab them in the back was something that he simply could not approve of.

Moreover, there was one other plan on top of that one that Camus was furiously opposed to.

One that went against loyalty. That went against justice. That went against God's teachings.

Camus had boldly held forth on justice, exactly as though he was standing in for God in person, but when Leo had stood before him and demanded that Camus kill him, when he had gone as far as taking his own life hostage, he had gotten Camus to submit to the plan.

No, thought Percy Leegan as he rode his horse, back then, it wasn't His Highness Leo Attiel that Camus was fighting. It was probably himself. The confrontation between the two of them was the embodiment of Camus' inner conflict, as he was stuck between his god's teachings and reality.

Although Camus was noticeably rough and wild in appearance, speech and conduct, his heart was actually delicate and easily wounded – although they had only been together a few months, Percy could tell that much about Camus.

In these past few months, Camus too had been through a number of experiences. Perhaps, if he had been the same as when Percy had first met him, he would have killed the prince – or, even if he hadn't gone that far, he would have thrust those slender shoulders aside and would have run from the room, even at the risk of being injured, and afterwards, he would have made his way back alone to the temple, to die a heroic death.

– The teachings he followed were his ideal. Yet concrete ‘power’ was needed to put those teachings into practice. ‘Power’ to prevent one from being destroyed, from being denied, from being erased from this world.

Although Percy was not aware of it, Camus had constantly been caught up in that dilemma.

He had fallen to his knees in tears, and had consented to the plan. To defend his comrades and his god’s teachings, he had agreed to knowingly carry out actions that went against every one of his precepts. Back then, just how much pain had accompanied Camus’ decision?

Percy Leegan was completely unaware of it.

As he thought back to Camus while riding along right then, it was, in all honesty, a form of mental escape. It was, after all, Percy himself who had offered to guide Dytiann’s ship.

He had to ensure that Dytiann continued to believe that Atall as a whole had accepted their reinforcements. Although the House of Leegan, to which Percy belonged, was not particularly famous, it was nonetheless a family that had served as retainers to Atall for many generations. It was not without prestige. On top of that, it was a fact that he himself had gone to aid Conscon Temple. Just for that alone, Arthur Causebulk had trusted Percy.

Arthur, huh?

Just like Camus, Percy could not conceal his disgust for Dytiann’s current actions – but he did not hold any hatred towards Arthur himself. Although he had felt a previously unknown intimidation from him, Arthur seemed young for twenty-seven, and his smile was utterly guileless. In short, while it was true that Arthur was someone who would harm Atall, he was not particularly villainous and, as Percy continued his journey, he was conscious of a weight pressing down on his chest.

It wasn’t just Arthur. Every one of those soldiers was the same. There were even those that he had talked with on friendly terms. Young soldiers who had told him that ‘this is my first time going to the front,’ and who had listened attentively to Percy’s stories about the fighting around Conscon Temple, as though anxious not to miss a single word. Percy could sympathise to an almost

painful degree with their need to encourage themselves by hearing about the experiences of those who had already gone to war, and with their fervent anxiety about whether they would be able to achieve success, or whether they would simply die miserably.

Turning his back to where the massacre was taking place, Percy urged his horse onwards.

The sun was climbing in the sky.

At around the same time, five hundred of Allion's soldiers swarmed up the mountain paths, guided by the spy.

The row of armour weaved its way upwards, looking like it was sewing stitches between the small groves of trees. Two turns before the main temple gates, they took a sidepath. Ahead of them, a hole opened up in the cliff.

It seemed that the faithful and the priests had spent several years burrowing into a natural cave. It was mainly used by the priests for meditation, but on the temple's festival days, they sometimes held masses there which laymen could also attend.

By passing this way, they would apparently be taking a shortcut to the shrine on the summit.

The assault by Allion's troops on the other side of the mountain was no doubt holding the attention of the warrior monks, since there was not a single one of them to be seen. Although the soldiers had made this detour just to be sure, there seemed to be barely anyone left at the main temple gates.

Allion's side could tell that, *everything is going according to plan.*

In reality, however, they were the ones moving "according to plan."

The one who had originally drafted these measures was Percy Leegan. This was before he had even met Lord Leo. When he had still been fighting at the temple and had thought of attacking the enemy headquarters, and before leaving to do so, he had imparted a plan to those of his men who would be

remaining on the mountain.

They had made use of an enemy spy called Kenny. He was originally a marauder, and it was immediately obvious from his behaviour that he was also an agent working for Allion. The other side was probably using him because his clumsy actions were sure to attract attention, and so allow the other spies to move about more easily. Percy, however, deliberately pretended not to notice him, and had one of his subordinates approach Kenny.

Claiming that he himself was also a spy for Allion, the man fed Kenny false information and helped him escape from the mountain. This had all happened immediately after Allion had advised the temple to surrender. There was no doubt that they were planning an all-out assault, and Percy believed that if, on top of that, they received information that “the rear of the mountain is full of openings,” then they would definitely jump at the bait.

Percy had put these measures in place so that after enticing a large part of the enemy troops out from their headquarters, he and his men would be able to strike at their very heart. They had failed temporarily because of the unforeseen situation surrounding Lord Leo’s escape, and the mountain hunt that Allion had conducted because of it, yet these measures were still valid.

While Hayden, the commander, was away, Allion had still continued to sporadically send out soldiers in frontal attacks; their aim was probably to make sure that the temple’s gun batteries maintained fixed positions. Which also ensured that the unguarded gaps at the back of the mountain still remained, and which meant that they were certainly intending to attack from the rear at some point. Having realised as much, Percy suggested to Leo that they once more put his measures into practice, and Leo had agreed.

Allion was caught in the trap.

At the mouth of the cave, Allion’s soldiers reorganised their long line of troops. Their cheeks were flushed from anticipation at the savagery they would be enacting from there on. There was, after all, no greater joy than to trample triumphantly over an opponent defeated in war.

However, in their surroundings and at the top of the steep cliff, warrior monks were silently lying in ambush. Camus was acting as the linchpin; stifling

his breathing, he watched what the enemy was doing while waiting impatiently for the moment to give the order. As soon as he raised his voice, the warrior monks would all rise as one to shoot their arrows and bullets; being literally caught off guard, Allion's side would naturally escape into the cave.

But the story that there was a shortcut to the temple through the cave was a complete lie. They would immediately run into a wall. The monks would charge in after Allion's soldiers, who would no longer be able to either advance or retreat.

That was the plan.

Having arrived at the steep cliff, the spy who had guided Allion – and who was, of course, a soldier employed by the Leegan family – softly started to make his escape. The soldiers who were exchanging ribald smiles were supposed to meet with the same fate as the troops from Dytiann immediately afterwards.

However –

“Oi,” a captain leading the troops called out to the spy. The man started and stopped.

Ever since the current king had taken the throne, Allion had been plunged into one war after another. And this captain had plenty of combat experience. Here, in front of the cave, some kind of instinct for danger had probably alerted him.

“I'll give you a few men. Go run around the other side of the cave, just to be sure,” he ordered.

“Ay... n-no, but... if, by any chance, we were spotted by any of the warrior monks, it might compromise the surprise attack...”

“Doesn't matter. Even if they do figure it out, the attack will still happen. And speaking of any chance, it's more important to make sure there aren't enemies lurking around.”

Concealed within the long grass, Camus watched the scene from a distance. Although he could not hear what was being said, a torch was pressed into the hands of the soldier who was pretending to be a spy, and some of Allion's soldiers gathered to the side, so he could roughly guess the gist of it.

Camus was forced into a decision. If they found out that the cave was a dead end, then the plan would obviously fall through.

Should it be said that neither Percy nor Leo were able to anticipate such small, on-the-spot problems? They had wrongly assumed that the soldiers convinced of their victory would neglect to be cautious. This was the difference between theory and experience.

Still, the temple side, which had received the pair's plan without working on the details, had also been inadequate and overly optimistic.

Seeing that the spy was hesitating, the Allian captain grew increasingly suspicious. He called up soldiers from the various platoons, and was preparing to give them the order to search the surroundings.

They could not wait any longer.

Damn! His eyebrows bristling like flames, Camus leapt to his feet.

"Shoot!"

"Disperse!"

Between him and the Allian captain, which one gave their order the fastest?

A storm of arrows and gunfire rained down on Allion's soldiers. Screams and shrieks surged and got jumbled together, just as they had around Dytiann's ship. It did not last for long however. The explosive show of force had sent Allion's troops scattering in every direction, and from their various locations, they started returning fire with arrows and bullets of their own.

Camus clicked his tongue in annoyance. The events unfolding were clearly different from the plan. Even worse, because the temple did not have proper supplies, their bullets were already about to run out. They had been prepared to use their last remaining ammunition to carry out this scheme, but in the end, less than thirty enemy soldiers had been killed in the surprise attack.

Allion's group was five hundred strong. Once they realised that the enemy no longer had any bullets, the situation was reversed, and they started pressing forward, swords and spears in hand, while those of their comrades who were armed with guns provided covering fire for them.

On the temple side, even while they continued to shoot with bow and arrows, the group armed with spears had rushed forward, making the first move.

The one nimbly running in the lead was Camus. With a single thrust of his spear, he sent the helmeted head of an Allian soldier flying. After which, he thrust again. A soldier who was jabbed through the neck jerkily fell back before collapsing. He was aiming for the captain through this series of surprise attacks but Allion wouldn't simply let him do as he pleased.

Swords swung towards him in counterattack. As he repelled their blades with his spear, he shouted out at the top of his lungs,

“Push forward, push forward!”

There's no other choice, he thought.

