

TALES
OF
LEO ATTIEL

III

✦
首なし公の肖像
✦

レオ アツテイル ル伝

杉原智則

イラスト ✦ 岡谷

電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations



レオ
TALES OF ❄️ LEO ATTIEL

アツテイル
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A character with brown hair in a braid, wearing a green tunic and a red cape, is shown in a dynamic pose. They are holding a sword that is covered in blood. The character's face is also marked with blood, and they have a determined, slightly shouting expression. The background is a dark, purple and blue sky with some foliage visible on the left.

何者だ。
なぜぼくを狙う。

※ アトル公国第二公子 ※

レオ・アツテール

列強に対抗すべくアトル国内の
体制強化を目指す。



レオ兄さまは、
男の方になられたのだから。

✧ アリオンの将軍の娘 ✧
♡ フロリー・アングラット

レオの婚約者としてアートル国内に滞在中。

✦ 僻地からきた傭兵 ✦

クオン

剣の腕に長けた若者。
秘められた過去が
ありそうで……。

だけどおれは、
山どつて純血ではなかったから。



✧ 勇猛な修道尼 ✧

セーラ ♪

レオの側近の僧兵、カミュの妹。
尼僧とは思えぬ
妖しさがある。

わたしは——英雄譚に華を添える、
運命の導き手ね。



トール、この父が
仇を討ってやるぞ。

兄上はホロの一員であるわたしを
女として扱った。

アトール討伐は、
神に成就を誓うに
ふさわしい事業となる。

※ 聖ディティース連盟
十字軍総軍司令官 ※
モルディーン・ヤノス

弟の総大司教ワイマーと並び、
現在のディティースの
実質的支配者。

※ アトールの有力貴族 ※
**ダーレン・
アクティカ**

「反レオ・アッティール」を
掲げる諸侯の一人。

※ 「山の民」の戦士 ※
アクア

クオンの故郷の少女。
女を捨て、戦士の道を志す。





デザイン * ビイピイ

Prologue

Recently, both just before falling asleep and just after waking up, Leo Attiel had been having two different kinds of hallucinations.

First, just before falling asleep, when he threw himself down on the bed, stretched out with his back against the mattress. If he did that with enough force, he felt as though he could catch a glimpse of his own back, left behind in just that split second before he flung himself backwards.

Yo, Leo Attiel.

Leo spoke to his own back.

How was today? Did you take matters into your own hands? Did you handle things well as 'Lord Leo'?

His back then answered,

Well, nothing got out of hand. But I couldn't do everything I'd set my mind to doing this morning. Issues keep piling up. There were all sorts of things I wanted to get further along with too, but it's already over for today's me. I'll leave the rest to tomorrow's me.

Is that right? As Leo smiled, the shadowy back before him went blurry and disappeared. *Well then, let's be 'Lord Leo' tomorrow, too.*

He closed his eyes while thinking that.

What Leo meant by 'Lord Leo' was his vision of a future Leo, clothed in hopes and ideals.

Leo truly wanted to become that kind of person. Considering that previously, he had even disliked his family name, 'Attiel', there had clearly been a change within him, psychologically speaking.

For example, while he had always loved reading books, he now sometimes

noticed that there was a difference in how he chased the words over a page. Before, he had simply admired these worlds that were unknown to him and in which he would likely never set foot. It was different now. When he read historical tales that depicted heroes from times past and near, he felt that he would one day be like them, that had to one day be like them.

That's the way it has to be.

That conviction did not only bring hope with it, however, and sometimes, it was despair, its exact opposite, which it beckoned into the young man's heart.

He was painfully aware that when he acquired one piece of knowledge, he needed a hundred or two hundred more items of knowledge before being able to fully understand it. If he yearned to be like one hero, he also dreaded the thousands of steps he would need to climb to be like him.

There were tens of thousand of future Leo Attiels stretched out before him. Because of that, he sometimes forgot who he was.

During the day, he was fully engrossed in all those things, and it was only in the short time before going to sleep in his bed that he was brought back to his original self. His back was the lingering remains of 'the me from the daytime who isn't me'.

Then he would sleep.

Leo had not been dreaming recently. He simply slept deeply.

But in place of dreams, when the morning sun washed over his bed and awoke him, he saw a different illusion.

From when he had been eleven, he had spent more than six years in the land of Allion. It was a long time; from childhood to puberty. And so, whether the bed he lay in was actually in Tiwana, the capital city, or in Guinbar Castle, or even in a room in Conscon Temple, Leo sometimes had the impression that he was still in Claude Anglatt's manor.

If he opened the door and went downstairs, he would smell the breakfast that Claude's wife, Ellen, had gotten ready. The brothers, Walter and Jack, would already be at table, chattering away, and Florrie, who would be helping lay out the food, would greet him with, "Good morning, Leo-niisama," while giving him

a smile as lovely as the seasonal flowers which sometimes decorated the table.

That illusion was as vivid as reality, but it disappeared entirely once his body and mind were fully awake.

One-by-one, he mentally went over all the things he needed to do today, and all those he would need to start tomorrow, as well as all the things that had been moving along yesterday and that he needed to check the progress of.

There were too many things that he had to chase up after. Or maybe he was the one who was being chased after? – Either way, another new day had begun.

Whether or not it would bring Leo Attiel closer to his longed-for image of 'Lord Leo', whatever its fights, its challenges or its trials, it was a new day.

Chapter 1: The Leo Guards

Part 1

One afternoon, towards the end of winter, Sovereign-Prince Magrid Attiel of Atall had gone out for a stroll accompanied by Kirsten, the princess-consort, and ten or so attendants.

Magrid had originally intended to go hunting after finishing the morning's work, but Kirsten, his wife, had all of a sudden announced that she wished to join him, so the plan had been changed to a walk along the riverbank northwest of the capital, Tiwana. The sovereign-prince now sat on a hill that sloped gently upwards from within the wood that ran along the riverside.

Next to him was Stark Barsley. As a member of a long-serving family of hereditary retainers, he had established himself at the castle in his territory, but since he had already retired, he occasionally visited Tiwana to express his gratitude to the sovereign-prince – who was younger than him – or perhaps to come and tease him.

“His Highness Leo, is it...” Stark spoke the name in a relaxed tone of voice. “I couldn't help feeling surprised. Hmm, while I would have said that both were mild-tempered, he was a boy who did not give me quite as good an impression as his older brother – ... but from there to thinking that he would move troops behind Your Majesty's back... Truly, the blood of our ruling House is not to be taken lightly.”

“This is no time for you to be so nonchalant. Stark, won't you take charge of him?”

“Recently, I’ve been spending all my time fishing from an open boat in the lake. Your suggestion is not appealing enough to give up that pleasure for.”

“How can you be so heartless? Father relied on you more than anyone,” the sovereign-prince pleaded with a man who was older than his own father.

The one Stark was being asked to take charge of was Leo Attiel.

– A month after the affair at Conscon Temple had come to an end, Florrie turned sixteen, and Leo eighteen three months after that. There had been rumours that the wedding between them might take place on one of their two birthdays, but both dates had passed without anything happening.

Leo himself had said that, “The church is only halfway built, so it isn’t the right time yet.” And also, “My birthday? The priests of the Cross Faith say that it’s an unlucky day.” Because of it repeatedly being put off, an official date had yet to be decided.

Leo Attiel.

Until a few months earlier, it wasn’t at all clear that the people living in the capital, Tiwana, had even heard his name. Nowadays, there was no one in all of the Principality of Atall who did not know of the second-born prince.

After the events surrounding Conscon and Allion, as well as Dytiann, there were two major schools of thought concerning Lord Leo.

The first was to see him as a hero. The voices speaking in his favour were mainly those of the people, and Leo’s popularity had soared in the outskirts of the capital. The story of how he led his troops to save Conscon, and there killed Hayden Swift, the commander of the Allian forces, became a topic for popular illustrated storybooks and for the improvised songs of minstrels, and before long, even plays were being performed about it.

As the plays became ever more popular, their performances tended to be staged even at shrines, which caused some problems. The main shrine in Tiwana worshipped ‘Iron Saint’ Lévy-Rahan, but Leo, the hero of the story, had, through a series of events, converted to the Cross Faith. As such, the priests frowned at having a ‘pagan’ tale performed on their premises.

Yet Leo was also, of course, a member of the sovereign-prince’s family. If the

shrine refused to stage the play, it would probably give a bad impression to those in power. Accordingly, the play was allowed to be performed as long as the script glossed over Leo's religious conversion. It was said that the initial performances were so popular that people couldn't even get through the shrine's gates anymore.

Amongst the commoners, most people thus cheered for Leo and praised his name.

There was, however, a second school of thought when it came to Leo – one which regarded this 'rash and thoughtless prince' as nothing short of dangerous. That opinion was mostly whispered among the vassal-lords and noble retainer families.

Sovereign-Prince Magrid struggled to offer a convincing explanation about what had happened. If he explained that Leo had acted completely on his own – not only when personally leading soldiers to Conscon, but also when meeting the king of Allion shortly thereafter – he would be showing weakness by revealing that the princely house was not internally united.

On the other hand, if he claimed that everything had been done according to his own intentions, he would probably bear the brunt of criticism again. "While it is all very nice that Allion ended up giving in, the sovereign-prince once again arbitrarily brought the entire country to the brink of disaster" – something along those lines.

Just like the troupe staging the play, the sovereign-prince had to rack his brains to find a good way of keeping the details hazy. But not only was Magrid not a skilful orator, he also had no one that he could consult with on this matter. As a result, he ended up sounding evasive. Which was what he actually was being, but, more importantly, that evasiveness also shed light on the very facts that he was trying to hide.

Although nobody could possibly imagine that Lord Leo had acted entirely on his own from start to finish, theories and complaints still flew around.

Could it be that the young lord was so convinced that the temple needed to be saved that he actually disregarded His Majesty's orders?

But any way you look at it, it was the prince's first campaign. He didn't have

any experience with military command. Then maybe it was only luck that allowed him to defeat the enemy general. He was playing an incredibly risky game. You can't move soldiers based on nothing but a chivalrous spirit, without the light of wisdom. One wrong step, and all of Atall would have been in flames right about now.

The vassal-lords got onboard with that speculation, but rather than saying that they deeply believed that Leo Attiel was dangerous, it would be closer to the truth to say that they bitterly resented him.

After the events at Conscon Temple, Leo once addressed the vassal-lords about the need for a permanent army. When Leo had previously raised the issue, stories were widely repeated even among the populace about how the vassal-lords had practically laughed in his face; now however, the ones being laughed at and criticised were those same lords.

“They're all completely blind.”

“It's clear that the prince has far more foresight than any of them. If they had listened to His Highness' petition, the prince wouldn't of had to suffer all alone.”

There was no end to those voices.

The sovereign-prince could ignore neither the displeasure and sense of impending crisis felt by the nobles, nor the vocal disagreement of the people. Which was why Magrid had summoned Stark Barsley, who had once won fame as a loyal retainer to Magrid's father, to Tiwana. The original intention had been to invite him hunting, but as that had been changed to taking a stroll, it was while they were leisurely standing shoulder to shoulder on top of the hill that he sought Stark's wisdom.

“What should I do?”

There is not time enough to talk here about all of Stark Barsley's career. As the illegitimate son of a noble house that he had no mind to inherit, he had already left the country by the time he was a young man. He had wandered, of course, to Allion and Shazarn, and had then extended his steps further west, travelling beyond the Grand Duchy of Ende and the territories of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius, all the way to the western countries of Tauran.

According to one theory, he had worked as a mercenary in Tauran and had been made a slave in Mephius.

It was coming up to thirty years since he had inherited the family keep from his younger brother, who had died of illness. Although he seemed like someone who really should write his own autobiography, now that he was nearing his seventies, his countenance had grown so gentle that his once harsh way of life seemed almost impossible to believe.

Now as well, he spoke with a smile on his long face.

“Entrust soldiers to the young lord.” The sovereign-prince looked understandably sour. “To all outward appearances, the young lord obeyed Your Majesty’s orders to repel Allion and rescue Conscon. In recent years, Atall has not pulled off any other military feat equal to it. It would look unnatural for you to cast him away. Therefore, as a reward for the young lord’s great deeds, it would be fine to grant him soldiers fulfilling a position close to that of royal guards... right, you could have them be ‘personal guards’. With the voice of popular discontent currently on the rise, even the lords won’t be able to wriggle out sending out money or men either... It should be possible to organise a fairly grand unit without emptying the Treasury.”

“But,” the crease had not vanished from Magrid’s brow, “Although it’s vexing to admit it, that damned Leo outmanoeuvred me and turned his blade against Allion. If I grant him troops, he might grow more and more arrogant, and pose a greater threat to Atall than ever before.”

As he groaned, the sovereign-prince wore an expression that he rarely showed his other retainers. It was the expression of a young man clinging to an older person. “And so,” was all the sovereign-prince said, with an air of broaching the topic of negotiation, before asking Stark to take Leo in hand.

“If I grant him soldiers, Leo will one day also become the master of a castle keep. So Stark, would you be willing to hammer into my son the preparedness and mental attitude needed for the ruling family, while at the same time keeping an eye on Leo?”

He asked with his head bowed, but Stark did not look particularly inclined to respond favourably.

Hmm, thought Stark, while striking a nonchalant attitude, His Highness Lord Leo? You can't even go fishing at some backwater pond without hearing nothing but rumours about him. ...It might not be bad to meet him at least once.

This wasn't because he was intending to act as his mentor, but simply because he had been thinking for a while now that Leo was an interesting person.

He was a noble who had been in service since the era of the previous sovereign-prince. In this era, the ruler placed great trust in him, and he frequently served as a diplomat. In that position, one did not merely convey the ruler's thoughts when in a foreign country, and there were plenty of times when one had to rely on one's own judgement, so, naturally, those chosen for the task were all people whose political stance was aligned with the ruler's.

Stark had been a friend of the previous sovereign-prince, and he was well-versed in gauging the mood in Allion to the west, Shazarn to the north, and the various countries to the east that were tied together by the Cross Faith.

In his time, Atall had experienced virtually no wars with the outside. There had been times when relations with the neighbouring countries had temporarily deteriorated and each side had taken up position in the border regions, but he could count on the fingers of one hand the number of actual battles that had been fought.

Stark himself had fought against marauders – which included bands of mercenaries and members of powerful clans chased out of their own countries – who had broken into his territory. There had even been an episode in which he had recaptured his own castle after it had been taken from him. Not even he, however, could conceive of crossing swords with a foreign country, and on top of that, with Allion of all places.

Yet Leo Attiel had accomplished that inconceivable feat.

Very interesting, thought Stark. But also, very dangerous.

Stark had gradually reached his fill of leaving his old friend's son in suspense. "Taking charge of him is a different matter," he said by way of preface, "but I might as well meet Lord Leo. Although I'm not at all sure that this up-and-coming hero will want to listen to what an old sack of bones has to say."

For now at least, he offered words to please the sovereign-prince.

Since the conversation had reached its conclusion, they walked to where Kirsten, the princess-consort, was sitting beneath a parasol held up by ladies' maids. Since the sovereign-prince fell into conversation with her, Stark took a discreet step backwards.

It had been quite a while since he had last seen the princess-consort. Since she only had a three-year age difference with Magrid, she must have been nearing the end of her thirties, yet she was still as lovely as ever. She was so slender that it was hard to believe she had born three children, and both her expression and her bearing indicated her deeply modest and reserved personality.

Stark, however, had been observing the princess-consort since her youth, and he felt that *the corners of her eyes twitch convulsively*. As her emotions piled up within her without ever showing on her face, there was a danger of them exploding. Stark had known any number of women who were like that, and, in a way, the princess-consort fit into that mould.

Actually, the Princess-Consort Kirsten had once had a bout of hysteria that was still talked about within the palace. It had been barely a few years after the birth of her eldest son, Branton. To ensure his son's education, Magrid had decided not to have him raised in the palace at Tiwana, but to instead have the child fostered by one of the long-serving, hereditary retainers. This noble's territory was not particularly far from Tiwana, but Kirsten had nonetheless vehemently opposed the decision.

Kirsten was by birth the daughter of a family of vassals in service to a different house of high-ranked hereditary retainers. Her father had died young, however, and the fight to succeed him as family head had not been gentle. Their liege had just barely managed to put an end to it by personally acting as arbitrator, but by that time, her mother had also passed away.

Magrid had fallen in love with her at first sight when he was still a prince but, perhaps in part because of her early history, she had remained extremely shy and reticent and ever since her marriage, she had always found one reason or another to avoid showing herself in public whenever possible.

The princely house had a long history, and its customs influenced every aspect of daily life, so it was easy to imagine that she had found it suffocating at the ceremonious court where she knew virtually nobody.

Thereupon, the long-awaited eldest son had been born.

For Kirsten, the existence of this baby who shared her own blood gave her place to belong, and must have seemed almost like her one and only ally, given that there were so few people in her life that she could trust. When the child was separated from her, she showed passion and fury such as she never had before. She hounded the sovereign, her voice shrill, and wrecked one room after another within the palace.

Most of the retainers were unfortunately unsympathetic towards her. “The princess-consort lacks awareness as a member of the family of the sovereign-prince,” said her those around her, showering her in their harsh criticism.