The only chance they would ever have was now, when the enemy was still getting their formations ready. They would push forward with numbers and momentum. Push, and push, and overwhelm them. Even if they couldn't get the enemy to fear for their lives, their momentum would at least give them trouble...

There will be needless losses on their side. They need time to ready their formations.

Even a momentary weakness would be enough; then, Allion's side would flee into the cave. If they could secure the entrance and exit, they would at least be able to gain time.



But gaining time was also what Camus and his group wanted to achieve.

The cave itself was a dead end, but from where they were, there were any number of ways to reach the summit. If they allowed Allion's side to win here, then, just as Allion had planned, the temple would be caught in a pincer attack. Which was why they had to stop the enemy at all cost. If only Allion's soldiers would escape into the cave, then they could restrain the location of the fighting to just the entrance, and Allion would not be able to make use of its numerical superiority.

And that was why they would push forward. Could only push forward.

Camus took the lead, brandishing his spear and encouraging his brethren. A wild and furious god, different from the one that he believed in, seemed to have completely seized hold of his body. The Allian soldiers who stood before him were far more experienced at war than he was, yet most of them were ready to run.

Responding to Camus' impetus, the other monks lined up on either side of him, offering up prayers as they did so. Now that friend and foe were so close together, using firearms was no longer possible. Steel collided against steel as sparks flew.

Allion's soldiers were on the verge of being overpowered by the force of momentum.

Compared to the warrior monks, who were determined to die here, they did not have the same deep attachment to this place. They had never expected the fighting to devolve into this kind of melee, and they were starting to lose their nerve.

"Withdraw," the captain shouted. "For now, withdraw to the cave!"

Thank Heaven, Camus smiled.

He jabbed spear downwards towards an enemy soldier. He didn't even know how many it had been anymore.

But at that moment, an intense shock ran across his thigh.

Huh?

He had repelled a sword which was swinging towards his face. The pain had come right after that.

Looking down, his right thigh had been cut, and blood was flowing. The still boyish face of the enemy soldier who had injured Camus' leg could be seen from beneath his helmet.

"I'm called Randius!" He gave his name in a clear, sonorous voice.

Who the hell cares? Camus aimed to drive his spear straight into the youth's throat, but he was easily parried.

"I pity you because of your youth. But even though I pity you, that had nothing to do with mercy. The best I can offer is having my spear finish you off in one go," said Camus, then thrust his spear in attack once more.

But it missed again as his opponent lunged close. Camus hurriedly pulled back his spear to block the sword's blade. It turned into a test of strength, but Camus, whose leg had been cut, could not use it to brace himself. In a complete reversal of what had happened earlier, he was now being pushed back through brute strength.

"Fool!" Camus yelled at the enemy who was so close to him. "Do you not understand God's compassion? Resisting it just means that you will be thrown into the fires of hell as kindling. Make the sign of the cross before you die! If you do, even a dragon might pass through the eye of a needle, and the Gates of Heaven might open for you."

As he was the one being pushed back, Camus' words did not sound sane. And in fact, he was not in his right mind. Just a while earlier, his way of fighting had been fiercely terrifying. He had actually felt as though God had descended into his body to meet out justice.

Yet even for Camus, surpassing the abilities of a normal human in the way he had done took an extreme toll on his body and mind. And now that his momentum had been stopped, he was forced into awareness of his exhaustion and his injuries, and was being pushed back by an opponent who looked like a child.

Even so, Camus gritted his teeth and exerted all of his strength, but when

Randius bent diagonally and Camus' leg moved to follow him, Randius swept his own leg to knock him off balance.

Camus tumbled onto his back.

Randius raised his sword.

What?

Camus was almost light-headed as looked up at the sword. *Now?* he wondered. Did God want his life *now*?

No sooner had he thought that, than Randius staggered back with a jerk. His right shoulder guard had been blown off.

It had been hit by a bullet. The impact was too much for Randius' posture, and he fell backwards.

When Camus instinctively looked back, he saw a smoking gun muzzle close by. And the one holding it was Sarah. He didn't remember having his little sister join their unit, so it looked like she had decided to take part in the surprise attack entirely on her own. She had just fired the last remaining bullet.

"Ugh!"

Sending a look to his sister that expressed neither gratitude nor anger, Camus used his spear like a cane and lifted himself up to his feet. Dragging one leg behind him, he raced to where his comrades were still fighting bravely.

Part 3

Leo Attiel had shot three arrows to settle this battle.

The first arrow had led to the annihilation of Dytiann's forces near Allion's territory.

The second one was preventing the advance of five hundred of Allion's soldiers who had been attempting to approach Conscon Temple from the rear.

While Percy and Camus were in charge of the first and second arrow respectively, Kuon was responsible for the third one.

He was guiding two hundred of the soldiers who had originally been serving under Nauma Laumarl, as well as a further hundred that Kuon himself had selected from the peasant militia. At Percy's suggestion, Kuon was also acting as their commanding officer.

"If you give him soldiers to lead, he will probably show a rapid transformation," Percy had told Leo.

It was true that Percy had high hopes for Kuon's future prospects, but actually, this was a case of Percy magnificently overdoing things in a bid to give Kuon – who seemed unsettled and liable to wander aimlessly to some other land once this fight was over – a sense of responsibility and of accomplishment, so as to convince him to stay in Atall.

The regular Ataltese soldiers were naturally baffled by this decision, and there were some who had objected, but since it was a direct order from Lord Leo, they had no choice but to obey this boy before them. And despite all of that, the three hundred men that Kuon was leading actually held the key role in this battle around the temple.

Not long before dawn, they had marched along a certain mountain path. But not one on Mount Conscon. Nor was it a path up the hill where Dytiann had

concealed their ship.

Travelling the steep and rugged mountain paths while fully armed was dizzyingly difficult, yet Kuon seemed unconcerned as he led his unit. This was not only because he had been born and raised in mountains, but also because he had already taken this route more than once.

Indeed, they were in Allion's territory. They were south of Claude's castle, in the area where Lord Leo had once fled to, and which Kuon and the others had penetrated to go and help him.

On top of that, fires were lit all along the way, so it was far different from the previous time, when he had been forced to move around stealthily, and Kuon was practically humming a tune as he went along the paths. Claude had placed those fires as a defence measure, yet currently, there was not a single soldier from Allion to be seen as Kuon and the others continued their way. That was all due to the secret conversation which had taken place between Leo and Claude shortly before the battle began.

The third time that Kuon had passed through these mountains was that very time when Leo had entered Allion, taking only Percy and Kuon with him, to meet with Claude. Back then, Leo had made one request to Claude:

“Please allow my soldiers to pass along the road that Percy and the others once used to for their planned attack.”

It was hardly surprising that Claude had then flown into a rage and ordered Leo to “leave!” It was virtually the same as saying that – *we intend to attempt another attack on Allion's headquarters, so Sir Claude, I would like you to look the other way.* In other words, it was asking Claude to betray his country.

That, however, had been before he was informed Dytiann's participation.

When Claude was informed that *the great eastern power will be intervening in this war*, his expression turned grim. Thereupon, Leo had explained the self-same plan that Camus had once objected to.

“It seems that Dytiann's army is going to come over by air carrier. If we can guide this ship, there is a very good chance that we will be able to offer you the entirety of their troops, Sir Claude.”

Who could guess just how great Claude Anglatt's surprise had been? His entire face – which looked just like a bandit's at first glance – was scrunched into a scowl while he sank deep into thought.

“...You're a damned villain,” he cursed.

The situation surrounding the temple would turn into something huge if Dytiann joined the fray. It might turn into a drawn-out standoff as both sides entrenched themselves in their positions. On a personal level, because of Hayden's dislike for him, Claude was under suspicion of being linked to the temple and to Atall, but he would be able to rack up considerable merit from stopping the unforeseen incursion of a foreign enemy.

What made Claude call Leo a “villain” was the way he had seized Allion's weak point: while Dytiann's intervention would undoubtedly be a problem for Allion, it would also, by all rights, be one for Atall as well. Yet Leo was breezily bringing it up as a ‘bargaining chip’, even though he was actually forcing Claude's hand.

All of this explained that none of Claude's soldiers were stationed along the route that Kuon and his group were travelling. The excuse that would be given was that Claude “suspected that Dytiann was making its move,” and had thus taken “every available soldier” to go and stop the trespassing ship.

Kuon's party was able to approach the enemy headquarters without anyone suspecting a thing. The watch fires, built in iron baskets, which were originally supposed to help guard against a surprise attack had, ironically, served as a guide for the attack corps.

By the time the sky had turned a light purple, the enemy fortress was before their eyes. Although for all that it could be called a fortress, being large in scale and having quite a few soldiers stationed there, it was just a hastily built construction. Since he had been in no position to request generous funding, Hayden had probably felt it was enough as long as it could house the soldiers and store the weapons and provisions.

Looking down at the fort beneath them might have been an almost nostalgic scene for Kuon. Back then, they had also gotten very close to it, but Claude's soldiers had found them immediately afterwards. They didn't need to worry about that now, though; there weren't even any sentries around the fortress.

“...?”

Kuon creased his brow and made a movement like a dog sniffing at the air. Let alone not having any sentries, the fortress gave no sign of any kind of human presence.

– On this one point, Leo’s reading had been off.

The third arrow that he had shot was supposed to be a lethal one, which would pierce Hayden Swift in the throat.

Hayden had sent out many of the soldiers to capture the temple, leaving no more than two hundred men at the headquarters. Since he needed to immobilise the temple’s artillery, he had also sent out all of his cannons. With defence being so fragile, if Kuon and his elite group had attacked that night, there was a very good chance that they would have been able to kill Hayden himself.

Perhaps fate was on the side of Allion’s commander: even though up until then, Hayden Swift had not once gone to the frontlines, earlier, after having sent out most of the soldiers and while it was still night, he had whimsically decided that: “I want to see the situation at the temple with my own two eyes.”

He had woken up virtually all of the remaining soldiers, who had all already gone to sleep, and, astride his own horse, he had personally left for the temple. The fortress was basically completely empty. The only ones left behind were the young servants who helped take care of Hayden and of the soldiers, and although there were a few who grabbed a spear in response to the surprise attack by Kuon’s group, they quickly realised that they were at a complete disadvantage, and readily surrendered.

Kuon gnashed his teeth; he had just lost the perfect opportunity to take the head of the enemy general.

But not only that – the unit that Hayden was leading was about to become a new player in the struggle at the temple, and there was a risk that it would turn into a threat from behind for Kuon’s companions.

Moreover, in this fight, Kuon’s arrow had been their greatest hope for overall

victory. Even if they were able to drive several hundred soldiers away from the temple, it would hardly end in the complete routing of their opponents. Although any number of fights were sure to break out from here on, none of them would earn them anything more than a single, small-scale win.

Right, it was to settle things ‘from here on’ that Leo had given Kuon the strict order to “get Hayden at all cost, even if he’s the only one.”

The blood rushing to his head, Kuon grabbed hold of all of the horses which were left in the enemy stable and shouted, “We’re chasing after the enemy general!”

The soldiers had all been ordered to obey Kuon as they would Leo. And yet – “Hold up,” one of the regular Ataltese soldiers called out to him.

“What?” Kuon glared at him from atop his horse. The man had probably spoken because he hated having to follow some brat from the sticks.

The soldier’s plump, unshaven face broke out into a broad grin.

“Aren’t we going to set fire to the fortress, Captain, Sir?”

Fate.

Just a moment ago, I stated that fate might have been on Hayden Swift’s side. When the Heavens – I use ‘heavens’ here in a generic way, and it makes no difference to think of it as referring to the God of Heaven, to the myriad Spirits, to the Dragon Gods, they who are said to have inherited the wisdom of the ancients, or to any of the great beings that various people believe in – when, then, the Heavens look down, they are never a fair and impartial ally, and this time as well, they were inclined to grant Hayden just a little more luck than others.

At the same time as Hayden Swift was advancing on a position overlooking the temple from the north with a little under two hundred of his soldiers, Leo Attiel was also approaching the temple. After completing all sorts of preparations in Savan’s territory, Leo had vanished from Guinbar Castle.

I have already mentioned that he had built several encampments near the

border and had billeted soldiers there, but I have not yet said that one of those was actually built a little further west of the others, and was actually across the border. Percy and Camus had chosen the location.

When they had been stationed in one of the villages at the foot of Mount Conscon, they had crushed a base belonging to the marauders who were attacking in that same neighbourhood. After that, they discovered another, then yet another of these bases, and Percy had used their relative positions to work out where the other enemy camps which were scattered around were situated. He had linked their various positions in a line which roughly enclosed Allion's field of activities. And they had built that last encampment just beyond the line.

It was audaciously close to the temple. In othered words, it was only a stone's throw away from Allion's forces.

That was where Leo was. Kuon's group had also previously been hidden there. While keeping an eye on the situation at the temple, they had spent a few days gathering soldiers from the other encampments and, when Leo decided that the time was right, he had sent Kuon to the north. And then, at a moment which was very close to what Leo had predicted from his various observations, the beacon had been lit on Mount Conscon.

Leo left the encampment with three hundred of the soldiers that he had summoned there. Given how many regular Ataltese soldiers had joined Kuon's unit, and taking into account that a hundred had been left under Nauma's command to act as the rear-guard, most of his soldiers were from the peasant militia.

If Leo's guess proved correct, those of Allion's troops which had advanced to the foot of the mountain would currently be in the middle of fighting the temple's forces, while Allion's detached unit would have arrived at the other side. Leo intended to join in the former of those two fights.

Those in the most dangerous position in this battle were the ones who had to attract Allion's attention. Because it was vital that they annihilate the detached force in one strike, all of the temple's few remaining bullets had been given to the troop lying in ambush on the rear-side of the mountain.

Allion's troops were similarly intending to attract the enemy's attention so that it would be easier for their detached force to make its move. As such, they would not be intending to penetrate too deeply onto the mountain. However, if they realised that, "The enemy is weaker than ever before; they don't even have bullets or arrows anymore," then they would no longer be cautious about their opponents, and they might decide that rather than drag things on, they should take them down in one go. And Leo would move into position to attack them from behind.

Hayden was moving to the exact same position to watch the temple fall. If both of their groups continued on their current trajectories, they would inevitably meet.

Both units had sent out scouts on horseback, but this was where Allion's skill made a difference. The scouts that Leo despatched were, after all, simply amateurs. Allion's party, on the other hand, noticed the presence of an enemy reconnaissance unit, and hid behind a clump of trees. Once the enemy scouts had passed them by, they made a rough guess of where the enemy unit probably was, before hurrying over there. After thoroughly observing that enemy force from a distance, they headed back.

The report reached Hayden at once. The enemy was Atall's army – they had apparently openly been flying several flags of the principality. This in itself came as a surprise to him, but on top of that, there was information about a flag with the emblem of a cross that was flying so close to the others it was almost overlapping with them.

Leo Attiel!?

Hayden's Swift's eyes opened wide. There was no one else in Atall other than Leo who had a connection to the Cross Faith. The moment he was aware that Leo was on the battlefield, Hayden decided to destroy both him and his troop.

There was no definite proof that Lord Leo himself was part of the unit, but Atall, which had once denied sending reinforcements to the temple, had now brazenly crossed the border. There was no way Hayden was going to let them get away with it.

The surprise attack on the temple should already have begun. It would fall

within the next few hours. Once the reinforcements lost their purpose, Atall would no doubt turn back and leave, so it wouldn't be bad to catch them out before that happened.

You won't be able to slip out of it with vague excuses anymore, Magrid – Hayden smiled from horseback.

Perhaps it was because of the excitement of experiencing combat from close up for the first time that his emotions were running wild. Hayden had the scouts lead the way, and ordered his men to advance more quickly. Most of them were on horseback.

Half an hour later, Leo Attiel's unit was moving west along the river which flowed in the plain at the foot of Mount Conscon. They were about five or six kilometres away from the first of the temple's main gates. When he thought about how the fighting had surely begun on the mountain, Leo's expression turned grim.

There were wooden houses in the area, so this had probably been a settlement which had been established to open up the forest by the riverbank. It seemed, however, that Allion's raids had caused the villagers to flee either to some other area or to the temple, and there was no one to be seen. Only a few emaciated dogs were prowling around.

The mountains' ridgeline was starting to turn white, the buildings' shadows were slowly standing out from their dark surroundings. From the other side of the river came the sound of successive horses' hooves. When Leo looked towards it out of reflex, he saw a group of armoured riders. There wasn't even time to cry out.

In that moment where everything seemed to be holding its breath, the gazes of the commanders met.

If Leo Attiel was, of course, surprised, then Hayden Swift was too. But his startled eyes quickly gave way to a joyful expression.

"The prince is there," he shouted out from horseback. "Those dogs from Atall are swarming around the leftover scraps! Get them, bring them down!"

The mounted group crossed the bridge. Leo and his party were in no position

to bring that bridge down, but then in the first place, Leo was far too astounded to even think of doing so.

Hayden was here. Which meant that Kuon's surprise attack had not been on time. On realising that Hayden was not at his headquarters, Leo thought the same thing as Kuon had. Even if the measures put in place at the temple succeeded and managed to drive Allion's forces away for a while, given that Hayden was still there, that victory – paid for with so many sacrifices – would be for naught.

“Prince, please withdraw!”

Faster than Leo could recover his senses, the militiamen had put themselves at the ready to counterattack. They were full of zeal, and some of them were even rushing forward.

“Wait! Please wait!” Though Leo tried to stop them, he was too late.

Allion's riders made nothing of the spear-wielding militiamen. Some of the soldiers' long-handled halberds crushed through the farmers' skulls, while the spearheads that other soldiers thrust downwards pierced through the craftsmen's leather-clad chests.

Leo's peasant-soldiers shuddered. Yet they did not flee. They stood firm in front of him, as though to halt the enemy onslaught. As they did so, those of the young men who had once been hunters quickly stepped forward and, while some of them kneeled in front and others stood behind, they nocked arrows to their bows and shot them. It was a movement they had learned through training, using the skill they had acquired through hunting every day. About five riders fell from their horses. Seizing that opportunity, the foot soldiers, whose unusually long-handled spears they had received from Leo, shouted out “Let's go!”, and moved forward together.

As though his horse's hooves were stitched to the ground, Leo could not move away. All he could see was red blood spurting.

The small houses were clustered around a narrow road, and now that their initial momentum had been halted, the enemy did not seem able to advance as easily as they had expected to. But now that it had turned into close combat, the difference in skill naturally became apparent. One after another, the

militiamen had their arms sliced through, their legs pierced, or their heads cut off.

Leo's head ached furiously.

The blood coursing to his brain was increasing the pressure beyond what it could bear, and it felt as though his head would explode at any moment. He was seized by the impulse to tear off his helmet and throw it away.

While he remained like that, Leo's people, whom he loved, fell prey to the enemy's swords and spears. Even so, he couldn't think of anything. He couldn't even feel anything.

"Please, please escape," shouted one of the militiamen who stood closest to him. He almost looked like a child. "We'll stay and protect you, so Prince, please hurry and escape!"