Although Kirsten’s rampage lasted no more than three days, the affair cast an even deeper shadow than before over the princess-consort. Several years after coming to Tiwana, she had finally and with difficulty managed to make friends, but now she utterly cut off all relations with them and stayed cloistered within the palace all day long.

The birth of the second prince, Leo, brought Kirsten no comfort. On the contrary, that time, the mother gave the impression of being hesitant to get close to her son. *She was probably feeling cautious*, thought Stark. Because she was afraid that he would immediately be taken away from her, she would not allow herself to love her son.

Because of what had happened with their eldest son, Magrid had relented with Leo and had left him in her care, yet Kirsten failed, so to speak, to love her second son. He was almost entirely looked after by nursemaids, and although they occasionally met each other, the relationship between mother and child was strangely formal and distant.

“Mother!”

The fact that Kirsten was now more or less able to show herself and to be at ease in the full sunlight was without a doubt thanks to the birth of the third prince, Roy, who was currently running up the hill as he called out to her.

Right after Roy Attiel had been born, Kirsten had held her child close.

“He has exactly the same eyes as my father. And his mouth and nose are the living image of my mother,” she had said through her sobs.

As though in compensation of her eldest son, Branton, who had been stolen away from her love, and of her second son, Leo, whom she has failed to love, Kirsten doted on her youngest child, Roy. She had even claimed that the souls of her parents, whom she had lost young, lived in Roy, and she would not be parted from him even for a moment.

Roy had been raised receiving not only his mother’s love, but that of the entire palace. He was friendly and intelligent, and there was no one who would not feel affectionate towards him.

“Oh dear, what have you been up to, Roy? You’re covered in mud.”

Even now, when she was admonishing him, Kirsten’s eyes watched him fondly.

Roy Attiel had been picking flowers at the foot of the hill with the ladies’ maids, and had made them into a garland. When his mother bent forward a little, he placed it around her neck.

“Oh my, how lovely.”

Kirsten and the ladies’ maids all smiled, and even Magrid turned a gaze filled with love towards his third son.



How calculated. Stark was the only one who was critical of the third-born prince, Lord Roy. *He isn't a child of five or six. If I'm not mistaken, His Highness Roy is around fourteen or fifteen. A boy who's old enough to have been on his third campaign, making a flower garland for his mother. And to get himself all muddy on top of it... he really is slick.*

Appearance-wise, he closely resembled Kirsten and was as lovely as her. His boyish face still gave a childlike impression, but, in a year or two, it would surely start troubling the women around him.

Stark had also heard that he was good at his studies. Although his mother indulged him and frequently took him away from his training in martial arts, so that he often took breaks from it, it was said that he was not incompetent with a sword.

Yet all for all that Roy's eyes were sparkling with joy, Stark could tell that his aim had been to please the adults. Rather than intelligence, he gave off a whiff of cunning.

Since he's always being fawned on at his mother's side, his tendency to earn favour with the adults is just going to get stronger and stronger. His abilities aren't bad; it would probably have been best if he had been fostered out, like His Highness Branton was.

Despite having those thoughts, Stark had no intention of suggesting any such thing to Magrid. He did not want to be told, "Well then, since you're retired, you have plenty of time to take him in," nor did he want to hassle of having the princess-consort bear a grudge against him.

Stark was aware that he had already given plenty to his country, and he was not inclined to work himself to the bone any further for it. For the same reason, he did not wish to get dragged into every kind of trouble that appeared. And since he was as he was, in truth, he really didn't want to have to take charge of Leo, either.

Part 2

“I might as well meet Lord Leo,” had said Stark, but in actual fact, it wasn’t until a month later that they came face to face. In the meantime, the creation of the ‘personal guards’ that he had suggested was given the go ahead.

Since it had been authorised by the ruler, Magrid, neither the nobles nor the vassal-lords could object, and they had to fork out money and men, just as Leo himself had once badgered them to do.

Percy, an Ataltese noble, and Kuon, a mercenary, both of whom had been following Leo and whose positions were close to those of vassals, were also formally integrated into the unit.

The second son of the House of Leegan is being a fool – Kuon was one thing, since he was a rootless drifter, but there was a lot of malicious gossiping about Percy. He’s letting himself be dragged along at the prince’s whim. That’s no way to get on in life.

The rumours weren’t necessarily wrong, either. Leo certainly seemed to be engrossed in military affairs, but what were the odds that Atall would plunge into more foreign campaigns from now on? Even though these were war-torn times, there was no territory that this tiny country could hope to aim for, sandwiched as it was between the two great powers that were Allion and Dytiann.

In other words, there was very little chance that Leo would perform any spectacular feats from here on. And unlike the Royal Guards, which conferred considerable status even if one had no distinguished war records, this newly-established ‘personal guard’ had neither history nor prestige.

Percy himself did not find it unnatural that there were rumours about his *having bad luck*. Naturally, his family was against the whole thing. His father repeatedly suggested different courses for Percy’s future, but he eventually

gave up once he realised that his son was firmly determined.

His mother was more persistent than his father.

“What does Lord Gimlé think about it?” she asked bluntly.

Gimlé Gloucester, one of the vassal-lords, was the father of Percy’s fiancée, Liana. Speaking of Gimlé, when the request for reinforcements had reached Tiwana from Conscon Temple, he had made it very clear that he was against sending them any help, stating that “it has nothing to do with us.”

Consequently, when he later learned that the sovereign-prince had one-sidedly decided to send soldiers to the temple, Gimlé had visited Tiwana for the express purpose of voicing his strong criticism of his ruler.

Percy had been among those reinforcements.

On top of that, Gimlé did not seem at all happy about the whole chain of events that had led to Lord Leo driving back Allion’s army.

“How is this heroic? It only on the surface that things miraculously ended well; in fact, he’s sown huge seeds of discontent in Allion. And also in Dytiann, which had its troops annihilated,” this time as well, he forthrightly criticised the princely house.

When at that point, Percy joined Lord Leo’s personal guards, Gimlé was quite naturally not going to hold any positive emotions towards his daughter’s fiancé. And in all truth, Percy’s own feelings grew complicated whenever he thought of Liana.

I get where my parents are coming from, he sometimes thought. At the moment, I’m like a child who is delirious from fever. I can’t calm down. There are just too many things going on. So I should plant my feet back on the ground for a while, and reconsider again after cooling my head for a bit.

It would be fine for him to become an assistant to his older brother, who would one day be head of the family. Enlisting in the prestigious Royal Guards would also be good. As would be receiving a subsidiary castle from Lord Gimlé and going to live there with Liana.

But when all those possible paths leading to bright, golden futures were confronted with the thought that *I will walk alongside Lord Leo*, they

immediately faded into colourlessness, cracked, and were crushed and scattered into a thousand tiny pieces.

There were certainly no mapped-out paths to where travelling with Lord Leo would take him. There would be chaos. There would be ups and downs. Perhaps his future itself would be shortened as a result. And that was why Percy thought it was *interesting*.

Compared to burying himself in a predictable future, it would be far more interesting to walk towards an unknown one, following a path that was shrouded in darkness so thick that he could not see even a single step ahead, and in which Leo Attiel was the only guiding light.

The young Percy's heart swayed time and again but, in the end, and to the very last, that one thought did not change. Taking several dozen retainers of the Leegan family with him – most of whom had fought alongside him at Conscon Temple – as a gift, he enlisted into the personal guard.

A ceremony was held on the day of the guards' inauguration. Several hundred soldiers, led by Leo, who was clad in brand-new armour, marched in a parade into Tiwana Palace. Leo stopped before Magrid, who was sitting on the throne in the audience chamber, removed his helmet, and placed it at his feet, while behind him, all of the soldiers knelt in unison.

Magrid rose from the throne and stepped forward. Leo knelt before him and took hold of a precious sword, inlaid with gold ornamentation, the tip of which he pressed against his own chest. Magrid placed his hand on the hilt. Leo did not move. *If my life displeases my lord, please push this blade forward and end it*, was the declaration being made.

Instead of thrusting the sword into his son's heart, Magrid stooped and kissed the hilt. After which, he once more took hold of sword and returned it to the scabbard at Leo's waist. The meaning of those actions was *I am entrusting you with a part of the power I hold as sovereign*.

The nobles and high-ranking commanders who had gathered in the audience hall in their ceremonial clothes all clapped. With that, the Personal Guards were formally instated. – Though this became something of an object of mockery in Tiwana Palace.

First of all, although Leo Attiel wore golden armour which covered him from tip to toe, it did not suit his slender silhouette. Nor was it just an outward impression: it actually wasn't fitted to his size. Normally, the helmet and armour should have been especially made to order for Leo, but he himself had turned down the idea, saying that "It's only a formality. I don't want too much being spent."

Instead, as there were any number of old sets of ceremonial armour lying unused in the treasury, he had chosen suitable pieces from among them, but since there had been no rehearsals before the ceremony, all sorts of flaws were discovered right before the actual performance. The torso was a little tight, whereas around the waist and from his ankles down, it was too loose, and cloth had to be stuffed into the chinks. Because of that, however, Leo's gait as he walked was a little strange. Every time he took a step forward, the helmet noticeably jiggled up and down, and it comically looked as though it would go flying off at any moment.

Nor was it just Leo: the soldiers also attracted ridicule. Since they were a mish-mashed unit which had been hastily cobbled together, they marched without any kind of coordination, and on top of that, some of them had been mere farmers or merchants until just very recently. It was their first time setting foot inside the palace, so all of their attention was taken by wondering at the interior and at the crowds of people, which led to them accidentally and repeatedly kicking whoever was in front of them, prompting those around them to want to laugh.

"Oh my, truly a gathering of mighty warriors." Sarcastic comments flew.

And while everyone laughed, it felt somehow as though they were returning to their senses after having seen an illusion. When they had first heard of how Leo had defeated Allion, it had been like something out of a heroic tableau, but now he was before them in the flesh and in armour, accompanied by soldiers who were obviously amateurs.

It seems that just as the rumours said, there must have actually been very little fighting.

Maybe it's true that Allion retreated when they realised that Atall was taking

part and that Dytiann was prepared to intervene.

They lost interest.

Stark Barsley was also within the crowd. Once the inauguration ceremony had ended, he headed for the antechamber which Leo had withdrawn to. Just as he was about to offer his greetings –

“Oh! Lord Stark. It’s been a long time,” flushed and sweaty, and having just removed his armour, Leo sat up.

They had not seen each other since he had been sent to Allion as a hostage. For a while, they exchanged stories about when Leo was young.

“Ah, but Your Highness is no longer the little master from back then. Your Highness Leo, once again, many congratulations on both your recent military exploits and on the inauguration of your Personal Guards.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Well then, now that you have soldiers of your own, what does our gallant Lord Leo intend to do next?” Stark broached the main topic on a joking tone. “Will you be delivering the finishing blow to Allion? Or will you be seizing Shazarn, now that rumours say the country is in turmoil?”

“Hmm, indeed. First of all...”

“First of all?”

“I’ll start with building work.”

“Building work?”

As the startled Stark watched, Leo finished changing his clothes and started to leave the antechamber.

Well, we can continue to talk while eating somewhere, thought Stark, as he hurriedly chased after Leo.

“W-Where are you heading, Your Highness?”

“To Guinbar.”

What?

“There are a number of building works that need to be done. Sir Stark, thank you for going out of your way to be here today. Let’s arrange an opportunity to talk together at leisure at some point.”

Leo left the palace with the soldiers who had just taken part in the ceremony and Stark was left reeling from surprise. The ‘building work’ that Leo had mentioned was the construction of barracks to house the hastily established Personal Guards. The first thing to do was to have them built in the two castle towns of Tiwana and Guinbar. While lodging there, they would be assigned tasks such as undergoing military training, acting as guards, going on patrols and so on. In one go, they had essentially become professional soldiers.

Up until then, every time there was a war, Atall would hire mercenaries, call up militias, or have the various noble Houses send a few dozen of their retainers. Aristocrats who held lands had to call up soldiers from the villages and fortresses dotted around their domains, which created problems in terms of coordination and mobility in an emergency. Leo had long observed the problem, which was why he intended to have his soldiers live in groups throughout the castle towns, and have them perform daily combat training with their units, in an attempt to develop a mobilisation system that was close to Allion’s in terms of skill and efficiency.

It was clear that Leo hoped to one day extend the system throughout all of Atall, and that he intended to first test it out by using his Personal Guards. This would, of course, cost money. Which was why Leo had pleaded with the vassal-lords, and also why Stark had suggested to the sovereign-prince that they be asked to contribute, so as not to overburden the national treasury.

Most of the nobles forked out the money, albeit unwillingly, as I mentioned earlier. There were some, however, who flatly refused to do so.

These were Darren Actica and Oswell Taholin.

“They’ve rejected the hero’s request again...” with just that, their reputation plummeted in their home areas. Yet when the order to contribute had come from the sovereign-prince, they responded with the same plausible excuses that they had used to reject Leo’s plea – “We would very much like to cooperate, but the financial situation in our domains is regrettably strained. We

will take part later, when we have a bit more surplus.”

After the ceremony, Leo behaved himself. He went back and forth several times between Tiwana, the capital, and Guinbar, Savan Roux’s territory. He inspected the construction of the barracks in both towns, kept an eye on how building-work was progressing on the church at Guinbar, and personally went to observe the soldiers as they trained until the sweat was pouring off of them.

Stark would occasionally accompany him. Leo naturally had his own thoughts about this elderly retiree who was suddenly drawing close to him, but he never openly said a thing.

“You’ve come again?” he greeted him. “The elderly seem to have plenty of time on their hands. I would love to hear about your experiences and learn from them, Sir Stark. But please keep them to a length that won’t bore the young.”

Their relationship had even turned into one which allowed him to make those kinds of jokes. And yet –

He really isn’t very good at shortening the distance with people. Stark inwardly appraised him. *Maybe it’s because this comes after seeing His Highness Roy. It shows in stark contrast how poor he is at socialising.*

Leo did not only travel between Tiwana and Guinbar: very soon after his Personal Guards were instated, he had gone once to Conscon Temple. He had wanted to see how it was doing after Bishop Rogress’ death and now that it was working to rebuild. At the same time, he had gone to see Camus, the warrior monk who had fought against Allion alongside him, and Camus’ little sister, Sarah.

“It is good to see you in good health, Your Highness.”

Camus had been promoted to being an aide to the temple’s bishop. There didn’t, however, seem to be any particular difference in his appearance, including in the clothes he wore. He still wore chainmail under his monastic robes, and grasped a spear in his hand.

When he heard that Leo had been assigned a personal guard, his eyes sparkled.

“Just what I’d expect of you, Your Highness. You are steadily progressing towards your goal. Well then – I will of course also be joining your troops, right?” he said as if to confirm it.

Leo gave a low hum as he gravelly shook his head.

“You’re now a person of importance at the temple. Rather than having me involve you in the trivial, worldly matters, don’t you think it would be better for both you yourself and for the temple if you concentrated on its reconstruction, and put all your energy into supporting the new bishop?”

“W-What are you saying? Of course I will give my all to rebuilding the temple and assisting the bishop, but I am not the sort of man who would begrudge offering my life for you, Prince. If we’re talking about the temple’s future, then I believe that we must implement the ideals that you once talked about so as to demonstrate our military might to our surroundings, and to build up our influence. For that, I, Camus, am willing to face death as many times as I need to, and I am ready to have my bones crushed in order to repay you the debt we owe you.”

“Actually, my big brother finds it boring to be secluded in the temple,” shrugged Sarah, who was standing next to him. “Now that he’s become such a great man, he leaves all his holy duties to others, and spends his entire time training with his spear. There isn’t a single day when you don’t see steam rising from his muscles. Honestly, given that he jabs at them so much, just how many times a day do the gates of Heaven open? A thousand times? Or maybe ten thousand?”

“W-W-Who is it that you’re saying neglects their holy duties? Even though now that Bishop Rogress has passed away, everyone here has carved his last wishes into their heart, and is pushing forward every day... Sarah, you might be my little sister, but you’ve gone too far.”

“Yeah, yeah. Now that you’ve become so great, you’ve also become even more pompous than before. Lord Leo, whether it’s to the battlefield or to certain death, please take my brother wherever you feel like. It will be refreshing not to have him around hurting my ears.”

The prince laughed to see that the two of them were the same as ever.

“I was joking, Camus. What kind of Personal Guards would they even be if you weren’t part of them? You’ve also got your work at the temple, so I’m sure it’s going to be tough on you, but I’ll be counting on you from here on as well.”

Relieved to hear those words, Camus finally cheered up again. He looked as though he might seize his spear at any moment to go and thrust it somewhere a thousand or ten thousand times to release the fiery energy that had been accumulating inside him, which earned him his sister’s heartfelt disgust.

Still, Leo’s goals were not confined to observation and meeting his friends again, and he had brought part of his Personal Guards with him. As part of their duties, they would be stationed at the temple and in the outskirts of Guinbar, to allow them to feel the tension of being somewhere where actual combat had taken place.

Nothing actually happened afterwards though, and the hereditary retainers, the vassal-lords and others simply saw it as “the prince is playing around with his new toy.”

Having observed Leo from close up, Stark was not as quick as the other nobles to draw that conclusion. With his ever-present relaxed expression, he took the tea that Sarah held out to him.

“Oh my, it was well worth leaving the countryside to be offered tea by such a beautiful nun,” his face broke into a smile as he accepted the cup.

It was on that occasion that news reached Atall about Allion and Dytiann, the two countries which lay east and west of it, which were also the two powerhouses whose antagonism had come to head during the battle around Conscon Temple. There had apparently been a number of letters and messengers going back and forth between them, but this time, they had arrived at the point at which a meeting would be held between representatives of both countries. Moreover, those attending would not be nobodies.

For this reason, they would not be meeting in either of their two lands, and it was said that wished to hold the conference in a place halfway between them, in Tiwana, the capital of the Principality of Atall, a country which was also connected to this issue.

And lastly, both Allion and Dytiann had nominated Leo Attiel as a witness to

the meeting.

Part 3

Time and time again, throughout history, the small countries covering the entire region had been compelled to come together and form an alliance centred around Dytiann Cathedral so as to defend themselves against an outside threat.

About half a century earlier, these countries had joined hands in the face of an invasion from the north. Since the war had dragged on for longer than expected, they were inevitably forced into forming a strong connection and a prolonged alliance. To the outside world, this powerful league of countries, tied together as it was by religion, soon seemed to be a single organisation, and it came to be referred to by others as the “Dytiann Alliance”.

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The Papal States expanded from around the cathedral – which, from that point in time, came to be known as the Holy See – and the Church organisation based in those states seized suzerainty over the other countries.

After more than ten years of war, the alliance achieved victory, or at least a respite, against the north. Soon after, however, the Pope succumbed to illness. This caused repercussions of a different sort from the invasion. Previously, the

papal throne had gone no further than providing spiritual and moral guidance, but after the birth of the 'alliance', its authority was no longer merely moral, and it had become the very real ruler of a group of vassal states. Consequently, the struggle for succession to the papacy was now of a completely different nature than it had previously been.

Each country competed both openly and covertly through political influence, military might and information gathering. Before long, a succession of quarrels broke out. The Holy See should have brought them to an end, by sheer force if necessary, but those within it were instead accepting bribes from the various countries, and corruption gradually grew widespread. There were even some cases in which they used the conflicts to build up their own personal funds.

Any who disagreed with this were thrown into secret jails without being given a chance to defend themselves, and were burned at the stake without any official trial.

Popular discontent grew greater and greater. Violence against officials from the Holy See broke out in one town after another. When the Papal States' independent army carried out 'purges' in response, the fires of rebellion against the Holy See finally blazed bright throughout the lands.

The various countries who had fought over who should sit on the papal throne were deeply divided into two camps.

On the one hand, there was the 'Church Faction', which was currying favour with the Holy See by supporting it, and which was trying to seize power as a religious state, on the same model as the current regime. Opposing it was the 'Rebel Army', for whom the enemy was the none other than the present Holy See, and which wanted to establish a new Church power.

Among those who joined the rebellion, be they the great or the humble, there are many who are still praised as heroes even to this day. And the most representative of all were the 'Yanos Brothers', Mordin and Wymer.

They were originally from a poor village, but Wymer, the younger brother, had been given to the local church from a very young age, where he had demonstrated outstanding academic ability. He first became a page to the local lord, then from there he rose to become the secretary to an influential

aristocrat, and was eventually employed as a steward in charge of managing estates. Since the noble family who employed him was part of the anti-Church faction, Wymer had joined the rebellion from the very start, and had manoeuvred to thwart the Church faction's plans and to prevent interventions from other powers. He had also made full use of his inborn talents by launching a propaganda campaign to win over the masses.

The manoeuvres that Wymer set up proved effective, and the anti-Church faction obtained tremendous support from the people, while also scoring one victory after another against the Church faction.

At around about that same time, Mordin, who had remained in their native village, caused an uproar. He was still only a mere farmer at the time, but he was built along massive lines, and he had always been absurdly strong.

One day, an official who was in with the Holy See came to visit the village, on the pretext of 'making an inspection'. In reality, however, he had come to con the gullible villagers with a fake get-rich-quick scheme; claiming that they would need initial capital to start, he lent them money at illegally high interest rates. When the villagers were unable to repay him, he mercilessly seized their lands and fields. Those who resisted were roughed up by marauding soldiers who had been hired with Church money.

Mordin's father was also among those who were assaulted, and he was beaten until he couldn't stand anymore.

Mordin flew into a rage. He hid himself in the surroundings of the church which served as the marauders' base and, when some unlucky soldiers in groups of one or two happened to be loitering around, he caught them, dragged them into a clump of bushes, and beat them to death, before taking their swords, armour and other equipment from them.

When the soldiers, unsure of what was happening, cautiously showed themselves, Mordin and a few of his friends, wearing the equipment that he had stolen, ambushed them and slaughtered all thirty of them, as well as every one of the officials who had been staying at the church. This provoked the Holy See's fury, and they put together a full-scale subjugation corps.

With no means left with which to fight, Mordin had already resigned himself

when his younger brother Wymer heard of his native village's plight, and dispatched a troop from the rebel army.

After an impressive battle and with the help of his powerful allies, Mordin magnificently routed the subjugation corps. Shortly thereafter, he too joined the rebel army.

Just as the younger brother excelled in negotiations and scholarship, the older brother had a military genius that was now allowed to flourish.

He achieved countless exploits on the battlefield. According to rumour, while he himself was talented, he could not shake his air of rugged simplicity, which reeked of country bumpkin, and which seemed completely at odds with his aura of a hard-bitten fighter. This exerted a strange fascination on people, and prominent warriors gathered around him one after another, with the result that Mordin accomplished those feats in battle.

About ten years after the previous pope had died, and five years after the rebellion flared up, those who belonging to the Holy See, as well as those supporting them, were expelled from the cathedral. They now became the 'Old Church faction', while the rebel army turned into the 'Current Church faction'.

That was when Mordin and Wymer were given the family name 'Yanos'.

The Yanos brothers included, the volunteers enlisted in the rebel army entered Dytiann Cathedral, in what had once been the Papal States. The civil war, however, had yet to be entirely suppressed. Another five years passed, during which Mordin became the supreme commander of the armed forces, yet even after taking the cathedral, he continued to lead his troops to hunt for the remnants of the Old Church faction.

Wymer, the younger brother, whose skills were highly valued, had carried out the role he had been given as diplomat, tasked with hindering any southwards progression from the northern countries during this time of internal strife. He was at the forefront of things when the Church was being completely reorganised and was eventually able to seize the position of its leader, appearing all the while as though he had been pushed into it by the army volunteers.

As it would have seemed arrogant to call himself "pope" at that point in time,

he went no further than “head archbishop”.

Mordin, the older brother, as supreme commander of the army, and Wymer as head archbishop – it could be said that the Yanos brothers were, for all intents and purposes, the rulers of the Dytiann Alliance. Such was Dytiann.

After the events at Conscon Temple, the upper echelons looked for every possible way of avoiding a confrontation with Allion. If you put all of its territories together, Dytiann’s power was considerable but even so, the civil war had only just subsided. Everyone in the higher levels of government recognised that it was still too early to take on such a truly powerful country as Allion.

After more than three months of exchanging letters and messengers, Allion’s side finally showed signs of caving. It looked as though things had quietened down among Allion’s hot-blooded, swaggering young warriors who had clamoured that “Dytiann must be destroyed”.

Both sides would send envoys to talk with each other. The purpose was, of course, to build a road towards mutual reconciliation.

The meeting was to be held in Atall.

Now that a place and time had been announced, the eyes of its people were on Allion, so they would be doing things seriously. Dytiann would also need to send weighty representatives. But if they made a mistake in their negotiations, if they inadvertently made too many concessions, they might be branded as ‘incompetent’. However, having said that, if they were too firm, they might cause the worst possible outcome: a war between two influential countries.

Who on earth should we send to this? Within the Church, opinions were in chaos.

From the residential area, with its rows of private houses, you had to cross a long bridge to enter Dytiann’s cathedral.

In the past, the way to the cathedral had been made deliberately tortuous, and you had to cross over three separate bridges to enter. Moreover, tolls had been collected on each one of them. Not even the clergy was exempt.

The Yanos brothers had all of those bridges destroyed and replaced with this one long one. It was decorated at regular intervals with carvings of angels and saints. There had been plans to create images of the heroes who had risen to fame during the rebellion – although the present Church referred to it not as a ‘rebellion’, but as a ‘crusade’ – but these had been halted at Wymer’s urging.

Bishop Baal was crossing the bridge, sitting astride a horse. His long hair was a colour that was close to grey, and his nose was aquiline. His figure was gaunt but, being a diocesan priest, he was known as a man of dignified demeanour. In fact, once upon a time, he was a man who exuded so much vigour that the other priests and deacons would hurriedly clear the way for him.

Now, however, after crossing the bridge and leaving his horse at the stable, Baal hunched his shoulders and concealed his face, as though wanting to hide himself from people’s eyes. This was because the plan to send reinforcements to Conscon Temple had been drawn up at his suggestion. The idea had been to use the temple, as well as Atall if at all possible, to gain a foothold that would help them obstruct Allion’s ambitions to the east. Yet when you looked at the actual results, Arthur Causebulk, the commander of the Sergaia Holy Rose Division, had been killed by an Allian general, and the upper echelons were racking their brains to find a way to repair relations with Allion.

It was hardly surprising that Baal’s shoulders stooped.

Once he entered the church’s precincts, he had the impression that he was being laughed at from every corner.

They say that Bishop Baal over there was acting like some great tactician when he made that suggestion.

Lord Mordin, who supported him, must also be feeling terribly disappointed. How dare he actually come here?

He felt like the monks who lowered their heads to him, the servants who treated him courteously, and even the little pages drawing water from the well were all hurling scorn at him behind his back.

Baal felt utterly wretched. At the same time, he was enraged at those who spent their time mocking and judging others without ever putting themselves in danger. And then, whenever he thought of Arthur’s death, it was as though his

grief was tearing him apart, limb from limb.

Shame. Anger. Sorrow. How many times had these emotions tormented Baal since Arthur's death? And although they whirled confusedly within him, in the end, they always blended into one and formed another, distinct emotion. Hatred. Or, to be more accurate, the urge to kill.

It was the same now.

Perhaps because the seething bloodlust radiating from him was so easy to sense, the sneers and gazes turned towards him all receded at once. The hatred and murderous impulse that Baal was consumed by was not, however, turned against anyone in Dytiann.

Only one man's face was on his mind as he passed by the side of the cathedral, walked on without stopping at buildings which looked like lodgings for pilgrims, and arrived at an edifice along the wall that seemed to be a private residence. He climbed the stairs, passing by more monks as he did so, and arrived at Mordin's office.

The door had been left open. There were several guards on either side, and when they saw Baal, their expressions turned sour and their eyes signalled to him to "wait a bit".

He soon understood why, as a scathing voice could be heard from inside.

It was definitely not that of Mordin Yanos, and belonged instead to his younger brother, Wymer. Since that voice could occasionally be heard addressing someone as "Brother", it was unmistakably Mordin that Wymer was one-sidedly lecturing.

Really not a good time... An annoyed expression flitted across Baal's face, but since the two *de facto* rulers of Dytiann were in the middle of a discussion, he could not enter. He stayed waiting outside for a while.

Simply from hearing that voice, Baal could clearly picture what the two of them looked like right now. Since he had long served a domain lord – after the success of the rebellion, the troops that lord had lead were given the name of 'Sergaia Holy Rose Division' – Baal himself had joined the rebel army, and had met the Yanos brothers almost immediately after doing so.

Even though the brothers could roughly be described as the older being a warrior and the younger an intellectual, in terms of height, the younger was also the taller of the two. From the top of that great height, he was berating his older brother in that ever shrill and piercing voice of his. Said older brother was probably deeply ensconced in his chair, with his arms folded and his eyes shut as he remained silent. Mordin Yanos was known to be a taciturn man. He never spoke any more than was absolutely necessary. And, of course, he never spoke a single word in joke, so it was said that even those serving closest to him had never even seen him smile.

“When we won the Holy War and had to present a new model for the Church faction, it was utterly preposterous that your wife was a pagan. Why won’t she be baptised?” Wymer kept coming back to the same thing.

Mordin gave no reply.

“And anyway, having her celebrate pagan ceremonies is a real problem. You already have two daughters with that woman. Could you please try to look at things from a wider perspective? Brother, as supreme commander of the crusader army, you need a suitable wife. And by that, I mean someone who will be the first to kneel before God’s teachings, who can serve as a role model for the people, and whom it would be suitable to call the mother of the nation. Don’t tell me you don’t already know that.”

Once he was done delivering his repetitive complaint, Wymer left the room. His archiepiscopal robes were embroidered with gold and silver thread and, having only just finished his solo performance, his skin was faintly glistening with sweat.

Wymer’s eyes met Baal’s for a brief moment. Although he was an archbishop, he was still only in his forties, so his age was not so different from Baal’s. Yet with his great height, it felt as though he was lording it over the kneeling Baal from far above.

Although he had certainly seen him, Wymer completely ignored Baal’s greeting.

“Oh, and one more thing,” apparently, he still hadn’t said enough, since he threw his high-pitched voice back into the room. “Recently, haven’t you been

gloating about how the people close to you have taken to calling you 'king'? No, I know that you've never called yourself that, but even so, Brother, you should be actively putting a stop to it. When others call me 'pope', I kneel with my forehead to the floor before them, and I would wear my knees to the bone in shame at having others unjustly suspect my intentions. Our Dytiann doesn't need a 'king'. You should be more than well enough aware of that."

After that, without sparing Baal a single glance, he left with the guards who had been waiting outside the room. The matter of Conscon Temple was something that Baal had suggested to Mordin, who had one-sidedly approved the plan, without consulting his younger brother. Right after that incident had ended in failure, Wymer had likewise gone to his brother's office, and, exactly as he had just done now, had sermonised him at length.

As far as Wymer was concerned, Baal was no more than a man who "does things that are completely uncalled for simply to toady up to my brother". As such, his stance was that he didn't need to pay any more attention to Baal than what was absolutely necessary.

Baal felt faintly angry, but he quickly corrected his expression and asked for Mordin's permission to enter the room. The only answer he received was a grunt.

Which indicated that permission had been granted.

Baal stepped into the room. Mordin was sitting in exactly the position that he had earlier pictured him as being in.

Mordin Yanos was a man who held countless titles of every rank throughout the lands of Dytiann, starting with Supreme Commander of the Crusader Army, Captain of the Church Cavalry, Bishop of the Church, and continuing up to being the domain lord of several regions. Yet his appearance seemed completely at odds with all those magnificent titles and the many glorious feats he was said to have accomplished during the 'Holy War'.

Those with malicious tongues claimed that, *originally, his face was longer, but the Geblin tribe crushed it flat from top to bottom with their inhuman strength.* His heavy eyelids made him look perpetually sleepy, his nose looked as though it had been squashed into the middle of his face after taking a blow from an

iron ball, and his lips were thick and long.

On top of that, as I mentioned previously, he had a taciturn personality. Before Mordin rose to fame, those who met him would at first believe he was mute. *Just what remote countryside does this bumpkin come from? They say that in the northern lands, where the winter is harsh, there are villages of serfs who can barely understand human language – did he run away from there?* Apparently, quite a few people imagined something along those lines.

When Baal offered him his greetings, Mordin nodded with another grunt. He sent a glance towards the private secretary who stood at his side, and the old man, who was as desiccated as a withered tree, brought over cups of wine. Baal only drank enough to just moisten his lips. The aroma was quite strong.

After that, Mordin continued to barely speak at all. Through who knew what kind of mutual understanding, every time Baal said something, the secretary would smoothly give a reply after receiving an eye signal from Mordin, whose expression barely changed throughout. This made him look all the more slow and stupid, but those within Dytiann – Baal included – who knew his personality were well aware that his appearance was deceiving.

Yet even Mordin raised his eyebrows slightly at the proposal that Baal put forward.

Even though Wymer had declared that he would be in charge of selecting who would attend the conference with Allion, Baal completely ignored this and announced that “I wish to go myself.”

Moreover, he went even further and said –

“If at all possible, I would like you to come with me, Your Excellency.”

The private secretary stayed quiet for a while, and instead, it was Mordin himself who answered in his somewhat hoarse voice –

“To Atall?”

“To Atall,” Baal nodded vigorously. “As I have written in several letters, the enemy we now most urgently need to confront is not Allion. The only target we should be focusing on is Atall. They are enemies to God, who schemed against us and used Allion to bring Arthur to his death. Because of that, we need at all

cost to avoid any kind of strain in our relationship with Allion. Your Excellency, we are weak and need your help.”

Chapter 2: Readyng Weapons while Smiling like Gentlemen

Part 1

The conference would take place after both sides had finished taking their breakfast together.

The location was in the outskirts of Tiwana, the capital city of the Principality of Atall, and, more specifically, in a castle built by the youngest brother to the previous sovereign-prince, in a village where had chosen to establish himself. A long table had been set up in one of the castle rooms, on either side of which the representatives from Allion and Dytiann faced each other. Presiding in the seat of honour was the witness from Atall.