He was so close that when he opened his mouth wide, Leo could even see his two rows of teeth.

It was then that *somebody* whispered in Leo's ear.

"Use fire."

Leo started in surprise.

In that moment, Leo Attiel's mind dredged up the information he needed from the books of tactics that he had read voraciously up until then. He snatched one of the torches that they used on their march from one of his men, and flung it towards one of the houses. He then grabbed another and repeated the action with the house opposite the first one, then again with the house behind it.

The soldiers who were standing on guard around the prince looked blank, but once he ordered them to "do it!", they all started mimicking his actions. The area began to be engulfed in flames, and a hot wind blew against everyone there. Leo also gave swift instructions to those of the youths who had originally been carpenters, and they took their axes to the houses on either side.

"Pull back, pull back from here!" Leo ordered his companions who were still engaged in fighting, and he himself turned his horse back around to the way

they had come.

As the prince ran, the militiamen followed. Without a second's delay, Allion's riders moved to do the same but, at that moment, the carpenters' axes brought down a pillar.

The house's structure had been a very simple one, so even when just a single pillar fell, the roof on either side of it collapsed onto the street. Smoke and flames crashed down, and Allion's horses reared up. It seemed the flames would prevent them from advancing.

"Don't let him escape!" Hayden shouted out from the rear. He himself sprang his horse onward; abandoning the idea of giving chase by going straight forward, he instead raced around to the side.

Leo too recklessly galloped forward.

"The enemy – no, Hayden's target is *you*, and you alone," that voice whispered once again.

"I know," Leo replied, kicking his horse's flanks. He hurried forward, even though it meant leaving his soldiers behind. Leo knew full well who it was who had been whispering to him since earlier.

There was no one there who could give him orders. No one other than he himself.

He urged his horse forward so as to pass through the south of the village.

The Heavens, however, seemed to have decided to continue favouring Hayden. An arrow shot by one of Allion's soldiers struck Leo's horse in the rump. This time, it was his mount which reared upwards, forelegs in the air, before toppling over sideways.

Leo was thrown off, and knocked his head hard. In that moment, his helmet came off, and tumbled along the side of the road.

The horse that Hayden Swift was riding kicked it away as it came thundering up towards him.

Chapter 7: The Fifth Arrow

Part 1

“It’s the end of the road for you.”

Hayden had brought his horse to a halt right in front of Leo and spoke as looked down towards him. One by one, the other Allian riders joined him. Leo was surrounded.

His lips curved into a refined smile, Hayden jumped lightly down from his horse. He drew the sword that was at his waist, and thrust it right before the prince’s face.

Leo could do nothing except moan in pain from where he had hit his head and his back.

“Smile,” said Hayden. “Do you remember? You ordered me to do so. And what was it you said after that? Oh, right: ‘go on and do your worst, I’ll show you how I turn the tables on you’ – wasn’t it?”

The nearby riders all laughed as Hayden imitated a boy’s voice. Even when jeering at someone, it was extremely unusual for Hayden to joke around to make others laugh. Simply put, he was in an incredibly good mood.

“You also said that you wanted to see what I could do with my own ‘power’. And now you see it. It’s only a matter of time before the temple falls. And now that you’ve come running to it, I fear that next it will be your own country’s turn. Atall’s aristocrats are completely blind. On that point, I give you my praise. But... well, *what of it?*”

The tip of his sword shook in time to Hayden’s laughter.

“Even though you wanted to defend the temple at all cost, were you only able to scrape up this many soldiers? And on top of that, they look like a bunch of amateurs. What can you do with them? Toss a stone in an ocean and they’ll be swallowed up in an instant by the wave it causes. *That* is the limit of your ‘power’, you who challenged the mighty ocean that is Allion.”

“ ... ”

Leo gave no response. He merely raised a feeble gaze towards Hayden. The sun had finally risen, and it bathed the surroundings in its pale light.

“Now than, what should I do, Lord Leo?” Hayden tilted his head to one side, just like a young girl might do. “I could keep you alive. As a hostage captured on the battlefield. But would the sovereign-prince of Atall pay the ransom money? If he decides to carry on pretending complete innocence, he might well just watch his son die without lifting a finger. But if that’s fine by you, let me see you beg for your life. Still, I’m not a man without compassion. If you say that you couldn’t bear such a disgrace, I’ll kindly kill you on the spot. At the end of the day, no matter which you choose, it won’t change either Allion or Atall’s destinies.”

Hayden struck Leo’s cheek with his sword as he spoke. The soft skin burst open and blood started to flow out.

“Now then,” Hayden walked closer. “Choose, Leo Attiel. I taught you this before: a noble should not grasp a sword without the proper resolve. So with that resolve, choose your own fate. *Now then!*”

Hayden slowly removed the blade from near Leo’s cheek. When he did so, Leo murmured in a trembling voice –

“I...”

“Hmm?”

“I want to live.”

“I see. Then you’ll be a hostage. This gentleman has already been a hostage in Allion for six years, yet it seems that he’s taken a considerable liking to living like that.”

While Hayden sneered as he pulled back his sword, the soldiers on horseback all burst out laughing again.

Whereupon, Leo laughed too. And it was not the kind of obsequious, flattering laugh meant to try and prolong one's life.

"I will live and I want to live," said the prince. "But I won't be left alive thanks to your 'power'. I will live thanks to my own 'power' alone."

"What?" Hayden looked down his nose at him as he jeered. "Are you still talking back? Poor fool, you can keep your life and still lose a few limbs, you know?"

Leo's smile did not falter.

If the Heavens were going to grant Leo even a little of the luck that they had been lavishing on Hayden, that was the moment to do it.

Ally reinforcements did not appear. Nor did Leo have any other plans carefully prepared in advance and still waiting to be used. And of course, there was no miracle, such as a bolt of lightning from the sky striking Hayden down.

But Leo was laid out on the ground, surrounded by Allion's soldiers. And from that position, he could see it. Over the line of hills, unobstructed by houses or walls, smoke was clearly rising in the western sky, which was still faintly shrouded in darkness.

Noticing that Leo was not looking at him, Hayden casually glanced back behind him. And saw the same thing as Leo.

"What's..." he started to ask his men, then suddenly opened his eyes wide in astonishment. "*That's...!*"

"Allion's headquarters."

Hayden swiftly turned back around when Leo's voice answered him. In that same moment, their surroundings suddenly erupted into noise.

"Go look!" Hayden barked an order at one of his men, who quickly took off on horseback. He then turned his sharp glare back towards Leo. "Our headquarters, you say? Bastard... is that it, so you attacked our camp?"

"If you had been just a little slower, you might also have been going up in

flames, and your soul might have been sucked into the smoke.”

“Bullshit!”

Hayden readjusted his grip on the sword he had just pulled back and struck Leo on the cheek with the hilt. The blow was so strong that Leo’s head jerked sideways, and blood flew from his mouth.

“I see, so this was your plan to pull back from the brink? But how unfortunate for you – see, even though I was supposed to be devoured in your flames, I’m still alive!” Hayden spread out both his hands and roared with laughter. “So what if that temporary fort burns? The temple will fall soon anyway. I’ll just take it over and turn it into my base. Even if your damn soldiers took control of our headquarters, we can just attack them from both sides once the next wave of our Allion troops come and...”

“Lord Hayden!”

The rider that Hayden had sent out had already returned. Listening to the words that hastily tumbled from the soldier, Hayden’s face went pale.

“My troops are retreating, you say? How?!”

While Hayden’s question was completely understandable, if he had been able to see the situation, the answer would have been just as readily available. Allion’s troops were, at that moment, in the middle of withdrawing from Mount Conscon. The rider had been able to return so quickly because as soon as he had left the abandoned settlement, he had been able to see the long line of lights descending the mountain.

It had started with the five hundred of his men who had crept up Mount Conscon from behind: they had witnessed the black smoke rising from their headquarters from the very beginning.

Those soldiers had no way of knowing that Hayden was not at the headquarters. Moreover, even though they were supposed to have been guided by one of their spies to stage a surprise attack on the temple, they had been the ones to be ambushed and fired at. And now, on top of that, their headquarters were in flames.

Allion’s forces obviously couldn’t know what the enemy’s actual situation

was. From their point of view, it looked like they had been lured to the mountain so that the enemy could launch a large-scale offensive.

In which case, there was only one possible choice to make.

“Retreat!”

There was no worse fear having a force cross into their own country’s territory to attack them, and losing their support from the rear.

They turned their backs on the unit of warrior monks.

Thanks to their captain’s accurate judgement, they had been able to avoid receiving a devastating blow, and had even pushed back the enemy at one point. But there was no denying that they had fallen into a trap. The soldiers definitely held doubts about this fight. Not about whether the warrior monks had laid further snares beyond this one, but about whether this entire fight at the temple hadn’t been designed to lure them in.

In other words, ironically enough, it was the very fact that Allion had seen through the only trap that Leo had laid which sparked their fears.

Helmets and armour of Allian design rushed down the slopes of the mountain, like an avalanche of steel. That was the uproar which Hayden and those near him had heard.

“Ridiculous! Have them go back!” Hayden yelled.

He was about to send out more men to have them convey his orders, but at that moment, the militiamen that Leo had outdistanced heaved into sight, all shouting as one. Although in themselves, they were not opponents that Hayden’s soldiers needed to fear, their appearance suggested that the warrior monks might be chasing after Allion’s fleeing troops and be heading this way.

They all realised that remaining where they were was dangerous.

“Lord Hayden, we should withdraw for now!”