Dytiann's delegation consisted of Mordin and Bishop Baal.

When they had received reports, a month earlier, that "Mordin Yanos might be attending," Atall had been abuzz. He was very much a big-shot. This was the man who held command over the entire military of the Dytiann Alliance, and rumours claimed that he was now calling himself "king". He had ridden to Atall on a gorgeously decorated air carrier.

Opposite them sat Aventa Navarro, who was the younger brother of Allion's king, Hugh-Jarl Jamil, as well as Administrative Deputy-Secretary for the capital city.

With him was also the greatly-experienced Hawking Ingram.

According to the rumours which had been floating about, Hawking had been

unwilling to come to Atall, claiming that he was, after all, “practically retired”. He had not, however, been able to refuse after being personally nominated by the king’s younger brother, Aventa.

Finally, the witness from Atall was Branton Attiel, the eldest son of Sovereign-Prince Magrid.

And next to him, with the position of aide to his brother, was the second son, Leo Attiel. He was nothing if not closely related to the incident at Conscon Temple, being the mastermind who had received assistance from Dytiann to defeat Hayden, the commander of Allion’s army. As such, he was more closely concerned with the matter at hand than any of the great men present.

As far as the sovereign-prince was concerned, he wanted Atall to remain strictly neutral throughout the meeting. Accordingly, he had not intended to let Leo attend, given that he was bound to cause trouble, but when both Allion and Dytiann nominated him, Magrid was unable to flat-out reject their request.

Behind Leo, who was sitting at the head of the table, was Stark. He was serving as an advisor to the assistant but, naturally, he had also been tasked with monitoring Leo.

Everyone introduced themselves and exchanged greetings.

The meeting started out comparatively peacefully.

To begin with, Dytiann’s stance rapidly became clear. While justifying themselves to Allion, they did not wish to seem unduly servile. When all was said and done, it was Allion which had first caused all the turmoil. Without any just cause, they had marched their troops towards what was a holy site for the Cross Faith, and so, if anything, Dytiann felt like they should be the ones denouncing the other party. Of course, however, they did not want to provoke a war by relying on that kind of emotional argument.

Broadly speaking, Allion was following the same lines as Dytiann. Although they were censuring Dytiann for having trespassed into their territory, they didn’t want to make it into anything bigger than it needed to be. However, since Dytiann had been caught violating their borders, public opinion in Allion would not accept it if they did not obtain at least one concession from Dytiann.

Skill was required from the representatives of both sides.

Dytiann insisted that: “Our sole purpose in dispatching our troops was to protect all of the believers at Conscon who share the same God as us.” This agreed with the explanation that Lord Leo had given to the king of Allion, about why he had sent reinforcements.

In other words, they were playing on the fact that their position was the same as Prince Leo, whom Allion had more or less forgiven. “We had no intention of invading Allion,” “there is no reason for you not to overlook our actions, just as you did with Lord Leo’s,” they petitioned.

Opposite them, Allion demanded explanations. “Well then, why did Arthur Causebulk cross the border?”

Incidentally, the one speaking for Dytiann was almost entirely Baal. Mordin would occasionally interject with a grunt, or give the very slightest of nods, but he did not speak.

On Allion’s side, only Aventa, the king’s younger brother, was talking – so excitedly that he was practically frothing at the mouth. Hawking’s expression remained uninterested from start to end. Once again, Aventa leaned forward towards those on the other side to press them for an explanation:

“Isn’t it absolutely obvious that you intended to attack Allion under cover of wartime fire from the temple?”

Bishop Baal replied,

“He was there only to create a distraction. As it took place on the battlefield, I do not have the full details, but I believe he intended to cut Sir Hayden’s attacking forces from their headquarters, and so chip away at their morale. Isn’t that right, Your Highness Leo?”

Although Leo was supposed to be an observer, Baal seemed intent on dragging him into things at this point. The tone he spoke in was mild, but his eyes were darting poison.

At that moment, Stark, pretending to pick up a sheet of paper which had fallen to the floor, whispered something in Leo’s ear.

“I do not know the full details either,” Leo’s answer was concise. “Although I too was certainly present on the battlefield, by the time I arrived at the temple, Sir Arthur had already been killed in battle. However... what the lord bishop has just said accords with what I later heard from the people at the temple.”

By presenting it as second-hand knowledge, Leo pulled himself away from the whirlpool of arguments he had risked being dragged into. In so doing, he also gave some measure of support to Bishop Baal, but Allion’s interrogation did not end there.

“I hear that in your country, there is a tendency to view Arthur as a hero? And that he is even being seen as a saint who ‘sacrificed himself for God’s teachings’. Are you aiming to exacerbate people’s hostility towards Allion?”

“Absolutely not!” Bishop Baal interrupted so forcefully that he was spewing spittle.

It was actually true that Arthur was being treated as a hero. Or, more accurately, it was true that the higher-ups in the Church were acting that way, so Allion’s concern was entirely reasonable. The aim, however, was not to stoke people’s fighting spirit.

Instead, the problem was Leo Attiel, whose fame was resounding throughout Dytiann. The people in those religious lands were singing the praises of the prince who had faced the mighty Allion in order to defend a temple of the Cross Faith.

“Why didn’t Dytiann do anything?”

“Surely the temple must have asked for help from Dytiann as well? But the top-brass in the Church are afraid of Allion.”

“To think that even a tiny country like Atall took action, even though it only has a distant connection with God’s teachings – the Church really is deplorable. Normally, they always look as though everything they do is in accordance with God’s will, and they’re quick to preach His teachings, but when they need to protect His devout followers, they just run away.”

The Church had come under repeated criticism. It hadn’t been so very long since the civil war had died down in Dytiann so, if, at the time, the situation had

developed into war with the mighty Allion, the people would likewise have been outspoken in their condemnation. Yet, for the same reason that the civil war was so recent, the Church feared nothing more than this sort of criticism.

Which was why it needed to loudly proclaim that, “our Dytiann fought to defend Conscon. This victory was not achieved thanks to Lord Leo’s courage or prudence, but instead owes far more to Arthur Causebulk, the commander of the Sergaia Holy Rose Division, who took action even at the cost of his own life.”

Allion’s side naturally understood these circumstances, it was just that they wanted the extra ammunition to fire at their opponents.

Given that everyone there understood the circumstances, nobody was remotely interested in Baal’s rebuttal. They all knew that nothing that was said was true. And naturally, for that reason, those who heard him were as impassive as walls, and Baal’s words merely bounced off them in vain. However

—

“Arthur left for the front on my orders.”

Everyone there turned their startled gazes in the same direction.

Towards Mordin.

He had one brawny arm stretched out on top of the table, and his other palm was placed on top of it. If Leo’s memory served correctly, he had remained in that same position since first entering the room.

“There is no cause for regret when a warrior bravely offers his life in a foreign land on the orders of his liege, and in accordance with the Divine Will. We were not especially holding him up as a hero, but merely asked that prayers be offered so that his soul could find peace. And the people simply responded to that call.”

The tone in which he spoke was low, but it was heard far more clearly than Baal’s raised voice.

A little after noon, they took a short break.

Once the representatives had left the room, Leo called Percy over to a corner

of the room.

“What do you think?” He asked briefly.

Percy had also been in the room from the start, mixed in among the pages, and so he had witnessed the full proceedings. He thought for a moment before answering.

“It looks as though both countries have their own circumstances to consider, and want to avoid an open confrontation. Both sides are attacking lightly while waiting in ambush for the opponent to make concessions.”

“Yeah.”

There was always friction between countries. They wished to avoid attracting hostility from other lands but, at the same time, if they appeared weak, then they would lose support from their own people. They constantly had to weigh in the balance the twin dangers of having other countries send troops against them, and of rebellion erupting from within.

“In Allion, fights are still breaking out in the wake of its wars of expansion. From what you hear, the king himself is constantly galloping off in all directions to suppress them or to act as mediator. Well, then again... rumours say that the king loves being personally present in battles and war.”

I can sort of see it – Leo was reminded of the king that he had only ever met once. Among Leo’s acquaintances, the one he most resembled was Claude Anglatt. Their positions and outward appearances were completely different, but they were alike in that they were both brimming with energy, and both seemed bad at staying quietly in one place.

“Meanwhile, in Dytiann, it has been five years since the civil war came to an end, but no doubt they want more time to consolidate their ground. It was certainly unexpected to learn that Mordin, the army’s supreme commander, would be coming here, but, from that alone, it is clear that they want to avoid a head-on collision with Allion.”

That a man in Mordin’s position had come in person was, in itself, a mark of Dytiann’s consideration for Allion.

“That being the case, how’s this meeting going to end?”

“In Allion, the notion of subjugating Dytiann will be brought up because of this. Those voices won’t be particularly loud since, thanks to Sir Claude’s ‘achievement’, they did not take any direct damage. Still, the king is as he is. And from time immemorial, retainers have taken their cue from their king’s personality. With the younger warriors at its centre, the momentum will build up.”

Percy’s reading was to prove accurate.

Once the meeting resumed after the break, Allion launched itself into an offensive. In contrast to earlier, it was Hawking who spoke.

“We would prefer not to have to listen to your country making long, drawn-out excuses again. We want firm promises. We would like you to guarantee to us that, from here on, Dytiann will sever all contact with Conscon Temple, and that you will not send soldiers to that area again,” he stated firmly.

Across from him, Baal grimaced. Conscon was conveniently located as far as Dytiann was concerned. If they could maintain their connection with it, it would make a very good defence if Allion made a push towards the east. Moreover, Conscon Temple was displaying gratitude towards Dytiann over the recent incident. If they could use that to build up their relationship, Conscon’s usefulness would further increase.

Besides which, there was also the loss of Arthur. Baal had known Arthur since the later had been a child, and he did not want his death to go to waste. In spite of himself, he became emotional.

“If it’s a matter of firm promises, then we want the same. And in the first place, if Allion does not send soldiers against the temple, we will have no reason to dispatch our own...”

While Baal looked ready to take up the fight, Mordin cut his words short by raising his hand.

Wow, what huge hands! Unconsciously, Leo opened his eyes wide.

Mordin was so huge that Leo really couldn’t compare, and even his face would probably fit several times over in the surface of Mordin’s own.

Baal was also startled and bit back his words. Just now, he had almost said

that *it's because you sent soldiers that we sent soldiers*, but that backward and forwarding of blame had already been endlessly exchanged through letters and messengers before the meeting had started, until both sides had grown tired of it. Which was what had led to both sides sending envoys to meet face-to-face.

If he repeated that childish exchange now, it would harm the authority and the whole meaning of this conference. After bringing Baal under control, Mordin seemed to swiftly reach a decision.

“We have no intention of bringing fights into holy grounds.”

The meaning behind those words was that he accepted Allion's request.

Having obtained the commitment they had asked for, Allion's side might have been expected to leave things at that for now. Yet if anything, Hawking, the veteran, did not stay his hand and attacked with such vigour that his earlier lack of enthusiasm for the meeting seemed impossible to believe.

“Then next...” he went on to add further stipulations.

Baal's expression changed once more. It wasn't just him: emotion even flitted across Mordin's face, which had so far remained expressionless. Hawking had suggested that Mordin go to Allion's capital and meet the king in person.

Of course, he did not go so far as to say that Mordin should offer obeisance to the king as his retainer, but the humiliation that he was going to force onto the commander of the crusading army was very close to that.

The problem was that Hawking's provocation was not only aimed at Dytiann; it was also meant for Atall, which had been contenting itself to act as a neutral party.

Percy's analysis had been correct, and neither Allion nor Dytiann wanted war with one another. However, Hawking's assessment was that *Atall will also want to avoid any deterioration in the relationship between its two neighbouring countries*. And it was with that in mind, and with the intention of observing Atall's attitude, that he had deliberately made a request that Dytiann would never comply with.

Will the observers from Atall try to soothe us, or will they try to persuade Dytiann?

Simply put, he was virtually holding a blade to their neck and demanding –
“Which side will Atall choose?”

Part 2

Not surprisingly, Branton, the official witness, was thrown into confusion. He half rose from his seat and looked first towards the crimson-faced Bishop Baal, then towards the proud-looking Hawking but, in the end, he sat back down again without saying a word.

At that point, Hawking turned his attention towards Lord Leo, who was sitting next to Branton. From his attitude, it seemed as though Hawking had only just noticed that he was there, but this was very much an act. If Hawking found anything worthwhile in this meeting which he otherwise had absolutely no interest in, it was the fact that he might be able to grasp Leo Attiel's personality.

Ever since withdrawing from the frontlines, Hawking had mostly been engaged in drawing up plans and gathering information. Through his own schemes, Hayden Swift had forcefully pushed the situation into his desired direction, and when Hayden had come to ask for his cooperation, those schemes had held a certain fascination for Hawking. He had even entrusted his own son to them.

Yet the result was that Hayden's troops had been crushed.

By Leo Attiel.

Just what kind of man is he?

More than anger, what he felt was curiosity. Because of that, Hawking had gone to Jester Castle when the king had met directly with Leo, to see what he looked like. And since what he looked like was a normal, insignificant boy, Hawking's interest had been piqued all the more.

Now then, what moves will you make?

He had felt a certain amount of anticipation, but, after all, Leo had kept quiet in front of all these powerful figures, remaining silent, with his eyes lowered.

Hawking had been somewhat disappointed.

Is he the kind of hothead who only shines on the battlefield? Or did he achieve those military exploits simply because his retainers had paved the way for him?

With Atall unable to say anything, Hawking had taken the opportunity to press Dytiann still further. Which was when Baal, whose emotions were at breaking point, made a slip.

“I-Isn’t it you who first attacked the temple for no reason at all? You’ve been calling for apologies and for His Excellency Mordin to go to your capital, but aren’t you forgetting your own position?” He blurted out the words that Mordin had earlier managed to get him to control.

Naturally, Hawking would not let that chance slip.

Branton hurriedly intervened as both sides started to get heated.

“I-If the king of Allion and His Excellency Mordin were to meet, how about doing so at a castle in Atall?” he suggested.

If Mordin went to Allion, it would be nothing but a humiliation for Dytiann, but if they met in neutral Atall, both sides would save face. It would have been much like this current meeting, but Hawking was intent on bringing shame to his opponents.

“I would appreciate it if you gentlemen from Atall would keep quiet. This is between us.” The authority with which he turned him down threatened to overwhelm Branton.

The meeting was turning stormy.

Needless to say, Hawking Ingram was not being serious. Allion, however, had sufficient room for manoeuvre, so *if they take it seriously, then fine.*

During the interview, Hawking had constantly been scrutinising the expressions worn by the representatives. The conclusion he had come to was that if the negotiations broke down now, neither Atall nor Dytiann had either the guts or the desire to mobilise their troops. Even if these talks were suspended, both of those sides would no doubt do everything they could to set up a new meeting.

Out of the three countries of Allion, Dytiann and Atall, it was after all Allion which was the most powerful. Although Hawking did want to avoid war, he also believed that it would not matter if these talks broke down. He was ready to rise from his seat and proclaim that “it will be too late for you to back down later!”

At the same time, however, *if there is one person we need to be careful about...* that was Mordin, who had come to take part in the meeting.

His presence at the talks was completely outside of Hawking’s predictions. Moreover, as he was, by nature, a man who was slow to express emotions, Hawking was having a hard time reading him.

He’s a man of high standing. If I push too much now, he might decide to go to war on nothing but his own authority. Now then, how will you navigate these stormy seas? Will you bring things to an end or will you self-destruct?

Hawking glared down at his surroundings, showing that he was prepared to leave if needs be, depending on what Dytiann and Atall would do. Baal was loudly arguing, but not a single one of his words was sincere, while Mordin remained silent, perhaps because he was hesitating. Branton was just looking around him in a panic.

Whereupon –

“Mordin, Your Excellency.”

Leo Attiel called out to Dytiann’s ‘king’. Having finally spoken after so long, what would he say?

“I am acquainted with the king of Allion. If you meet with him, I could come with you,” he offered.

For a moment, Hawking was as astounded as Stark, who sat behind the prince. Yet that quickly turned to gloating. *Oho, so Atall’s prince has chosen to support us and to try and persuade Dytiann? Well, as expected, he has an eye for things. Even if it causes friction with Dytiann, they can’t take on Allion.*

At that moment, Leo looked straight towards Hawking. And smiled.

“Would His Majesty the King be willing to meet with me a second time?”

“But of course. His Majesty, King Jamil, frequently praises your bravery, Lord Leo. He has been telling us until our ears burn that he wishes the men of Allion had even a fraction of your daring, so I have no doubt that he sincerely wishes to see you again, Prince.”

Hawking spoke as though he was stroking the head of a puppy which had come to be hugged. And yet –

“Is that so? Certainly, when I think about it, the king of Allion was a gentleman who was courteous even to a shallow youth such as myself. When I said that I very much wished to meet him in person, he said that he would hate to have me travel all the way to his capital city, and went out of his way to select a meeting point that was halfway between the Anglatt domains and the capital. Naturally, he will also be anxious to meet with His Excellency Mordin. And it’s none other than Atall which is the halfway point between Allion and Dytiann. Yet, Sir Hawking, for some reason, you don’t really seem to favour that solution. So in that case, where would be a good place?”