“We should regroup with the rest of our troops. If you appear before them, Lord Hayden, they will surely regain morale. Capturing the temple can come later.”

Hayden growled like a beast of prey. When he glanced again towards Leo, his

face became suffused with even greater rage.

“Why are you smiling?”

“You’re the one who told me to smile, Hayden. So I’m smiling.”

“You...”



At that moment, Hayden Swift made the stupidest mistake of his life.

There was no way that Lord Leo would be unarmed. Yet even so, and perhaps carelessly believing he could deal with an opponent who had no weapon in hand and who seemed to have no more practical combat experience than a child, he bent forward towards Leo.

Was he intending to at least kill Leo with the sword he held in his hand, or had he planned to take him hostage?

In that moment, Leo's lips puckered. From those lips that seemed to be asking a lover for a kiss, he spat out a blood-covered tooth.

It had broken when Hayden hit him earlier. And now, it hit Hayden in the eye. In the second that he faltered after being struck on the eyeball, Leo drew his sword and swung it straight at him.

Leo had long been receiving training; he could not err when striking at an defenceless opponent. The blow beautifully cleaved the top of Hayden's head in two.

The screams that rang out were not Hayden's own, but those of his men, behind him on horseback. As for Hayden Swift himself, he didn't make a sound as his head helplessly bobbed left and right, like a doll dropped from a great height, before slumping into a sitting position, his eyes starting wide open.

Death was close.

He was less than a second away from the moment of his death, but in that instant before the high wave came crashing down and dragged his consciousness into the dark, his thoughts were many.

I'm going to die, was the first of them.

Impossible, was his next thought, but he immediately revised it as, in that second, Hayden accepted what had happened with surprising ease.

And then, he thought of Leo Attiel, the one who had defeated him.

He did not think of anything else. Thoughts of his parents, of his wife and children, of the King of Allion, and even of Florrie Anglatt, whom he had been so deeply obsessed over, were all easily swept away from Hayden's consciousness

just before death.

Leo Attiel...

It was just last night, before he had left for the frontlines, that Hayden had, for the first time, felt a bond of fate with the second prince of the Principality of Atall. But he had from the very start sensed that there was something predestined about Lord Leo's existence. Hayden understood that; it was simply that he had not previously acknowledged it.

It had been when he had first met Leo Attiel at Claude Anglatt's castle, a place he now remembered with nostalgia.

He had instinctively realised that, *we're alike*.

In other words, they had both shared the same mutual perception of each other.

Which was why –

Hayden had felt so overwhelmingly irritated by Leo's manner, by his voice, by his very existence.

Which was why –

Even though he had not been particularly drunk, he had publicly mocked the young Ataltese prince.

Which was why –

Hayden, who had lost interest in so many things, had, in so short a time, poured out his energy to an almost frightening degree, until he was utterly spent.

That's why...

Unable to think any more thoughts beyond that, Hayden fell backwards against to the ground, and never moved again.

Astounded as they were, the Allian riders hesitated for one single moment: should they thrust their spears against Lord Leo in revenge, or should they leave this place immediately? That one second was enough. In contrast to Hayden, who had collapsed from the waist up, Lord Leo stood up straight and raised his

sword which had, even now, only taken a single life.

“I’ve killed the enemy general, Hayden Swift,” Leo bent back his head and shouted. “It’s our victory! Drive out the remains of the enemy force!”

“Aaay!” the militiamen all cried together as they came rushing up to obey that ferocious order.

To the Allian riders, it looked for all the world like battle-hardened troops were running to them from the other side of Leo Attiel’s upraised sword, responding to the one who was unmistakably their military commander.

Since they had lost their own commander-in-chief, there was no more question of victory for them. Only their own decisions could save them now. And as a result –

“Retreat!”

One after another, the riders turned their horses around and rapidly galloped away, Covering Lord Leo in a cloud of dust as they did so.

Part 2

Camus, warrior monk of the temple, looked down at the enemy who was withdrawing from the side of the main gate. After the enemies at the back of the mountain had retreated, he had immediately gathered his unit and gone to join those defending at the front. These new arrivals and the tangled information around them led the front part of Allion's army to believe that their force had already entirely collapsed, which in turn meant that they too commenced a speedy withdrawal.

All over the mountainside, warrior monks were waving their arms overhead. There were many also who were kneeling and crossing themselves. Some laughed out loud, while others openly wept, not caring that they could be seen. "No, we can't let down our guard yet," said those with actual combat experience, and they immediately started getting their units ready.

Camus did none of these things.

For a while, he watched the retreating backs of Allion's soldiers, his shoulders heaving as he gasped for breath. *Do I go?*

He then started climbing up the mountain path.

He was using his spear to support himself, but his feet were dragging for a reason that was completely separate from the injury to his thigh.

Although a few of their calculations had been off, on the whole, things had gone according to plan. Yet Camus was not feeling elation from their victory. There was still one more thing he needed to do.

"We did it!"

"God's grace protected us!"

But as his comrades called out to him and clapped him on the shoulders, Camus did not respond in kind, and silently walked by.

His destination was the inner sanctum in the main temple at the summit. He could see the cross towering from on high above the steeple, yet for some reason, Camus could not look at what was supposed to be the very symbol of his faith.

The temple was surrounded by the very few of Nauma's men who still remained on the mountain. They had received Leo's orders through Camus. *Guard the temple where Bishop Rogress is staying, and don't let anyone go in or out*, he had said.

When Camus had conveyed this to the bishop, he made the point that, "Allion's spies are still mixed in among us. And there will be more than one. They might take advantage of the fighting to come after your life, Bishop. Whatever you do, please stay in the inner sanctum during the fight. Don't take so much as a single step outside."

Bishop Rogress had agreed to it.

Upon being asked, the Ataltese soldiers confirmed that no one had entered or left. Which meant that the bishop was definitely inside.

"Well then, do we go in?" The soldiers lined up their spears, but Camus stopped them from entering the temple.

"Why not?" The soldiers looked puzzled at first, but suspicion soon crept into their faces. "You haven't changed your mind because of one win against Allion, have you? Victory probably won't last, you know. If you think about what will come afterwards..."

"I know!" Camus roughly interrupted the soldier.

"Even if we manage to win this fight, it will only be temporary," these were the very words that Camus, standing in for Lord Leo, had thoroughly drilled into these soldiers. There was no need to repeat them at this stage.

"But let me go by myself first. I don't want to suddenly have the bishop threatened with a row of spears. I'd like to tell him myself."

"We don't have that much time."

The soldiers scrutinised their surroundings. Since the enemy was still

withdrawing, most of the warrior monks and the faithful were still in position, but once the enemy had disappeared from sight, people would soon start gathering around the temple.

“I know that too,” Camus replied curtly, and stepped into the building.

He walked down the empty passageway. His last remaining task was to remove Bishop Rogress from Conscon Temple. When Lord Leo had revealed his plans at Guinbar Castle, this had been the one thing that Camus had most objected to.

Leo did not believe that they could be content with repelling the onslaught led by Allion’s army. Percy, and also Camus himself, had agreed with him. Even if they defeated a thousand soldiers, Allion still had ten of thousands more. These might be sent out in quick succession, or tens of thousands of men might be sent out all at once, and the temple’s one victory would be as good as inexistent.

According to Leo, there were two people who would be vitally important in turning that one victory into the end of hostilities between Allion and the temple.

“The first is Hayden Swift. He’s the one who suggested to the king that they send soldiers against the temple. Allion won’t stop its attack unless we defeat the man who started it all. On the other hand, if we can get rid of him, there probably won’t be anyone left who will want to continue a campaign which has brought them no benefits.”

Up to that point, Camus had been in agreement. The problem lay with what had come next.

“And the second one is Bishop Rogress,” after pausing for a beat, Lord Leo had continued. “Rumours in Allion claim that he ‘cursed the royal family’. On top of that, there are any number of criticisms within the country about how ‘the bishop is interfering in Allion’s politics,’ and about how ‘he is busy establishing his own independent state by establishing a free market at Conscon Temple and by having the monks take weapons’.”

That was nothing but vile slander, thought Camus, but he had not interrupted at that moment. The prince had only just described his plan of a sneak attack

against Dytiann, and Camus, whose attention had been on that, had already been close to erupting in anger. Leo's next words, however, had left the monk aghast.

“Even if the fight can be brought to an end for the time being, as long as the bishop himself is at Conscon, it will be impossible to eliminate the antagonism and hostility against the temple within Allion. Which is why... after defeating Allion's forces, I intend to have the bishop resign, at least for a short while, from his position as head of Conscon Temple.”

Leo continued still further,

“We'll have him write a letter to the King of Allion along the lines that he will be embarking on a pilgrimage to pray for the souls of those who died during the campaign. That way, we can have the bishop disappear so that even the temple won't know where he is. That will be the official story, at least; in fact, he will be moved to the church here in Guinbar. A suitable successor will also need to be installed at the temple until things calm down. Allion will almost certainly accept this 'concession' from the temple. With no more reason to continue the fight, and given that Allion will more or less have been able to maintain face, they...”

At that point, Camus' emotions had exploded.

Isn't that exactly like saying that Bishop Rogress is the main reason for the war!

Despite having that thought, Camus had agreed to the plan after his exchange with Leo. He couldn't do anything but agree. The desire to oppose Leo's plan still remained within him, but he also believed that there was no other method to bring an end to the quarrel between Allion and the temple.

Just as Lord Leo had said, the pretext for the fight had always been to punish the bishop for his 'insolence' at having rained curses on the royal family. If the bishop left the temple, then Allion would lose all justification to send its army against Conscon.