“Hah?” Hawking exclaimed somewhat foolishly.

What is this idiot of a prince talking about? What does he mean, ‘where would be good’? If anywhere within Allion would have done, I’d have said so from the start. The whole point for us is to have Mordin go to the capital. Does he want me to repeat myself?

“Ah, no, Prince... Please hold on.”

Given that it concerns our Allion and that Dytiann...

Hawking realised the meaning behind the smile that Lord Leo had maintained throughout. Leo had stated that “I will accompany Mordin,” and furthermore, he had asked, “Would the king be willing to meet me?” By confirming the latter, Hawking had agreed to the former. In other words, he had agreed that the Principality of Atall was not unrelated to this matter.

Bastard...

Just as Hawking unintentionally fell silent, Leo spoke again.

“I would like to confirm this with our guests from Allion. The Kingdom of Allion no longer lays claim to Conscon Temple, is that not right?”

“Naturally. Peace has already been concluded in our king’s name.”

What are you trying to do by going over all of this again, brat? Hawking scowled faintly at Leo, who did not turn his eyes away.

“Then that’s perfect. The land with the deepest connection to this matter is, of course, Conscon. His Majesty Jamil said that what happened was ‘an accumulation of misfortunes’. I share the same opinion. We must not risk repeating the same misfortune. Do you not agree that if the king of Allion were to go to Conscon, it would symbolically sweep away all of those misfortunes and misunderstandings?”

“Wait! You want our king to go to Conscon?”

“Yes,” Leo’s cheerful smile was unwavering. “If the king of Allion and His Excellency Mordin are to meet, there is nowhere more suitable. Isn’t that right? If they truly wish for peace, I hope that they will give it some consideration.”



Why Conscon of all places? Faced with Leo's beaming smile, Hawking Ingram chewed on the corner of his lip.

It was currently at peace with Allion but, obviously, it wasn't the sort of place in which the man who held supreme power in Allion – which had once led hostilities against it – would currently want to set foot. Conversely, Dytiann had sent soldiers to their aid, so the temple was sure to warmly welcome them.

The meeting between Mordin and the king is supposed to be a concession on Dytiann's part, but does he intend to turn it into a concession from the king of Allion by having him go to the temple? And more than that, since the prince is personally concerned with this, it makes it difficult for us to refuse.

While inwardly growling, Hawking outwardly presented an expression from which the interest was fading.

"Hmm, thinking about it, I'm not sure it's such a good idea."

He backed down. Which brought the talk about a meeting between 'kings' to an end. From the start, that had never been something Hawking was really aiming for. And with Allion pulling back from that issue, Dytiann was also more or less able to save face.

After this, Allion and Dytiann would follow the established route of continuing to exchange frequent messengers, and the talks came to an end.

Although all of those who had taken part in the meeting – including Stark Barsley, who had been observing closely from start to end – rose from their seats with calm expressions, all of them had but one name which similarly and deeply impressed itself upon their minds.

Conscon.

Hawking's expression had turned ugly when he heard that name, but on their way back to Allion, the ship he was riding on had no choice but to drop anchor for a while at the temple.

Soldiers who had been wounded in battle, and who had thus been slow to escape, were being held there as prisoners of war. Given that locking them up

was nothing but a burden in terms of time and money, those without status had been released. Those who were in any way prominent, however, had remained confined up until now.

It had been more than three months. Allion had deliberately ignored them in favour of investigating the relation between the temple and Dytiann. During the conference, Leo had promised Allion that they would be returned without any request for ransom.

Out of consideration for the feelings of those living on Mount Conscon, the air carrier landed some distance away from the foot of the mountain. Hawking himself had remained on board. “You go,” he had ordered one his retainers with a sour expression.

At the same time, the imprisoned captives were being let out of the building in which they had been kept, and were being made to stand in row. Warrior monks armed with spears and guns were keeping watch over them, with Camus at their head.

“You!” One of the prisoners of war shouted towards him in a violent – but unmistakably high-pitched – voice.

Looking at him, he was still young – probably about the same age as Kuon. However, unlike Kuon, who gave the impression of a somewhat feral child, this boy had a certain dignity in both expression and manner. Even though he had been held captive for over three months, it was clear at a glance that he was young but strong-willed.

“You’ve forgotten? I’m Randius!” Even though he was a captive, the boy puffed out his chest.

After thinking about it for a moment – *Ah!* – recognition seemed to dawn on Camus’ face, but he then proceeded to ignore the boy. That was how little importance he gave to him.

“You’ve got it now, right?” Randius, however, continued to talk in that voice of his which still had a trace of boyishness in it. “You were pretty good. Of all the monks at the temple, you were the strongest. That probably makes it even harder for you to have been defeated by me. You’re pretending not to recognise me and trying to look like it’s nothing big, but that’s just because you

don't want to admit how bitter you feel. I get it, I get it, you know?"

Camus pretended not to hear. The voice rose even higher into the blue sky.

"Did you all hear, warrior monks of Conscon? That man over there was defeated by me. And then, just before I could kill him, he managed to escape by having a sniper shoot at me. What a coward! Nobody with even the smallest knowledge of the art of fighting would act that way. Cowardly, underhanded and base a thousand times over!"

The spear in Camus' hand started to shake and, in the next moment, he had suddenly rushed up to Randius.

"Who's a coward? On the battlefield, taking you captive makes me the winner, getting caught makes you the loser. There's nothing else to it!"

"Shut up you pathetic fool who pretends to get your power from God. Both our wounds should have healed by now, so let's have another round!"

"Victory has already been decided. Look, they've come from your country to take you back. I don't care whether it's by ship or on horseback, but hurry up and leave these sacred grounds, you little cretin."

"Are you afraid of losing again, warrior monk? Actually, no – I've heard your name. It's Camus, right? If you're even half a warrior, have a rematch with me, one-to-one. If you don't, then don't think that battlefield is over yet."

Randius was still shouting. Just then –

"Please do so later, Master Randius."

The one who spoke was a man who had come for the prisoners, and who had already come up to the two of them. Not having been given a chance to explain himself, Randius' face flushed bright red and he turned to look at who had spoken, before suddenly exclaiming – "Ah!"

"Igor, it's been forever! Don't tell me you've been sent to fetch me?" Randius' face broke into a boyish smile. "Perfect timing. Give me your sword; I need to settle things with this guy."

"And I ask that you do so at some later time."

"What did you say? Even you – even though you've served Father for a long

time, if Father hears about this, he'll be furious. How can you not help his son wipe out his disgrace and..."

"Have you not heard about it?" The middle-aged man said with a grin. "I've just returned from Atall. I was waiting on your father, who was attending the conference with Dytiann."

"Father... Father came here?"

Randius' ruddy face underwent a complete transformation as the blood drained from it at an almost frightening speed. Igor bit back a smile.

"Your father is waiting for you at the ship. Now then, we mustn't take up too much time with these gentlemen of the temple. Young master, you know that Lord Hawking hates nothing as much as being kept waiting."

"I-I know," Randius had turned astonishingly meek. Still, as they were heading towards the ship, he turned once to look back.

"Camus! We'll postpone settling things for now," he did not forget to call out.

"What's with that young cub!"

Camus was snorting with indignation, as his sister came to stand beside him.

"It looks like you have a fated connected with that eligible young bachelor," she teased. "Wouldn't it have been better to bring things to an end? Couldn't you have settled it in a second?"

"I don't wield my spear for no good reason," Camus sullenly replied.

Just as Igor had done earlier, Sarah had to fight back a smile. Actually, nobody wanted to settle things more than her brother did. In that battle, Camus had fought like one possessed, but because of that, he ran himself into complete exhaustion, and it was when both his body and mind had reached their limit that the boy had challenged him. He had taken a cut to the leg and had been pushed back until he had been on the verge of losing his life, only to be saved by a bullet fired by Sarah.

I would never have been defeated by that kind of brat if I'd been in peak condition – there was no doubt that Camus, who fundamentally hated losing, felt that way. Which was why he had probably very much wanted to accept

when Randius had challenged him to a rematch.

But as one who followed God's teachings, he was desperately trying to convince himself that "On the battlefield, a win is a win."

It was because she understood his anguish very clearly that Sarah was so amused.

While Hawking and the others were returning to Allion, Lord Mordin and Bishop Baal were sailing back to Dytiann.

The two of them had spent their time in separate cabins but, having entered Dytiann's territory, they disembarked at a location some distance away from the cathedral. It was forbidden to ride up to Dytiann Cathedral in an air carrier, and Mordin was no exception. Or more accurately, it was Mordin himself who had created the rule.

People should not brazenly dance near the sky in those holy precincts, was the explanation that was given. The real reason, of course, was to protect the cathedral.

Mordin and Baal were jolted about in the same carriage as they travelled the road leading to it. For a while, the two of them remained silent but, when the sun had almost sunk out of view behind the forest, Mordin abruptly spoke up, startling Baal.

"The prince helped us out."

Seen from the side in the setting sun, Mordin's appearance was even more like a wild beast's than usual.

"He holds considerable talent."

"B-But, Your Excellency..."

"I know." Since Mordin was gazing straight ahead, seen from the side, it seemed as though he was just muttering to himself. "That's what convinced me. Just as you said, that young lord definitely pretended to request reinforcements and caught Arthur in a trap."

"Yes."

“Subjugating Atall will be a fitting pledge to offer to God. But, Baal...”

“I understand, Your Excellency,” Baal’s expression turned solemn.

There was no one else in the carriage. There was nothing to fear from the coachman either, as he was out of earshot. Yet even so, Baal lowered his voice still further.

“Now is the time for caution. So that very soon, Your Excellency will single-handedly hold all real power within the Church.”

After the representatives of Allion and Dytiann left Atall, the higher-ups decided that the talks had, at least for the time being, been a success.

Numerous voices rose in praise of Branton, who had skilfully served his role as a witness. Branton outwardly received those plaudits with modesty, saying that “I showed my face, nothing more,” but Percy, who had also been present at the meeting, was strangely concerned about Branton’s manner right after it had ended.

After both sets of envoys had left, he had walked up to Leo.

“You saved me,” Branton had said. “It’s a good thing you were there. Being deceived like that by Allion, we would probably have lost any chance of smoothing things with Dytiann.”

His words had been sincere. But for that very reason, Percy had been all the more aware of the unease in the smile that he had given Leo. There was no sense of jealousy or hostility towards his younger brother. Rather, it had seemed like he didn’t have the strength to smile. He seemed to be depressed.

Even so, Percy had no tangible cause for concern, so he did not speak about it. Instead, as they were leaving the castle which had served as the stage for the meeting, he talked to Leo on a different topic.

They had avoided any deterioration in their relations with Allion and Dytiann, but that was only on the surface. In fact, seeing the two of them together had highlighted that both sides had the same thought: *The present situation is as it is, but one day, this is an enemy we will cross swords with.* On this, at least, Leo

and Percy were in agreement.

“It felt a though even if right now their interactions are courteous, it would only take one chance opportunity for a massive war to erupt.”

“And when that happens, the blade will definitely fall on Atall,” Leo wore a thoughtful expression.

He did not say anything further, but Percy had learned to read this prince’s mind, even if only a little. *That means that we can’t be negligent in our preparations. Whatever direction the blade falls from, we can raise a shield overhead. And from the openings in the shield, we can thrust out a spear at any time.*

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Leo spoke again after a while.

“What is?”

“I’m not sure how to put it – Oh, right, for example: when I was living in Allion, I never imagined that I would meet people like Mordin or Hawking. Or, obviously, that I would watch them discuss their countries’ policies right in front of me. And that wasn’t a problem. There was nothing missing in my life, at least as far as being to able live it went.”

“Right.”

“But seeing them like that, watching as they tackle discussions that might involve entire countries in turmoil – I can’t believe that I used to live such a carefree life. Even though so many strategies are mapped out in this world, even though there are people who are like gods in that they’re playing a game far above the heads of the people and the soldiers, and who, with just a single word, can mobilise ten thousand, or a hundred men... I didn’t have even the slightest sense of crisis, and all I thought about were things like what was supper going to be that evening, what book would I read that night, or wouldn’t it be nice if tomorrow was sunny...”

Percy understood what Leo was trying to say. After all, he too had started to become aware of a similar sort of feeling to what the prince was describing.

“I also look with consternation on how I used to know nothing.”

“Right, consternation. And what I find especially appalling is that there are so few people who have that in common, here in Atall.”

Percy very much shared that feeling.

When taking their first step into society, it was common for young people to feel fearful of that world which was so much wider than anything they could have imagined, and that they were starting to catch glimpses of.

At the same time, they felt scornful of their previous, ignorant self. And simultaneously, some people would start to lament that *I'm the only one who understands*, and those laments were close to being a sort of superiority complex. In other words, they would look at the people around them and think forlornly “They live their lives without noticing a thing. How can they be so stupid and slow?” And they looked down in mocking contempt at everyone – their present self excepted and their old self included.

At that time, Leo Attiel was in a frame of mind that closely resembled that. And, as often happens when young men feel a sense of superiority, his desire to change the current situation as quickly as possible, even if it was only by a second earlier, invited impatience.

I have to make them understand, thought Leo. *Those fools who think that simply avoiding the pebbles that they can see in front of them is enough to protect themselves, their property and their country – I'll make them understand that war isn't something you see in front of you, that it's always lurking in the shadows underfoot. And I'll show them what they need to do to protect the people and their belongings.*

Part 3

Some of his time had been taken up by attending the high-level conference, but even so, after his Personal Guards were established, Leo continued to personally go on inspection tours in the villages, and to appoint youths. Exaggerated rumours sprang up about how “the prince is hunting for men,” and “where Lord Leo passes, not a single able-bodied man remains”.

A few days after the meeting, Leo held a large-scale kabat tournament in the grounds outside of Guinbar Castle. Those who qualified to take part were men above fifteen and beneath forty. That was the only requirement.

“Anyone who manages to win three times in a row will receive a reward,” Leo had his subordinates spread the information throughout the villages.

More rumours spread about the ‘man-hunting’ Lord Leo – “If you catch the prince’s eye, he’ll appoint you to his Personal Guards”. As a result, the number of participants swelled to a startling degree.

Since kabat was a form of grappling contest that originated in Allion, there was practically no one in Atall who had officially performed it. The good thing about kabat, however, was that the rules were simple and that it was fun to watch, even if the contestants were not particularly skilful.

The crowd got excited as those who took pride in their strength spectacularly collided with one another, and when those of less impressive physique made free use of inspiration and technique to topple those larger than them, the spectators roared their appreciation.

When one contestant valiantly managed to knock his opponents down one after another, they cheered that: “He’ll end up a great general.” When a soldier of slight build threw a large opponent, the praises swirled: “He’s got a talent for fighting.”

The tournament’s fame grew by the day, and more and more people came to

watch. As was common at the time, traders and prostitutes appeared wherever people gathered. Leo turned a blind eye to them. Bets on the matches started to take place between the spectators, but once the bookies had properly introduced themselves to him, Leo gave his tacit consent to them too.

At one point, though, an incident occurred.

Two young men who were clashing with one another in the circular ring made of piled earth were fighting with unusual ferocity. They repeatedly skirted close to breaking the rules with elbow strikes to the throat, or by striking their opponent's jaw with their shoulders. Upon inquiry, it turned out that the two of them were from neighbouring villages, and that those villages were constantly quarrelling and competing. The two of them were close in age, they were both wild, and, from the time they were born, they each seemed to have decided that the other was their 'arch-enemy'.

Even after the match was over, they continued to scuffle with no intention of stopping, until finally, other youths from the same villages also rushed into the ring, and a fight broke out among all of them.

"Prince, please step back!" The soldiers tasked with Leo's personal protection stepped forward to shield him.

Percy and Camus, who had only just arrived in Guinbar, entered the fray to act as mediators. With the Personal Guards also threatening the youths with their spears, the brawl finally died down, but Percy then suddenly realised that Lord Leo was no longer there. He had apparently returned to the castle, escorted by guards.

The atmosphere on the grounds turned strange.

Even at the best of times, tempers frayed easily, but the prince's absence threatened to spoil it entirely. Even if the matches continued, it didn't seem that there would be much enthusiasm. "Right," Percy threw off his leather armour.

"Everyone! I know that you don't know me, but I'm Percy Leegan, a spearman who follows His Highness, Lord Leo. Is there anyone who will be my opponent? I will recommend whoever defeats me to the prince," he entered the ring while shouting loudly.

“In that case, me too,” Camus also stripped the upper half of his burly body.

Percy and Camus’ names had spread since they were closely attached to Leo’s fame. The area abruptly started bursting with excitement.

Since Kuon was also nearby, Percy had been hoping that he would also step up but, for some reason, the boy had constantly been in a bad mood recently. He had been watching the kabat with a bored expression, and, perhaps because the earlier brawl had completely killed any enjoyment he had, he seemed to have left with the prince.

When Percy later returned to the castle, he addressed Leo in scolding tones,

“At times like that, shouldn’t the organiser turn around and come back?”

“But Percy, when there was that uproar, you were one of those shouting ‘Prince, withdraw’.”