Even Camus could see what the reality was. For all that his faith was as firm as iron, and for all that he was willing to continue brandishing his spear, that wouldn't result in anything except adding more victims to the count. Sooner or

later, the temple would burn down. And when that happened, he would once again have folded before ‘power’.

Faith alone – ideals alone can't oppose 'power'.

That was something that he understood all too well, both from Abbot Tom's example, and from his own experience.

He had told nobody – neither the bishop himself nor any of the temple monks – about the scheme to remove Rogress. It was clear that they would oppose it, and he could not afford to cause divisions within the temple just before they put their battle plan into practice.

So at the very least, Camus was determined to personally take on the duty of informing the bishop.

How would Bishop Rogress respond to it? It would good if he agreed to it. But if he fought against it, then... *Then it can't be helped. This is for the temple's future – and for all the people who live here. I'll take him with me, even if I have to do so by force. I'll take the bishop's anger and the whole weight of sin on myself.*

Just as he was steeling his resolve, he felt like someone's shadow was moving on the left side of the passageway, in the direction of the chapel.

“Bishop?” Camus called out. Bishop Rogress was supposed to be the only one within the inner sanctum.

The shadowy silhouette that he thought he had seen for a second vanished with a rustle.

Was it just my imagination?

He needed to hurry.

Camus climbed the staircase and went to the room where the bishop usually stayed. He knocked on the sturdy wooden door and called the bishop's name. But there was no answer.

“Bishop Rogress,” he called out once more.

There was nothing but silence.

His heart suddenly started pounding wildly. As though trying to shake off his awful premonition, Camus once again called out, "Bishop," with a nonchalant air as he pushed open the door.

The scene that greeted him was far worse than he had imagined. Bishop Rogress was slumped over his favourite desk. His episcopal robes were soaked in blood, while blood also trickled down from the edge of the desk and onto where a dagger, which was likewise dyed red, had fallen.

Camus dropped his spear.

He rushed up to the bishop, forgetting all about the pain in his leg. He pulled Rogress to him, but it was already too late. The bishop had breathed his last, and blood was flowing from the base of his neck. It had no doubt been slashed with the dagger which had fallen to the floor.

In contrast to the gore-covered body, Camus' face was pale, but as he lifted the bishop into his arms, he noticed a sheet of parchment spread out on top of the desk. There was something written on the blood-spattered paper. As Camus' eyes almost unconsciously ran over the words written there, they somewhat belatedly started to fill with tears.

Conscon Temple savoured the taste of victory for only a very short time. The monks, as well as the many other people living on the mountain, soon heard of Bishop Rogress' death, and the triumphant victory songs which had been echoing across the hills quickly gave way to cries of shock, and then of grief.

The Ataltese soldiers had guarded the temple where the bishop had been. There had been no crack in their defence; the bishop had taken his own life.

The letter that Camus had found contained the bishop's last words. It started by saying that he had not erred in his piety. The letter continued, however, by saying that although he had not gone wrong in his faith, there was equally no denying that it had caused the deaths of a great many people.

"Whether this fight ends with us achieving victory or suffering defeat, there is no longer any sense in allowing more people to die. I have already proven my love for our God. It is now those who follow our teachings who are

indispensable in order to carry on our feelings of faith. My life, therefore, has become unnecessary.”

The bishop then wrote with nostalgic fondness of his bond with the king of Allion, and expressed his gratitude towards the king for having done so much to revive the temple. After which, he continued,

“To end one’s own life is anathema to our teachings, but I will hereby deliberately break that taboo and bear the stigma of being an apostate. My dear pupils, my soul will fall into perdition, and I will experience the agony of burning in the fires of Hell for all eternity. You do not need to praise my name. You do not need to try and protect me. Instead, you must turn your voices against me: hate me, curse me, and mock me. But even though I am a man who gave up halfway on the thorny path that was my allotted fate, you must not deny the unbroken, living faith that carries on within you. There is no falsehood in it, for it has been carved into you down to your last drop of blood, through your pain and suffering; and you do not need to abase yourself before anyone in this world, for your faith is holy. The fight ends today. This current fight. There is a new fight that you will embark on from today onwards, and in it, you must never yield. Even as I burn in the fires of Hell, I will not fail to offer my prayers to God for you,” it concluded.

Every single one of the monks, without exception, wept when they heard Bishop Rogress’ last testament. The populace also knelt as they made the sign of the cross, and offered prayers to the Heavens.

When Percy Leegan arrived at the temple a short while later, he too learned of the bishop’s death. He went to the room where Rogress had died, which had still been left untouched, and was struck as speechless as Camus had been. He did not, however, lose his presence of mind.

He carefully examined the floor. There were some red footprints; they were probably Camus’, since his boots had been covered in the bishop’s blood. Then, in a spot that was slightly removed from the vivid red footsteps, Percy noticed something red which was clearly different from blood – a strand of red hair which had fallen to the ground.

After swiftly making sure that there was no one else in the room, he picked it

up and hid it in his breast pocket.

Shortly thereafter, Leo Attiel also arrived at Mount Conscon. Once the news spread that the prince had killed Hayden Swift with his own hands, the cloud of sorrow covering the mountain seemed to lift, even if only for a brief period. Praised as a 'hero', he was greeted with cheers that sounded like a beast roaring as the morning mist still drifted through the trees.

Leo received Percy and Camus' reports. When he heard that the bishop had committed suicide, Leo got down from his horse and, for the first time in his life – not counting his baptism – he made the sign of the cross. There was no time, however, for him to feel grief or any particularly deep emotion. He needed to shoot the "final arrow" without delay.

Allion's army had pulled away from Mount Conscon like the receding tide. They had passed by the smouldering remains of their burned-down headquarters, and returned to their own country.

As though chasing after them, the news of Bishop Rogress' death crossed Allion's border and reached the capital. At first, there were rumours that "the king of Allion sent assassins", but these were later corrected to, "the bishop committed suicide".

There was one person who offered stronger proof of it than anyone. Crossing over the border and into Allion, he had almost seemed to be chasing after the rumours that had, in turn, been pursuing the soldiers.

That man was Leo Attiel.

Very soon after Allion's army had retreated from Mount Conscon, he had got in touch with General Claude Anglatt, with whom he had friendly relations, and with Claude's permission, he had entered Allion's territory with a very small handful of attendants.

He remained for a while in Claude's fief while the general dispatched a letter to the capital. Upon receiving that missive, the king of Allion fell silent.

Hayden Swift had been a friend of his. That friend had lost his life on a battlefield where he should have been absolutely sure of winning. And to top it

all, it was said that he had died at Lord Leo Attiel's own two hands.

Damned Atall! The king raged.

There were several young men who rushed to fall in with the king's emotions. They clamoured wildly that they would gather the troops posted throughout the country and, without pausing at the temple, would strike against Atall.

Very soon afterwards, however, the news of Bishop Rogress' suicide caused huge tremors within Allion. According to a further piece of news that had arrived, Lord Leo had been organising the troops to give chase to the retreating army but, upon learning that the bishop had killed himself to put an end to the fighting, the prince had cancelled his departure with his soldiers, and had offered prayers for the "great martyr" throughout an entire night at Conscon Temple. His actions received considerable praise from the followers of the Cross Faith within Allion.

When, in addition to that, the king of Allion was informed that Leo Attiel was prepared to personally travel to the capital to deliver Bishop Rogress' last letter, it was no longer possible for him to carelessly raise the troops for a war of revenge.

Besides these internal considerations, there was also the fact that Dytiann had taken advantage of this opportunity to try and trespass into Allion's territory. Although Claude Anglatt's efforts had put a stop to it before anything happened, between Atall and Dytiann, the latter was a far greater threat, and Allion's warriors were more inclined to turn their hostility towards Dytiann, vowing that they "could not let this pass".

"I'll meet him," said the king of Allion after a moment's silence. "But I would hate for the prince to undertake the long, hard journey all the way to the capital."

Thus, they would meet in an area called Jester, which was situated exactly halfway between the capital and the Anglatt territory. It was a beautifully scenic place, with a lake close to the local castle town, and on the shores of which were villas belonging to the royal family, which they often made use of when inviting foreign dignitaries to visit.

The audience would take place in an old castle built on an island in the lake. It

was rich in history, as it was said that a grandson to Zodias, the founder of the Magic Dynasty, had built the castle overnight for his beautiful and beloved wife, using sorcery to carry the stones. Its appearance was likened in loveliness to a swan, resting its feathers on the lake.

In that castle's audience hall, Lord Leo Attiel, the second-born prince of Atall, stood in front of Hugh-Jarl Jamil, king of Allion. Nobles stood in rows on either side. It was not only those who resided in Jester who were present; there were also many who had travelled from the capital to catch a glimpse of the prince.

They could not hide their surprise at Lord Leo's childlike appearance. Moreover, the prince was wearing a long, simple robe that resembled the habits worn by monks of the Cross Faith, and a crucifix hung from his neck. He greeted Allion's king in a calm voice, and held out the letter that Bishop Rogress had left behind.

First, the king received it from a servant and cast his eyes over the blood-smearred parchment. For several seconds, he went over the words written in the letter. Once he had finished reading the document whose edges had been dyed into a red border by Rogress' own blood, he rolled up the parchment and handed it back to the servant who, in turn, returned it to Leo.

The prince spoke in the same quiet voice as earlier,

“The bishop was, to the very end, a man of principle. As a fellow believer in the Cross Faith, I received his kindness and moved my soldiers because of it, but Atall never had the slightest desire to inflict any injury on Allion's territory.”

Seated imposingly on his throne, the king of Allion replied,

“Allion too has no wish to particularly go looking for trouble with our neighbouring country. The recent events, Rogress' death among them, have been an accumulation of misfortunes. That is how I see things.”

At the risk of repeating myself, Allion had lost its justification for war with the death of Bishop Rogress. By having this audience with the king, Leo, who had trespassed into Allion's territory and killed Hayden, was more or less saving appearances. And the king of Allion had decided to meet Leo face-to-face because, of course, he too wanted that outcome.

“By the way, Lord Leo,” said the king now that they were practically at the end of the audience. “Even though you spent more than six years in my country, this is the first time we meet, huh?”



“Aye.”

“We should have gotten to know each other a little earlier. That’s what I’m thinking now.”

“...Aye.”

Leo Attiel could only hang his head, disconcerted.

It was at that moment that he heard the pitter-patter of small footsteps approach. When Leo raised his eyes, a little boy with snow white skin was standing at his side. Their gazes met.

“Is it *you*?” the boy demanded in a high-pitched voice.

“Oi, Kaseria.”

The boy paid no attention to the king who called out to him from the throne, and stared fixedly at Leo.

“Is it *you* who beat Allion’s army?” he asked in the same high voice.

With several of teeth missing and his clothes covered in dirt, he was the very image of a child enjoying his life of play. And yet –

Kaseria? I see, so this child is the prince of Allion?

It was a name that Leo was familiar with.

He was seven years old. Leo had heard that right after he was born, he had hovered on the border of life and death, and the one who had saved him had been none other than Bishop Rogress.

Did the bishop really receive a divine miracle? Or was it just a coincidence? I suppose now, we’ll never know, Leo remained silent.

“Don’t get too full of yourself,” screamed Kaseria, while his freckled cheeks went crimson. “You still haven’t beaten *me*. Don't think you've already beaten Allion!”

He didn’t just shout, he also kicked Leo in the shin.

“Kaseria!”

When the king raised his voice in reproach, the ladies’ maids in charge of the

boy came rushing out from behind the rows of courtiers.

“Prince, please come with us.”

“We’ve prepared some delicious sweets and tea, so won’t you come with us?”

While each of them called out coaxingly to him, they tried to catch the prince who was running about in the hall. The king of Allion sighed with a bitter expression on his face.

“He’s always been spoiled. Apologies, Lord Leo.”

“All goes in accordance with God’s will,” right at the very end, Leo let show just a tiny bit of mischievousness as he raised his crucifix.

Part 3

This was the last arrow that Leo shot. He had turned himself into an arrow to bring an end to things, at least for now. This 'fourth arrow' added itself to the ones he had released on the battlefield.

Yet if, during the battles around Mount Conscon, there had been someone able to observe things from the 'Heavens', they would probably deem that "Lord Leo's visit to Allion was the 'fifth arrow' from Atall's side."

Then what was that fifth arrow? Who was sent out?

Only a very few people know the answer to that now.

At the same time as the rumours were spreading in Allion, they blew like the wind into Atall. As the facts were revealed to them one after another, everyone's expressions went from astonishment, to pallor, to dread. Then, when it became known that Lord Leo had already peacefully concluded his audience with the king of Allion, people finally felt at ease and, with that sense of security, the story of how Lord Leo had rushed to the temple and repelled Allion's forces now sounded exhilarating. In the blink of an eye, voices rang out throughout the land in praise of Leo.

There were some, however, who did not view him favourably.

The first was Dytiann.

The upper echelons of the Church had sent Arthur Causebulk on a mission that they had viewed as a mere formality, yet he and the entire advance troop of three hundred had died in battle. Nobody in Dytiann could believe their ears. Arthur's mission had merely been to lead the Sergaia Holy Rose Division to the temple, so an outcome like this one simply shouldn't have been possible.

Just before he left for Allion, Leo had sent Dytiann a letter. In it, he explained

that when they had been about to land with the Holy Rose Division's air carrier, Arthur had received information that the fighting had already begun, whereupon, he had declared that "we will show them Dytiann's mettle in this holy war," and had personally decided to lead an assault deep within Allion's territory. The plan had been to cut off the attacking forces from their headquarters and to wear down their spirit, but, alas, Claude Anglatt had been quick to realise what was happening, and he had laid his troops in ambush. The result was the tragic annihilation of Arthur's unit.

Leo lavishly praised Arthur Causebulk, saying that the victory at Conscon Temple was largely thanks to his courage, and he accompanied his words with expressions of gratitude. At around the same time, a letter from the temple's acting representative, the contents of which were very close to what Leo was saying, arrived in Dytiann. Attached to it was the desire to honour Arthur as one of the temple's saints.

Dytiann had failed entirely in its designs. Not long after, they received a communication from Allion. Since they had to leave themselves a way out, they could not afford to be careless in their remarks to Atall. They sent a letter of congratulations for their victory to both Atall and the temple.

There was one person, however, who could not settle for this.

"Impossible!"

Bishop Baal cried out, his face ashen. He who had gone to Atall with Arthur as an envoy continued,

"I made sure to tell Arthur not to stand on the frontlines. Yet they say he attacked the enemy camp? And on top of that, he was conveniently ambushed by Allion's troops? A-And above all else, they were annihilated without a single survivor! It's completely unthinkable. This is *Allion* we're talking about: they would have taken hostages to get information about Dytiann, or ransom money, or whatever. They must have been working with Atall. They massacred the unit to ensure their silence!"

He continued to fire off words to himself so forcefully that it seemed as though the veins which were starting out from forehead would burst at any moment, and he would collapse as his blood gushed out of him. Yet no matter

how much of a ruckus he kicked up, he could not alter Dytiann's policy all by himself.

“You...”

Finally, his face as crimson as though he were crying tears of blood, Baal pledged a terrible oath before the church's altar.

“You who murdered Arthur, I will bring down the hammer of God's judgement upon you. No... it may be Allion who is directly responsible for Arthur's killing, but in reality, the ones deserving of hatred are Atall – and also Leo Attiel. That accursed boy, pretending to cling to us in desperation, while inwardly, he was sneering at us. With an expression as innocent as a child's, he offered Arthur in sacrifice to the devil. Watch well: one day, I will definitely, definitely, take your head – you who are possessed by the devil – and I will raise it on high above this altar!”

And then, there was one other...

The other person who could not view Lord Leo's actions with any kind of pleasure was Magrid Attiel.

Indeed, yes, the prince's own father.

When he received the succession of reports about this latest mayhem, and once he grasped the whole picture, he shook with surprise, agitation, and then with anger.

That anger was equal to the king of Allion's, who had lost a close friend. No, perhaps it even exceeded it. Magrid promptly had Leo return to Tiwana Palace, but as the rumours of Leo's accomplishments had already reached the capital, the welcome he received there was unprecedented in its enthusiasm.

It was similar to what had happened before, when he had escaped from Allion. Now, however he was the hero who had defeated that same Allion. As Leo strutted along the road on horseback, the populace's loud cheers washed over him like rain. Beneath the blue sky and alongside the flag that was emblazoned with the crest of Atall's ruling house, a flag bearing a cross fluttered in the cool, refreshing breeze. This was the flag which symbolised Leo Attiel and, from then onwards, it would come to leave a strong impression on

the people of Atall.

Claiming that he was “not feeling well,” Magrid did not go to meet his son. Yet that evening, he immediately summoned Leo to his chambers. The only other person in the room was Branton, his oldest son.

“What is the meaning of this!”

Faced with the furious shouting of his sovereign and father, Leo embarked on a lengthy explanation.

First, he revealed how he had received a letter from Bishop Rogress of Conscon Temple very shortly after his baptismal ceremony.

“It contained a direct plea to me for help as a fellow believer in the Cross Faith. After I had finished reading it, I was shaking. The bishop was already contemplating suicide even back then. But offering his life alone would probably not be enough to put a stop to Allion’s greed and ambition. Therefore, could I not, at the very least, send enough soldiers to protect the populace and the faithful, he asked...”

Naturally enough, however, the number of soldiers that Lord Leo could freely make use of was extremely limited. Thereupon, when the envoys from Dytiann repeatedly stated that they wished to “meet directly with the newly-baptised Lord Leo,” he had decided to see them on the pretext of a private greeting.

“And so you decided, on nothing but your own authority, to ask for reinforcements from Dytiann?” Magrid frowned.

What the sovereign-prince was most concerned about, however, was not how to berate his son. Apparently, upon receiving Leo’s unsupported permission, Dytiann’s military unit had openly crossed Atall’s territory in an air carrier. Magrid’s concern was that he had not received a single report of their being sighted by any of the patrols.

If a group of cavalrymen or of infantry had forced their way into Atall’s lands, the surveillance network spread out across the towns and fortresses would definitely have caught them. This incident, however, clearly revealed that conventional surveillance by itself was not enough to monitor movements by air carrier.

I hadn't realised that an armada of air carriers could suddenly appear in the skies above Tiwana.

The development of large-sized ships carrying nothing but soldiers meant that the way of conducting warfare would change.

Countries that are by the sea absolutely need a navy. Not only to prevent enemy attacks, but also to keep their territorial waters from enemy hands. Will an 'air force' become necessary in the same way for the skies which every country shares?

Magrid was experiencing the sensation of encountering a new threat. Leo continued,

“There is no denying that I had no right to lead soldiers and to go in reinforcement to the temple. Please forgive me, Father... no, Your Majesty. But should I have pretended not to see the temple's suffering? Should I have refused the favour that Bishop Rogress was begging of me with his life on the line? Up until then, I – Leo Attiel – had only ever been an insignificant hostage sent to Allion. How could I, when the bishop's request was recognising me as a man, as a warrior, as a fellow believer of the same faith?”