“That was only supposed to be temporary. Without you there, Lord Leo, the situation was unstable. And because of that, look at me.”

Percy pointed to the cuts and bruises that covered his entire body. He had got them when breaking up the brawl, and in a series of kabat fights. Even the tip of his nose had been scrapped raw, and looked comically red.

“I see, I’m sorry,” Leo gave a slight frown and nodded. He got neither angry nor depressed, and simply seemed perplexed.

The prince displayed almost startling amounts of talent but, on rare occasions, one caught a glimpse of how lacking in experience he was. Since he had been left in a foreign country from when he was very young, he probably didn’t have a standard by which to measure the effect on others of the actions of someone in authority.

– The incident was only a small one, but the impression it left on Percy would be an unusually lasting one.

It had been two months since his Personal Guards had officially been inaugurated, and about half a year since the end of the battles around Conscon Temple. As new faces joined, Percy gradually came to be acknowledged as Leo’s right-hand man by those around them, while Camus, who was coming and

going between Conscon Temple and the Guinbar area, started to be known as a retainer who served as a link to the temple.

Yet – as I already mentioned earlier – the third hero who had once rescued Lord Leo from Allion’s territory, Kuon, the mercenary who came from the mountain lands, had been in a bad mood recently.

For a start, he had nothing to do.

He had, for now, joined Leo’s Personal Guards. However, there was no particular danger within the principality, and although, when the prince was moving around he did so without pause, when he stayed still, he did so for extended periods of time. Perhaps those times caused Kuon’s gloominess to increase, but he got into quarrels over the most trifling things with his fellow Guards and with the young men in the towns.

Honestly, not this again, sighed Percy.

When they had been fighting Allion at the temple, Kuon had often caused disturbances among his companions. Remembering how he had to run around and break things up each and every time, Percy decided that he needed to give Kuon something to do.

“If you’re free, won’t you supervise the training for the new recruits?” he asked.

Having no particular reason to refuse, Kuon accepted, but as he was taciturn and seemed to be bad-tempered, he did not have a good reputation among the recruits. More importantly, although they were ‘new’ recruits, the overwhelming majority of them were older than Kuon, and since he had not earned any particularly noteworthy achievements in the previous battles, an increasing number of people started to look down on this ‘instructor’.

At that point, Kuon’s bad mood also increased.

“If you’re not happy, then come at me!”

The fights he picked only grew more numerous.

Yet interestingly enough, Kuon never slacked off about training. Even though he tended to talk as little as possible, and his manner was a little rough, he

taught methodically. He was especially in-depth when it came to helping those whose physique was slightly on the underwhelming side, enthusiastically drilling them in how to choose a weapon, or how to use their size.

“When you tangle, it has to come from you,” he hurled his instructions. “If your legs are injured and you fall, it’s the end. When you take a blow, you absolutely have to pull back while your armour is deflecting it, and quickly move in to attack again from a different angle.”

It was obvious that he was familiar with teaching the art of fighting to others. Since neither Percy nor Camus had any experience with doing so, in that sense, Kuon was invaluable, and Percy often felt what a waste it was that he attracted so much criticism and displeasure because of his attitude.

“Kuon seems to be getting more irritated by the day. Do you know why?” Percy asked when Kuon wasn’t around.

He had approached Kuon several times to ask him what was wrong, but Kuon shot him down with a curt, “Nothing.”

“If that’s what’s worrying you, leave it to me,” Camus thumped his chest. “Kuon is my beloved disciple. Considering his personality, he’ll be stubborn at first, but with God’s love, I, his master, will pry open his hardened heart, and then surely, in a flood of passionate tears, he will lean his head on my welcoming chest and will honestly bare his emotions.”

Camus went up to Kuon, brimming with self-confidence.

“How about it, Kuon? Won’t you come to mass sometime soon? It’s nothing too formal. You only need to listen as the Holy Scriptures are read out loud, and immerse yourself in the atmosphere.”

First, he planned to use an indirect approach. He expected Kuon to answer with, “Shut up,” and to turn him down flat. And yet –

“Speaking of which, Camus, I’ve been meaning to ask you about it. God, that is.”

“O-Oh!” Camus’ voice was filled with emotion. Seeing Kuon so unexpectedly proactive, he only barely managed to avoid shedding ‘passionate tears’ of his own.

“I see, there are points you have been thinking of. No, no, there’s nothing remotely strange about it. It isn’t as though, when you enter the faith and offer your body and soul entirely to the Divine Love, all of your doubts and misgivings are cleared away. Instead, it means that you are standing at the starting point. Everyone hesitates and loses the way whilst walking it, and that’s why we need the help of mentors and of senior disciples. Indeed, the path of faith is a hard one, and it is not one that can be walked alone. Well then, Kuon, what is it? Think of me as an older brother to whom you can say anything.”

“Camus, it’s something you said earlier. Before our ancestors rode a huge ship and landed on this planet... I mean, on the planet they lived on before that, you said that the Cross Faith already existed.”

“That’s right. Our Master is the God which has been believed in for the longest time. His great works are...”

“I’ve been wondering about it since I heard it, but...” Kuon continued, cutting through Camus’ words. “That god is on the previous planet, and he’s also on this planet, so does that mean he also rode on the big ship?”

“W-What?”

“But if you think about it, isn’t it weird? Or is there one more god every time there’s another planet?”

“D-Don’t be stupid. God definitely isn’t the kind of being that you’re imagining. God... right, He dwells in the hearts of all who believe and resonates with them... No, wait. That’s wrong. I was going to just give you my interpretation. I am still a greenhorn. This isn’t a topic that can be settled with my words alone. Let’s put it on the agenda for the next reading session. And for that, I need to get the materials ready at once. Faith is truly profound...”

Camus’ mind was struck with a puzzle of its own, and his attention was entirely taken up by it. To put it simply, he proved completely useless.

Percy felt extremely foolish.

What a completely unreliable monk. He’s far more useful in fight. But anyway, about Kuon. Percy was fairly sure that he wouldn’t get anything out of him either. But if I ask him directly, it might just make him even more irritated. And it

will become difficult if he puts his guard up afterwards. I need to carefully remove the obstacles and give him as little provocation as possible, and take my time, without getting impatient, to edge my way closer...

He continued to worry over it. As bad luck would have it, though, Sarah had witnessed the whole series of events and, the day after her brother failed in his attempt –

“Kuon, everyone says you’ve been strange recently. Well, since it’s you, did you eat something which was lying about on the ground and get a stomach ache?” she approached Kuon so outspokenly that had he been there to see it, Percy would probably have felt faint.

“It’s nothing,” Kuon was as curt as ever.

Sarah became indignant.

“Yesterday, I thought the stray dog was getting tamer and attached to me, but today it goes and bites me.”

“What? Who’s getting attached to you? If you got close, even a puppy that hasn’t grown fangs yet would bite.”

“What did you say? Animals love me, I’ll have you know.”

Even though it was a metaphor that she had brought up herself, it was very much like Sarah to then take it at face value. Just as it looked like they were about to get into their usual quarrelling –

“It’s good to see you getting along.”

Normally, it was Percy’s role to get between the two of them, but just this once, it was Lord Leo who stepped in. Not surprisingly, Sarah quickly stopped talking while Kuon looked uncomfortable.

Leo Attiel sat down on the bare ground.

They could hear the voices of soldiers coming from the castle courtyard where they were training. Leo was on a leisurely inspection of them. He was watching as the young men fought with staffs to capture the others’ flags or broke in horses, when Kuon suddenly asked a question.

“When’s the war going to be... if I may be so bold as to ask?”

Leo looked surprised.

“War?”

“Since you’re training soldiers, there’s going to be a war, right?”

“Just because you’re gathering and training soldiers doesn’t mean a war is definitely about to break out,” Sarah giggled. “The prince is doing what he’s doing so that he’ll always be prepared for when a war does break out.”

“I get that,” Kuon bit out, as much as to say ‘don’t butt in’.

Sarah shrugged.

“It’s not like I don’t understand. You want to earn glory as quickly as possible. And in the last battle, you lost your chance to kill Hayden, right? It’s because you don’t have any achievements to your name that the recruits treat you like a fool. So I understand that you’re feeling impatient.”

“That’s not...” Kuon started to gnash out his words again.

“Percy mentioned something,” Leo’s gentle voice broke in between the two of them. “Kuon, he said that you clearly have experience in training recruits. That’s how good at it you are, you know?”

“That’s... On the mountain, that's just normal,” said Kuon.

The ‘mountain’ he was talking about was not Mount Conscon, but the place where he had been born and raised. Leo had heard from Percy that Kuon’s birthplace was the rugged land that lay south of the Kesmai Plains – an area which was called “the Fangs Mountain Range” on maps in the principality.

“Most of the young men in the mountains become soldiers. It’s only natural that the seniors teach the juniors who’ve been incorporated in the same unit. If they don’t, then the unit loses strength and they’re the ones who’ll be in danger.”

“What do you mean by ‘unit’? Are you organised in units from childhood in your mountains, Kuon?”

“The ‘unit’ is... Well, you’re right, but it’s more like something like a family. Most kids join the same ‘unit’ as their father, although there also cases where that doesn’t happen, but then... you know, they change their ‘surname’.”

Kuon's expression indicated that he was having a hard time explaining. Other than for martial arts, he wasn't used to explaining things to someone who knew nothing about them. But Leo patiently listened to him, while still observing the soldiers who were training.

"For example, I was called Kuon Wei. The one who looked after me was a man called Datta Wei. And because Datta was the strongest of the Wei's, he was the head of the 'Wei'. So if I left the 'unit', I'd have a different surname."

It wasn't simply that Kuon was bad at giving explanations, when he said the name "Datta Wei", his expression seemed pained. His past seemed to include some unpleasant memories, but Leo deliberately pretended not to notice.

"So, Kuon, you were trained by the people of the 'Wei Unit', and you also taught the younger 'Wei' children?"

"Those who were good with a sword taught the sword, for those who were skilled at archery, it was the bow, and if your strong point was marksmanship, you taught how to use guns."

"I've heard that you're good with all of them. You must have been given an important position. So, Kuon, if you hadn't left the mountains, would you have one day ended up leading the entire 'Wei' unit?"

"No," Kuon declared firmly. "That wouldn't have happened."

"Why not?" Sarah had been listening with considerable interest. Actually, since this was the first time that Kuon had talked about his birthplace, she hadn't been able to rein in her natural curiosity. "Although it pains me to admit it, you're strong, aren't you? Or else, is your 'mountain' full of apes all as skilled as you are?"

"Even if I'd won the festival, I probably couldn't have become Warrior Raga."

"Who's Raga?"

"The strongest warrior on the mountain. He was a swordsman said to have been granted the shape of a beast by God to expel evil spirits but, obviously, now, he doesn't actually look like a beast... but when the time's right, they choose the strongest man."

Kuon really wasn't any good at giving explanations. Leo and Sarah listened to him while sorting out the words in their heads.

So 'Raga' is the name of a legendary swordsman from the mountains and, from generation to generation, they've been selecting the strongest man and respectfully give him that as a title – is that what he means?

“Even though they said that either me or Diu might be the next Raga, if I'd beaten Diu, they'd probably have found all sorts of reasons for not recognising me as Raga. Like how Raga's soul couldn't dwell in a half-blood like me, or...”

Having talked up to that point, Kuon suddenly seemed to snap back to himself.

“Anyway, never mind about me,” he almost spat out his words. “I'll work for you, Prince, if you give me money. If you say to do it, I'm fine with training recruits. But it's just that if there isn't going to be a war, then that isn't worth doing.”

Leo carefully observed at his profile.

Given that Kuon had been growing increasingly irritated recently, his thoughts probably didn't match his words. He wanted war. What Sarah had said about him wanting to “earn glory” probably wasn't wrong.

Leo didn't know what his reason was, but –

“Be patient for a bit longer, Kuon.”

Leo Attiel stood up while patting the dirt off from his backside, before stating something that left Sarah startled. “It will only be for a short while. There will soon be a war in Atall.”

Chapter 3: Bloody Sword

Part 1

Darren Actica.

He was one of the vassal-lords who, between them, governed over the southern half of Atall's territory, and who had once clashed with Leo over the quarry within Savan Roux's domains. Although officially that fight had never happened, in the end, Darren had been forced to give up on the quarry, and had lost his oldest son, Togo.

It had been half a year since then.

Darren's attitude never wavered, and he became the leader of what could be called the 'anti-Leo Attiel' faction.

"These Personal Guards are outrageous. Have you all forgotten the incident at Conscon? If the prince is put in charge of an armed force, he'll go over our heads and our lands again, and start wars however he wants."

He used every possible occasion to remind the vassal-lords of the danger that Leo posed.

Ostensibly, Leo had 'acted on the sovereign-prince's orders' at Conscon, but rumours were being whispered about how he might have wilfully acted entirely on his own, and they had been spread by none other than Darren.

"The only result is that it's drawn Allion's attention. If the prince is allowed a free hand to do as he pleases, he might call forth unprecedented danger to Atall. His Personal Guards need to be taken away from him as quickly as possible," he insisted.

Leo wasn't the sole target of Darren's attacks, and he also turned them against Savan Roux.

Given that a church was being built in his territory, Savan was strengthening his exchanges with Conscon. He was inviting a number of monks to discuss how to administer the future cathedral, and to work out plans to establish monasteries and churches throughout his territory.

Whereupon, Darren voiced suspicions that: "Savan strengthening his connection to the temple looks a lot like he actually intends to make the Guinbar area a part of the temple's territory."

Although Darren's speeches – delivered sometimes calmly, sometimes fervently – were impassioned, the response to them had so not been very favourable.

Darren Actica was a particularly powerful vassal-lord, and even the princely House kept an eye on his mood. Nobody could afford to disregard him but, right now, Lord Leo was being extolled as a hero such as Atall had never seen before. There was no one who was going to deliberately oppose that trend. And since Leo was at the time being relatively quiet – probably because he was absorbed in playing with the new toy he had had been given – there was no reason for them to feel a sense of urgency.

Shit, those damn fools are just sitting on the fence. As usual, all they care about is what's right in front of them. It will be too late by the time they realise I'm right. By then, they'll be nothing left for you bastards except kneel in a row before Leo, waiting for him to slice off your heads.

It was ironic: Darren spent his every day criticising Leo, yet he was the only one who perfectly agreed with Leo's long-held dissatisfaction against the vassal-lords and other nobles.

As his gloom-filled days piled up, the only one to offer him any support was Oswell Taholin.

Up until that point, the two of them had never had much to do with one another. This was natural enough: Darren had been the driving force behind toppling the previous sovereign-prince, and had accrued considerable power as the ruling House lost prestige, whereas Oswell was comparatively close to the

sovereign-prince.

If one traced their family line back to its origins, then most of the nobles who administered the northern half of the principality could be said to be linked by blood to the princely house. Conversely, the Taholin family had strengthened their relationship with the centre of power either by adopting sons of high social standing, or by arranging marriages with well-connected children.

Therefore, rather than saying that Darren and Oswell ‘had little to do with one another’, it was more accurate to say that when they came into contact, they were like mutually opposing forces that repulsed one another, and so they actively avoided having anything to do together.

Yet now, they were rapidly narrowing the distance between them.

“I was the one who once persuaded the sovereign-prince to send reinforcements to Conscon, but I always advocated sending mercenaries whose origins were unknown, to help the temple in secret. I certainly never imagined that the prince would openly fly the flag of House Attiel, or that he would personally lead troops against Allion,” said Oswell. Both of them appeared to share the opinion that “Lord Leo’s very existence might harm Atall.”

Having obtained such an unexpected ally, Darren almost felt like jumping for joy.

Since then, the two of them had been meeting frequently. Sometimes, it was in each other’s territories, and sometimes they avoided attention by dressing up as commoners and meeting in cheap, downtown taverns. On these occasions, they talked about what they could do to keep Lord Leo as far away as possible from government and military affairs.

When they held their many discussions, both of them looked for all the world like men who ‘worried about their country’s future’, although Darren’s heart was, of course, not so much concerned with the future of the country as it was consumed by hatred for Leo. Ever since being so badly burned by the second prince, Darren had vowed to have revenge on Leo and Savan. From start to last, it was all about his own personal feelings.

As such, when Oswell – a man completely unrelated to what had happened – climbed on board so eagerly, Darren felt complacent. *You just need to talk*

about 'fearing for the country', and that kind of idiot jumps on it. It's worth making use of him since it's so easy to do so.

In fact, however, Oswell did not have a single shred of loyalty towards the ruling family, nor one ounce of patriotic feeling towards Atall. Looking at things from a national perspective, it was actually Oswell who was infinitely more unscrupulous than Darren.

– Just as Hawking Ingram had once explained to Hayden Swift, Oswell Taholin, despite being one of the vassal-lords of Atall, had maintained a secret correspondence with Commander Hawking, and so, through him, with the Kingdom of Allion.

It dated back to seven years earlier.

Back then, when the principality had allied itself with Shazarn, and so had been attacked by Allion, Oswell had already agreed to work with Hawking. To borrow Hawking's words, "if the time had come and we had given him the order, he would even have risen to cause trouble from inside the country."

Even though it had already been seven years, Oswell was prepared to bare his fangs towards the Sovereign House of Attiel.

"Up until now, I've always been striving to build a connection to the centre of power, but this tiny country doesn't have a future anymore," he believed.

"It would be ridiculous for a man of my intelligence to be destroyed along with this insignificant country. Someday, I want to wear a toga of cinnabar-purple," he had thought for some time past.

'A toga of cinnabar-purple' was what high-ranking nobles in Allion wore to festivals or when they sat at important meetings.

When Hayden had been planning his second march on the temple, Oswell had received a communication from Hawking, and had already made preparations to gather soldiers. Yet in the end, the plan had fallen through since Lord Leo had defeated Hayden.

This had crushed Oswell's second chance at becoming an Allian aristocrat, and

it left him extremely despondent, yet even so, he continued to exchange messages with Hawking.

It was a few months later when a third opportunity arose.

Instead of the usual messenger, Hawking dispatched one of his direct retainers to Oswell's residence. He piled bags of money onto a desk. The purpose of those funds was "to erase Leo and destroy Guinbar Church."

Erase the prince – Oswell caught his breath when he heard it.

But it only lasted a moment. He was a man who had twice plotted to stage a rebellion within Atall's domains – he had long since steeled his resolve.

It was at that point that he started getting rapidly closer to Darren. Here, after all, was a man who was openly criticising Lord Leo. On top of that, during their many meetings together, he had come to realise something – *this is a man who holds extraordinary spite and hostility towards Leo.*

It was certainly timely. If he did a good job of manipulating Darren, then he would be able to accomplish his purpose without getting his own hands dirty. In short, and contrary to what Darren believed, Oswell was the one 'making use' of his accomplice.

Incidentally, and to talk about details that were hidden even deeper, the idea of 'erasing the prince' came solely from the Allian commander, Hawking Ingram. It was not an order from the king. The king of Allion had already shrugged off the question of Atall, and was having a great time riding his war horses east and west to pacify the situation inside his lands.

However, Hawking had cooperated with Hayden before Leo killed him, and he had also met the prince in person at the afore-mentioned meeting. As a result, his instincts were telling him that – *Leo Attiel is dangerous.*

For the time being, Leo was still young and, as far as Allion was concerned, he was not worth fearing. But although his country was small, his talent was disproportionately large, and one day, he would surely cause Allion harm.

And while he was at it, Hawking also judged that the church which was being built within Atall might prove an obstacle to Allion if the matter with Atall came to war. There were many adherents of the Cross Faith in Allion. He feared that,

as had already been the case with Conscon Temple, the country might be held back from the inside because of the links between members of the same faith.

Although he had retired from the front lines, Hawking loved Allion, his native land, more than anyone. He was a man who genuinely believed that – *If one day the entire continent is unified, then the flag flying in its capital city has to be Allion's*. If his eyes landed on the sprout from a bad seed, then no matter how small it was, he would not rest until he had trampled it underfoot.

Which was why Hawking pretended that this was the king's own will, and handed over those war funds while murmuring, "The king of Allion has great hopes for you, Sir Oswald."

Basically, Hawking was using Oswald, Oswald was using Darren, and both of them were planning on removing Leo without getting their own hands dirty.

So then, Darren and Oswald.

These two met repeatedly, and their discussion gradually grew heated. At some point, Darren confided to Oswald about his son, Togo –

"He was murdered by those base, vile cowards, Savan and Leo."

This, of course, was false. It was true that Togo had fallen into a trap laid by Leo, but he had actually been killed by an assassin sent by Darren himself. He had said it only as a way of attracting Oswald's sympathy, but Oswald looked so sorry for him, his eyes even filling with tears, that it was instead Darren who got pulled in and who started to cry.

Oswald took the considerable funds he had received and handed them over to Darren, claiming that they were "what I've managed to scrape up." Darren, needless to say, never suspected that Allion was manoeuvring behind the scenes.

Delighted with the offer of so much money, he hired soldiers for what was to come.

– While Darren was furthering his plans, Leo Attiel was actually paying close attention to his every move. After all, this was a man who even had his own son

killed, and who was clearly hostile towards Leo. Moreover, over the past half year, he relentlessly and openly criticised Leo's own actions, as well as the creation of his Personal Guards.

During that half a year, they had only seen each other once. It was on the day when Leo had returned to Tiwana's castle to prepare for the conference, and they had passed by each other in a corridor.

"I hear you have been admonishing me. Please be gentle, Sir Darren," said Leo.

"Now, now. I say what I do simply because I have sworn allegiance to the princely House, and because I hope to see a brilliant future for Atall. Your Highness Leo, you possess talent second to none. I earnestly implore you to turn that keen intelligence of yours in a different direction," Darren had responded with a smile.

While publicly maintaining that relationship, Leo had secretly sent several people to Darren's main citadel. Disguised as merchants or pilgrims of the Cross Faith, they were to carefully observe the situation in both town and castle.

Most of those sent out that way were the former retainers to the Leegan House, owing to the fact that they had the most experience. Leo, always alert to opportunities, decided that "this is the perfect chance," and had several men from his own troop go with them, to learn how to carry out reconnaissance duties.

At first, there had been no movement from Darren's side but, after the talks with Allion and Dytiann, Leo received more and more reports of human activity. Lesser castle lords under Darren's banner, and the governors of his forts were bringing their troops to his main castle town.

They claimed that "marauding soldiers sent by another power have set up base nearby." Yet when Leo sent people to investigate, just to be sure, they didn't hear the whisper of a rumour about marauders.

With that much information in hand, even someone other than Leo would be able to realise that Darren was planning on taking military action. It was also clear that he did not want his objective to be known.

Did he intend to come up with some reason or another to attack Guinbar again, or was he thinking of targeting Lord Leo himself?

“I’ll only end up on the defensive if I just wait and see,” Leo was forced into making a rapid decision.

Unlike when he had opposed Hayden, and every time, Leo could not postpone things until after he had carefully thought things through. There was, however, one very considerable difference between this time and all the previous ones –

Before, Leo had always been driven by a sense of urgency and necessity. Which meant that he had no choice but to make his move, just as though he was being pushed forward by fire. Even if his methods had been a bit rough-and-ready, simply waiting would result in him being consumed by the flames, so the first priority had been to find a way – any way – to take action.

This time, however, when he heard that *Darren is making a move*, Leo’s expression had been exactly like someone who has been told that a long-expected caller has finally arrived.

He’s moving? He’s doing me the favour of making his move?

Now, when he stood to meet the enemy, it was no longer because he had no other choice, nor because doing so was the only way to protect himself and what he held dear.

This was an opportunity that Leo Attiel had no intention of letting slip.

Leo immediately summoned Percy, Camus and Kuon to Guinbar Castle.

“I’m thinking of luring him in,” Leo stated after explaining about Darren’s movements. He wanted to probe the vassal-lord’s intentions by deliberately leaving him an opening. And if Darren was really thinking of killing him, Leo would entice him into trying to carry that out, then turn the tables on him and attack him by surprise.

It’s dangerous – both Percy and Camus shared that thought, but neither spoke it out loud. They were starting to get used to Leo’s way of doing things. Of course what he did was going to be dangerous, and the prince himself

acknowledged that danger when he declared that I no longer have any choice but to do this.

Even in that situation, however, Percy could not help but give him a reminder.

“Prince, I’m sure you are well aware of this, but fighting against Darrens’ group means...”

“Bringing civil war to Atall,” Leo readily acknowledged. “But I don’t intend to allow that fire to spread. We’ll extinguish it at once by swiftly and accurately targeting his weak point. This is necessary.”

Percy nodded. If anyone – be they from Allion or from Atall itself – was targeting the prince’s life, then Percy would naturally grasp his spear while standing as Leo’s shield. And if Darren was plotting to rebel because of his personal grudge against the princely house, then it would bear out Leo’s fears that the country lacked unity, while also providing the prince with an opportunity to show off his strength to the other vassal-lords.

Which was precisely why they needed to be swift and accurate. They could not allow anyone the time to interfere.

Leo proposed a plan, on which Percy and Camus offered comments. Kuon sat on the floor in a corner of the room, cradling a sword. Although he remained taciturn, the irritation that had been showing on his face recently had been wiped away.

When the meeting was over, he spoke for the first time since entering the room.

“Is it going to be war?”

The prince confirmed it –

“It is.... Probably.”

“I’d be bothered if it wasn’t,” the corners of Kuon’s mouth curled upwards.

After holding several other similar meetings, Leo started to take action.

First of all, he summoned the Personal Guards, who were stationed throughout Guinbar. The vassal-lords had assembled six hundred soldiers, while he himself had conscripted three hundred from among the people. Counting

the reserve soldiers, the total number exceeded a thousand. Since ample funds had also been collected from the vassal-lords, they were equipped with guns, cannons and armour all in the latest model, and had plenty of horses. In terms simply of numbers, Darren could perhaps match that one thousand if he called up the soldiers in his territory for military service, but if he had to hurriedly arrange for cavalymen, then he would have fewer than three hundred, even including the vassals of House Actica.

When Darren Actica learned of Leo's movements, he felt considerably shaken.

Does he suspect something? Darren wondered, upon hearing that the prince was gathering all of the soldiers he had to hand.

Just as Leo had guessed, Darren was preparing to attack Guinbar. After spreading false rumours that "Savan is plotting with Conscon Temple and intends to rebel," he would march all of his troops on Guinbar in one go, on the pretence that, "I found out that Savan's first wave of attack was going to be directed at my territory, and so I decided to pre-empt him."

The plan was that later, when it came to making excuses to the sovereign-prince, Oswell would back him up. Although Darren was unaware of Oswell's connection to Allion, that connection meant that Oswell could obtain endless amounts of letters and seals related to the Cross Faith within Allion. In other words, they could create ample evidence of a connection between Savan and the Cross Faith after Guinbar's castle town had been reduced to ashes.

While he was at it, Darren had every intention of killing Lord Leo, given how frequently the prince visited Guinbar. For that too, he had prepared a number of reasons.

"The good-natured prince was happily staying for a time at Guinbar Castle without realising anything about Savan's schemes. When my troops neared the castle, the prince terribly mistook the situation, and rose to defend Savan. When the prince appeared before us, leading his soldiers, we were reluctantly compelled to fight against him. As a result, the prince fled, and we have not been able to find him since." – something along those lines would do fine.

The prince liked to play at being a hero, so a made-up story like that one would sound plausible.

After obtaining Oswell's support, Darren had explained the entire plan to no one but a handful of close relatives and vassals.

"We'll do it." – All of them, starting with Dingo Actica, his second son, had shown their willingness. They believed, after all, that his eldest son, Togo, had been killed when he fell into a trap laid by Leo and Savan. Darren had told no one, not even those closest to him, that he was the one who had sent out an assassin against his first-born son.

The head of House Actica was as he was, and, on top of that, his loyalty to the princely house was essentially non-existent. Or rather –

"The ruling house is so happy about that matter concerning Leo that they seem to have forgotten what happened to the previous sovereign-prince. Now is the time to show them our power."

From the ambition he showed, it was as though he himself were a sovereign.

It was as their preparations were reaching the final stage, that they received reports that "the second prince's Personal Guards are gathering at Guinbar Castle." Darren's face went pale when he heard about it.

Yet Leo did not keep his Guards long at Guinbar, and soon moved most of them away. Apparently, he was going to leave them for a while with Conscon Temple, which he had close ties to. Darren did not know whether a group of marauding soldiers had appeared nearby, or whether Leo wanted to have his men train with the warrior monks, but this was pretty good news either way.

There was more good news to come.

Leo had not only summoned his Guards, he had also invited his fiancée, Florrie, to come from Tiwana. It seemed that after seeing the Personal Guards off at the border, the prince intended to travel with a small number of the remaining soldiers to a an area of holiday villas on the edge of Guinbar. He was planning to enjoy a summer break with his fiancée in a region noted for its beautiful natural scenery.

What an opportunity! Darren leaped for joy when he heard about it.

However, the excuse mentioned earlier would no longer be usable if Darren's soldiers led an attack on a quiet rest area. At that point, he went to Oswell

Taholin for help.

A new gift soon arrived from Oswell: five hundred full sets of armour.

Their make was not uniform: some were, of course, Atall-made, but sets crafted in Allion, Dytiann and various other countries had also been prepared. They were to allow Darren's soldiers to pass themselves off as 'marauders of unknown origin'.

Darren entrusted these five hundred 'marauders' to one of his relatives, a military man in command of a fortress. They would first surround the resort area, cutting off the prince's escape route, then they would swoop in to attack.

Darren would personally lead the remainder of his forces to very edge of Guinbar's territory. As soon as he received word that the prince's head had been taken, the two troops would immediately join up and launch the assault on Guinbar – such was the plan.

Togo, your father will avenge you of our foe.

Before, Darren had been rather plump, and his skin had been glowing with health, but recently, his face had been growing gaunt. Within it, only his eyes still gleamed sharply.

Part 2

The horse-drawn carriage which had left Guinbar arrived in the resort area in the evening.

There was a river flowing at the foot of a gently sloping hill. The woods growing along its banks occasionally opened up to reveal the villas of nobles and wealthy merchants.

The carriage drove into the grounds attached to the most luxurious residence of them all.

Leo, however, was not riding inside it. About an hour earlier, he had blended in with the group of riders which were escorting the carriage to its destination. Immediately upon arrival, the prince had stepped out of it and had stood at the summit of the hill which overlooked the villas to the south.

The only ones within the carriage were soldiers who was serving as decoys. Leo's fiancée, Florrie, had remained at Guinbar Castle.

– She was the most unfortunate one.

To prevent the plan from being leaked, Leo had hidden it even from her. Since receiving the invitation from Leo a few days earlier, Florrie had been happy and excited at the thought of spending time alone again with her fiancé after so long, but when it was finally time to leave Guinbar, Leo had shown up in her room.

“Something urgent came up. Don't take a single step out of your chambers until I get in touch with you,” he had suddenly said.

Florrie was surprised and was about to voice her complaints, but any thought of getting her fiancée to listen to her vanished in an instant. Leo's eyes were looking straight through her, and were gazing at somewhere far distant and

different from where she stood.

Leo is up to something, she realised.

“I get it. I’ll just wait here all alone until you come back,” she smiled.

Without even returning her smile or nodding to her, Leo had simply said, “See you,” and, stopping only to assign guards to her rooms, he quickly left Guinbar.

Left by herself, Florrie had stood at the window for a while. Beyond the balcony that stretched out from the floor below the one she was on, she could see a group of riders lined up in a row. Leo, now bearing weapons, walked towards them, took a horse’s bit from a page, and swung himself into the saddle. He then gave an order, and in the blink of an eye, he and his group had vanished from Florrie’s sight.

There were times when Florrie Anglatt could not understand Leo.

One such occasion had been half a year ago, when she was told that “Lord Leo killed Hayden.”

Hayden was the person who had been going to take her back to Allion, by force if necessary. When she had heard that he was dead, she had been confused about her own feelings, unsure whether what she felt was surprise, relief, or something close to sadness.

Above all else, she found it impossible to image Leo Attiel fighting at the head of troops, and brandishing a sword towards Hayden.

That wasn’t the first time, however.

Take her father, for example, Claude Anglatt. Both his voice and his body frame were huge, and when he yelled harshly at his retainers or at his sons, his face was terrifying. Yet towards Florrie – and her alone – he was gentle and indulgent. It was instead her mother who was strict about her upbringing, and whenever Florrie was crying sadly because her mother had gotten angry over some small thing or another, Claude stealthily sneak up behind his daughter, and would hold her tight in his big arms.

“My beautiful princess, you’re always bringing happiness to everyone around you with your smiles and your songs, but today, it’s the princess herself who’s

in a sad mood. I won't go easy on anyone who makes you cry. When all's said and done, I'm the strongest man in Allion, after all."

When Claude said that, Florrie would snuffle and ask, "Stronger than Mother?", whereupon, Claude would pretend to look terrified. They always had that conversation at times like that.

"What did you say!? So the one who made you cry – in other words, the person in the worst mood here – is Ellen? That explains why thunderclouds are swirling around the living room. Sorry, but she's the one person I can't go against. She's stronger than me. And at the end of the day, her word is law in this house. So you'd better hurry and apologise quickly. If you say it with a cute expression, Ellen's mood will immediately improve. The dark clouds will be blown away, and I won't have to be afraid of my strongest foe. Everyone will be happy."

When he was at home, her father was always laughing heartily, yet when he took part in war outside, he would plunge into groups of fully armoured soldiers and slaughter crowds of enemies – even though she knew it intellectually, she could never equate her father as he was at home with 'the valiant Claude Anglatt' of rumour.

It was much the same for her two older brothers. Even though they could sometimes be a bit mean, their expressions were gentle when they talked to Florrie, and she simply could not imagine them killing people if ever there was a war.

I suppose men have a different face when they're outside from when they're at home, was how Florrie saw it. Which was why she had intended to do her best to try and understand Leo. Yet that thought had now turned into : *Leo has become a man*. By which she meant that he now showed her a different face from the one he showed to others.