You could certainly say that Leo was skilful. Why else would he bring out such a narcissistic comment at a time like this? Rather than say that “the prince was behind everything that happened and even entirely deceived his father the sovereign-prince,” it was better to present the disturbance as being due to “the prince going off and taking action because of his selfish desire to be a hero.” The rout of Allion's army would then be no more than a result of that.

And thus –

“You fool!” Being berated by Magrid was probably well within Leo's expectations. “Are you planning to become king, maybe? Do you realise that because of your selfishness, Allion's army might well have been trampling into Atall at this very moment? A 'man' and a 'warrior' and a 'believer', was it? Are you saying that the people of Atall aren't worth any more than that puny little pride of yours!?”

There was nothing that Leo could do except fall to his knees. At times like these, it was always the kind-hearted Branton who would come to his defence.

“I can understand Leo’s feelings,” and “my little brother is still very young – he still has a lot he needs to study,” he said, while at the same time turning to his brother to rebuke him, “but you know, Leo, deciding by yourself to have an audience with the king of Allion, that really is going too far.”

In all honesty, saying that Leo had “gone too far” was putting it too mildly. However, even though Magrid could summon Leo in private and yell at him as a father, as the sovereign-prince, he could not publicly punish the young lord.

One of the reasons was that this matter was simply too big. The reality was that Leo had lead soldiers to fight Allion’s army, but if it became known that this had not been what the sovereign-prince wanted, then it would be revealed for all to see that not just the country but even the ruling House itself was lacking any kind of unity. It was all too easy to imagine that this would allow the vassal-lords to gain even more power, not to mention that Allion or Dytiann might see in it a perfect opportunity to intervene in Atall.

The second reason was that Leo had successfully protected the temple. He had also prevented relations with Allion from deteriorating any further by personally meeting with the king. Atall’s current situation could not possibly be any better than it was. And in fact, the people were already starting to see Leo as a hero.

And finally, the last reason was that Leo would soon be getting married to the daughter of an Allian general. This was certainly also one of the reasons why the king of Allion had allowed Leo into his lands. On top of wedding Florrie, Leo also had a strong connection to the Cross Faith, and was preparing to establish its first diocese in Atall. From here on, he would be responsible for contact with Allion in more ways than one. It wouldn’t be too much of an exaggeration to say that Leo’s very existence was now a lifeline for Atall.

Thus, the sovereign-prince could not, at this time, publicly condemn his son.

After scolding Leo harshly then having him leave for the time being, Magrid sat far back into his chair and heaved a very, very long sigh. He summoned a page to prepare him a drink.

“Even though it’s a bit late, should I get a tutor for Leo?” he said to no one in particular. “Or maybe, even if it *is* right after his wedding, I should have him

cloistered away in the cathedral as a priest of the Cross Faith? Either way, he's too dangerous to leave as is."

Magrid twirled the wine cup in his hand.

Even though they were father and child, Leo had spent six years growing up in Allion, so Magrid did not know his son's personality. Because of that, he was not surprised at how much Leo had changed in such a short amount of time. In other words, the way he saw it wasn't that "Leo has changed," but rather, "that boy has always had the potential to be dangerous."

This would have a huge influence on the relationship between the two of them.

Thus did Leo Attiel triumph over Hayden Swift.

Around that time, a letter of thanks was sent to Leo from Conscon Temple. According to what it said, a priest who been the equivalent of a close aide to Bishop Rogress would soon be inaugurated as the new bishop. Camus had risen considerably in rank, going from being merely one of the warrior monks to becoming the new bishop's assistant. He would also serve as the point of liaison between the temple and the church at Guinbar. He and his sister, Sarah, would be staying at the temple for the time being, "until the situation has calmed down".

When Sarah had informed Leo of this, she had added some other, completely unnecessary comments.

"Please take care of Kuon while I'm away in case he gets lonely. That puppy is always disappearing somewhere as soon as you take your eyes off of him, so I think it might be a good idea to teach him kindly with a collar," she said, in a deliberately loud voice, so that Kuon would be able to hear.

Percy had a really hard time soothing the boy's fury.

Half a month after being reprimanded by the sovereign-prince, Lord Leo left Tiwana with Percy and Kuon, and once more headed to Guinbar Castle. He wanted to see how the cathedral's construction was advancing but, once he got there, he received a report that dashed cold water over his victory.

“I am truly sorry, Your Highness,” Savan Roux, the lord of Guinbar, hung his head of grey hair. “I had guards keeping watch night and day but... they took their eyes off of him for a second...”

Togo, the son of the vassal-lord Darren, who had been in custody in Guinbar Castle, had been killed.

He had received a single sword stroke in the back. The killer must have been a man of considerable skill since Togo had probably died instantly. This had been neither a personal settling of accounts, nor a drunkard’s brawl. It was assassination.

And as to who it was who had ordered it...

Darren?

Leo thought of the man who had worn such an innocent expression at the time of the prince’s baptism. Within the bustling confusion caused by that huge crowd, had he perhaps been choosing a suitable place for Togo to be brought to and assassinated?

By using Togo as their trump card, they had once been able to drive Darren Actica into a corner, but now that Darren had personally gotten rid of that trump card – gotten rid of his own son – the danger posed by that vassal-lord would be resurrected.

Was this what was bred on Atall’s soil?

In that case...

From a parlour in the castle, Leo Attiel gazed into the distance.

In that case, there’s no choice but to change what grows on this soil.

The next enemy would be neither Allion nor Dytiann. Instead, it would be – “Atall.”

Reflecting the lights in the parlour, Leo’s eyes gleamed.

Afterword

Hornet, rat, spider, bat.

...Now then, what does this sudden enumeration of creatures mean?

Answer: these are the animals featured as the motifs on the coat of arms of the various vassal lords of the Principality of Atall. Since they will be appearing in the actual story in future volumes, everyone, please be sure to remember them well...

Yeah, saying that would be an outright lie.

The real answer is that there were a lot of animals tormenting me just as I was writing this second volume of LeoDen.

Just what kind of wild and remote region does Sugihara even live in? – let us set aside the wonder that I'm sure you must all be feeling since, somehow or another, all of those obstacles (?) have been overcome and this second volume has safely been published. With feelings aplenty of gratitude and regret over life, let us raise our glasses and give a toast.

Even though it's called 'Tales of Leo Attiel', Leo, the second-born prince, had a weak presence in the previous volume. However, this time, with the increase in the number of his appearances and him being placed at the centre of the story, has he, for now, lived up to expectations as the main character of this tale?

The main character, in other words 'the hero', is definitely Prince Leo but then, who on earth is the 'heroine' able to stand alongside him? When it comes to that...

Soon after I had finished writing the first volume, I had a telephone exchange

with my editor.

“I’ve received the manuscript, so I’m thinking of having Okaya, the illustrator, start working on the full-scale illustrations soon.”

“Okay. Please give my regards to Mr Okaya. The character sketches that you emailed me before gave off a really good feeling.”

“Yeah. Since we have pictures of all the characters, I’d like to settle fairly soon on the design for the cover. Well, given the title, Leo’s presence is essential, but I’m not quite sure who else should be featured.”

“Line up Percy, Camus and Kuon one-by-one, and you’ll be on the easy road to the ‘young master and servants’ appeal, no? It’ll be out-and-out manly and tough, with muscles and sweat almost jumping out of the picture, and...”

“The easy road to make a new publication appealing is to pretty it up with a cute female character, isn’t it?”

“That’s exactly right.”

“(The hell’s with this guy?) I have one question: who’s the heroine of the story?”

“Who... what do you mean?”

“Well, normally, you’d expect it to be Florrie, no?”

“Hmm, Florrie becomes Leo’s fiancée, after which (※ *Spoiler omitted*)... so she does have that very important role, but as for appearances, yeah... Since I’m not planning for her to have all that many, it’s a little difficult to answer when you ask if she’s the story’s heroine.”

“Then, Sarah?”

“Sarah, well, she’ll start appearing more often but... (※ *Spoiler omitted*)... So because of that, I can’t really say that she’s the heroine either.”

“...Er, so in other words, there isn’t any heroine?”

“I’m not saying there isn’t one. It’s not something I can decide unilaterally: whoever the readers think of as the heroine is the heroine. In the tale of real life, we all have our own heroines.”

“(Shaddup) So then, what are we doing about the cover?”

“Well if it comes down to it, we could have Florrie and Sarah stand on either side of Leo to make it look like there are double heroines and fool the readers.”

“Oi, oi.”

“For the advertising, we could have something like: ‘The timid Prince Leo Attiel was sent as a hostage to the powerful country of Allion. For he who doesn’t even know what might happen to him tomorrow, his meeting with Florrie, a sweet and charming young lady, and Sarah, a self-assured, gun-totting nun, will be the turning point of fate. Just then, trouble occurs between Allion and his native country, Atall, and...!?’ , no?”

“...Well, it just barely manages to not be a lie, but I can feel the malice in that last ‘!?’.”

“It’s like how my friends say that being zapped by electricity is fun.”

“(Time to rethink my acquaintance with this guy.)”

Some time after that exchange, I received a draft in which Sarah was smiling enigmatically behind Prince Leo.

“So then, this time, for volume 2, it’ll be Florrie, right?” I thought, but I was in for a surprise when I saw the draft for the cover of volume 2, which arrived a little while ago.

It was actually Camus who got selected! No, well, thinking about the plot this time around, it wasn’t so strange, but... Had even the editorial side given up on using the ‘young girl’ appeal...?

Honestly, this is going to be trouble.

-- Sugihara Tomonori