Even after the prince had disappeared from sight, Florrie did not leave the window. She lifted her hand towards her head and plucked out a single strand of hair, which she briefly brought to her lips before winding it around the little finger on her left hand.



It was one of the many good luck charms used by followers of the Badyne Faith. As long as the strand of hair remained coiled around their finger, a person who was precious to them would be protected from harm. Florrie's mother had taught her many such charms.

Please let Leo stay safe – Florrie continued praying for a long time, holding her finger with the hair wound around it to her chest.

“Please be sure to make things up to Miss Florrie.”

Standing next to Lord Leo as he looked down on the villas from the hill, Percy Leegan, who had ridden with him, offered his advice. It was already the third such reminder.

“One day,” Leo's reply was curt.

“When will ‘one day’ be?”

“War is coming. Percy, you know that too, right? From now on, things are just going to keep getting busier.”

Since Percy was being a bit too insistent, Leo was feeling petulant – *He's like an old man with the way he keeps making a fuss.*

Wanting to ease the tense atmosphere before they started talking tactics, Leo launched a counter-attack.

“I've heard about that too.”

“About what?”

“That your fiancée is Lord Gimlé Gloucester's daughter.”

“Indeed.”

“Sir Gimlé harshly criticised my father about sending reinforcements to Conscon, and I doubt he was pleased when I defeated Hayden. It wouldn't be surprising if he was secretly linked to Darren.”

Percy's expression turned serious.

Currently, there was nothing to indicate that Gimlé and Darren were linked in any way, and even when Darren publicly denounced the prince, Gimlé did not

seem particularly interested in it – yet it was a fact that he was very unamused by the recent string of actions that the princely House had been taking. That particular piece of information came from Gimlé’s daughter, Liana, so it was certainly reliable. And, of course, given that Percy had joined Leo’s Personal Guards, the vassal-lord held no kind feelings for his daughter’s fiancé either.

How would Gimlé react when, on top of all of that, the Personal Guards clashed in combat with Darren?

“And you’ll be making it up to Miss Liana...?”

“One day,” replied Percy, deliberately maintaining a fastidious expression.

Leo laughed.

“Well then...” Since Percy had to go and take up position, he took leave of the prince. “Your Highness, I earnestly entreat you to be careful. Please do not forget that on the battlefield, there are many occasions when one has an equal chance of being branded a coward or lauded as a hero. The most important thing of all is to watch for opportunities and then make a decision.”

“I know.”

“Then, with that...” Percy had been about to say something further, but – *it’ll just come across as tedious*, he decided, and said nothing more.

When Percy left, he plucked a strand of his own hair and wound it around one of his little fingers, but Leo was no longer looking in his direction.

When Percy left, he plucked a strand of his own hair and wound it around one of his little fingers, but Leo was no longer looking in his direction.

He did not have fires lit, and the entire surroundings were gradually plunged into darkness. Several soldiers remained with him as bodyguards, but since they didn’t speak a single word of idle chatter, it was just as though Leo had been left behind, entirely on his own.

Leo continued to stand in silence, staring at the riverside that was now shrouded in shadows. At times like these, he was invariably haunted by a shadow that somehow resembled stagnant *sludge*. The questions that shadow threw at him were questions that Leo had also asked himself.

Where am I? What will I do? Who am I?

The surroundings were so quiet, enveloped as they were in the dusk that was lit only by a few stars, that the voice seemed to echo louder than usual.

War? What will you do if it comes to war? And what will you do once you are waging war?

He knew. He had known for a long time now that there was no turning back. He could not afford to indulge in hesitation for even a single second.

Now that things have started, questions like who I am are irrelevant. I am who I am right now.

And since I'm doing this...

You need to achieve sufficient results in battle. If you don't, there would be no meaning to killing and being killed.

Leo once again shook off the sludge that resided within him, shaking his entire body as he did so.

The troop of Darren's subordinates had arrived near the riverbank.

They did not carry any lights either, but the land was level and clear in the area near the villas, so the five hundred men easily reached where they were going. Before long, they started to divide themselves into several smaller units.

Only the soldiers in the lead carried torches and Leo, from the top of the hill, could follow the movements of the glowing red points of light.

The enemy believed that there was only a handful of soldiers here, and the only thing they were worried about was that Leo might escape from them. Which was why they used the classic strategy for cases like that: compared to the soldiers gathering by the river opposite the villa, they placed a greater number of men in a position to cut off the path of retreat from the residential area.

Naturally, Leo had predicted that they would do so, and he had thoroughly examined the lay of the land beforehand. The points of light were moving almost exactly according to the predictions he had made at the time.

While the enemy was on the move, a messenger came up to him.

“The soldiers have arrived,” he said.

The “soldiers” in question were none other than the Personal Guards which were supposed to have been sent to Conscon Temple. They had pretended to set off towards it, then took the first opportunity to change direction, and had arrived here by way of inconspicuous mountain paths.

“Do as planned,” was the only order Leo gave.

Maps indicating where they were to go were to be handed to each of the commanding officers. The six hundred soldiers moved swiftly and, just as Leo had hoped, messengers soon came running one after another to give their reports.

“The First Unit has completed its preparations.”

“The riflemen of the Second Unit have taken up position.”

“The Fifth Unit has completed its manoeuvres.”

“Good,” as soon as he knew that all of the units were ready, Leo had his men set fire to the pile of kindling which had been stacked up at the top of the hill. It was the signal for each of the Personal Guards to light torches of their own.

A commotion ran through Darren’s men when they saw the brilliant flames that were lit behind them. *Did Lord Darren change his mind and send reinforcements?* Many of them wondered for a moment.

The very next second, gunfire rained down upon them.

The main strength of Leo’s Personal Guards was that almost every man had guns.

The quiet surroundings were abruptly transformed as gunshots and smoke filled heaven and earth.

“E-Ene-Enemies!”

“They’re enemies!”

The confused and terrified voices of Darren’s soldiers surged from every direction. Of course they did – the men who had encircled the villa to prevent

Leo from escaping suddenly found themselves encircled in turn, and the area around them was now filled with waves of hostility and killing intent.

No sooner had the gunfire abated than cavalymen charged towards them. The small units that had intended to block Leo's path of retreat now scattered. Darren's men had not imagined for a second that armed soldiers would swoop down on them, shouting out battle cries, and so the ambushers effortlessly tore through them.

"Don't panic! Return the attack!"

"Avoid further damage! Retreat, retreat!"

Contradictory orders flew, showing how badly they had lost their heads. With gunfire and gleaming spears closing in on them, every unit soon chose to fall back.

Aware of their disadvantage, the commander of Darren's forces decided to abandon the encirclement and instead ordered all troops to gather in one place. In order to surround them, Leo's forces were stretched out wide. Besides which, the commander quickly realised that *our numbers are about the same as theirs*.

Leo, still watching the movements from the top of the hill, quickly raised his hand. The soldiers who were by his side all immediately lit torches from the bonfire, and started waving them in unison.

While they were doing so, Leo made his preparations. He checked the armour he was wearing, then jumped onto a horse that a page had brought up to him.

Behind him, soldiers bearing swords and spears had gathered at some point. These were not the soldiers that the vassal-lords had assembled; these were the three hundred villagers that Leo had recruited and trained. Simply put, Leo had arranged it so that those of his guards who had at least some experience would surround the enemy then, when they had driven them away from their various positions, his most inexperienced soldiers would be given the task of charging at the opponent.

Equally on horseback, Kuon lined himself next to Leo. Up until then, he had constantly seemed to be chomping at the bit, but now, his eyes were shining.

“Just as promised,” Leo said to him. “I’ve arranged a suitable opportunity for you to earn your first achievement.”

“Yeah!” the boy from the mountain lands shouted, so fired up that his real nature was laid bare.

After receiving the signal from the torches, the actions taken by the Personal Guards changed. Near the river’s shallows, they deliberately left an opening in the encircling net. The enemy braced themselves and charge through it, but Leo and his men were already galloping down the hillside to catch them in a head-on ambush.

The gunshots continued, causing loud splashes of water and sprays of blood. Next –

“Cut them down,” Leo urged his horse forward as he yelled.

The Personal Guards quickly closed the gap in the net that they had earlier left open. The enemy was caught in a two-pronged attack, coming from both riverbanks.

“Don’t waver, don’t hesitate!” One of the enemies repeatedly called out from the middle of the river. “Advance, advance, advance!”

When he saw that, Kuon leaped from his horse, ran forward, and jumped into the water. He cut his way past an enemy soldier, then past a second one and, while the rest were still reeling in surprise, he drew up towards the man who seemed to be the enemy commander.

“You little shrimp...”

Those were the only words that the enemy commander managed to say after spotting the figure approaching towards him.

Kuon forcefully pushed forward, bumping against the horse as he did so. He nimbly swung his longsword diagonally towards the his foe, and struck him in the neck.

Leo’s Personal Guards had been motley group of soldiers and, even now, it would be hard to say that they excelled at coordination.

When thinking back on it, Leo had a lot of things to regretted, such as points he should have worked out in more detail before they launched the operation, or ways of improving the timing of command. Still, in the end, the single most useful element proved to have been his prior survey of the terrain and, if one only took the results into account, they were able to rout the enemy with very little damage to their own side.

Leo had poured nearly the entire the military strength he could mobilise into this battle.

If it had just been a case of driving away enemies disguised as marauders, he could have held more of them back in reserve but, as I explained earlier, the Personal Guards were soldiers who had been gathered from all over. Their origins were equally varied. While some were the vassals of noble families, others, like the ones Leo had personally recruited, had never held a weapon before. There was also a difference in their degree of enthusiasm. On the one hand, there were those who zealously wished to repay the favour of having been appointed, while on the other, the soldiers who had been offered up by the reluctant vassal-lords did not have a shred of interest in their present surroundings.

Which was why Leo had wanted them to stand together on this battlefield, where they could obtain an almost flawless victory, and to give them the chance to build up a sense of being part of the same troop.

I see, Percy thought admiringly as he looked in turn at all of the soldiers' faces.

Previously, they had stayed at the same barracks, slept under the same roof, and joined in the same training, but it appeared that fighting side-by-side just once was far more effective than living together for any number of days had been. Soldiers from different areas clapped each other on the shoulder, boasted about their own achievements, or mutually congratulated each other on their success in the fight.

But the problem is going to be what comes next...

Percy was worried. Although this time, everyone had been able to band together against a group of marauders who were targeting Leo's life, the next person who would be aiming to kill him would probably be Darren Actica, one

of Atall's vassal-lords. Among the soldiers who had come from other areas, there were sure to be some who would become agitated.

We're going to be taking on nobles from Atall?

Does the prince also intend to bring the fighting to our native region?

Not only would it lower the troops' morale, but there were sure to be men who would desert the unit.

Percy had talked about the problem with Leo several times before the beginning of this fight.

“We need to make the marauders confess that Darren is behind them and is pulling the strings.” He and Leo both agreed on this. Which was also why it had been crucial to gather most of the Personal Guards in one place.

But we don't have that much time. If we take too long about it, the soldiers who managed to escape will join up with Darren.

While Percy was lost in his own thoughts, Leo dismounted from his horse.

“Everyone, quiet down. Bring me the captured soldiers.”

At his words, the ecstatic guards fell silent, and the enemy soldiers who had surrendered after being unable to escape were brought to stand in a row before him, their hands tied behind their back.

Standing behind Leo, Percy Leegan checked to make sure that the other guards came over to see what was starting up. Earlier, he had casually placed his men in all the various units, and had told them beforehand to gather together at this point.

Once he was sure that a crowd had assembled, Leo Attiel thrust his sword at the first man in the line of 'marauders'. During the battle, Leo had inflicted deep wounds on three opponents, so the tip of his blade was covered in blood.

“Who are you? Why were you targeting me?” He demanded, his breathing ragged.

“Ha!” jeered the soldier who was the head of the row despite being seriously injured from a bullet wound to the stomach. The scornful smile on his pallid face came from the fact that Leo's voice had none of the strength of a person

making threats.

“I don't anything about *you*. I just got talked into a nice-sounding scheme to make some easy money. These fancy houses are packed with treasure, right?”

With his unshaven and slightly grimy face, the man really did look like the marauder he was pretending to be. The Personal Guards who were watching the scene angrily raised their voices.

“I see,” said Leo.

– Back when more of Darren's soldiers had been causing mayhem in Savan's quarry, Leo had decided that he would face those soldiers as his 'first campaign'. He had taken several days to both work out a plan and steel his own resolve. He needed to mentally prepare himself before standing on the battlefield for the first time in his life. The situation now was similar to that one, and Leo had already pictured this scene for several days now.

Do it without hesitating, he repeatedly told himself.

And now the time had come.

“I see,” he said again.

The next moment, Percy, standing beside him, opened his eyes wide in shock. Leo had drawn his sword back until it was above his own shoulder then, without the slightest hesitation, he had cut through the soldier's neck.

The strike had been shallow. The man staggered and collapsed, clutching his neck as he writhed in agony. With his foot on the man's shoulder, Leo pierced him from above with his blade. The soldier's movement suddenly came to a stop.

“Next,” said Leo, and another enemy soldier was pushed out before him. He asked him the same question.

“I-I don't know. It's true!” The soldier pleaded with tears in his eyes. “Please believe me. There was a guy who came to us with this offer. If you find him...”

It also ended in the same way. The only difference was that this time, Leo gave three strokes of his sword. The first cut was to the man's leg, the second was to his face, and the third was finally the killing blow.

Your Highness – Percy tried to call out, but couldn't. Leo's face, covered in the blood of his victims, was almost like a demon's.

"Next," said Leo.

And a third man met the same fate.

The soldier who was pushed forward when he once more called out "next," was trembling from the start. Leo no longer asked his question, and silently raised his sword. The still-youthful soldier opened his eyes wide, his gaze riveted to the bloody blade.

"W-Wait... Please wait!"

The one who cried out was not the young soldier. One of the older soldiers came crawling on his knees from the line of captives, and tumbled at Leo's feet.

"H-He's my only son. Have mercy... I mean, please have mercy, Your Highness Leo!"

"I don't recall having introduced myself as Prince Leo. My flag was not flown. Which means that you *did* know who you were attacking, doesn't it?"

In a quivering voice, the older soldier confessed that they were soldiers fighting under Darren's banner. He also told how, after killing Leo, they were supposed to attack Guinbar.

That was all Leo needed to hear and returned the sword to his waist.

"We'll take a few of them with us. Leave the other ones here, but don't untie their ropes." After issuing that order, he gave a second one, "Gather at once at the foot of the hill."

Everyone hastily obeyed. The expressions on the soldiers' faces held a greater sense of urgency than they had ever shown before. That was no doubt partly due to their astonishment at hearing Darren's name, but also partly to the shock of the scene they had just witnessed.

Regarding the latter, Percy felt the same way. Nevertheless, he went to his horse without letting anything show. Yet his hands as he took hold of his saddle were nearly shaking.

After making sure that everyone was going, Lord Leo once again climbed

astride his horse. Suddenly, however, as though he had changed his mind about something, he jumped back down to the ground.

“Percy, Percy!” He called the name twice.

His voice sounded so desperate that Percy rushed over in surprise. Meanwhile, Leo had, for some reason, started running towards a thicket of trees.

“Please watch behind...” even as he spoke, he crouched down to the ground. Leo’s back heaved and there was a retching sound, like a frog croaking in his throat.

Ah, that’s it – Percy understood.

“Is something wrong?”

“Is His Highness unwell?”

Several soldiers started to approach the thicket, but Percy stopped with a wave of his hand.

“It’s a confidential conversation. You can’t come.”

Behind where Percy was standing guard, Leo continued to throw up, keeping the noise as quiet as he could.

Lord Leo had already gone through his first campaign, and he had also killed Hayden Swift with his own two hands. However, it was one thing to kill an enemy in the heat of battle, but this was, of course, the first time he had swung his sword at someone who was not resisting, and doing so repeatedly, tearing through their skin, crushing their bones, piercing their organs.

Several minutes passed as Percy remained standing where he was.

“I’m fine now, thanks,” Leo stood up and walked up to Percy’s side. His face was calm, and he seemed about to walk back to his horse and once more take the bit from the page.

Percy called out to him from behind,

“Your Highness, for the blood,” he held out a cloth.

Leo took it expressionlessly and wiped the blood from the enemy soldiers

from his face – or at least he pretended to: it was actually the contours of his lips that he was wiping clean.

“I intended to kill them in a single blow,” he said as he was doing so.

“Aye.”

“But I failed. And then I realised that the other captives were afraid. That’s why...”

“I understand,” Percy nodded.

Actually, he didn’t understand. But as the prince made excuses for his actions, Percy managed to hold back his agitated feelings.

“In the future...”

“Yes?”

“I mustn’t put family members in the same unit. That’s what happens when you do.”

What he meant by ‘that’ was probably having a father freely give information as he pleaded for his son’s life.

Leo flung himself atop his horse. When Percy caught a glimpse of his profile, Lord Leo was just as he always was.

Horrifying, thought Percy as he too flung himself into the saddle and urged his horse forward, following after Leo.

War is horrifying. And so is the position of leader in war.

Part 3

Darren Actica's domain had been known as the Dharam region since long ago. It had once belonged to the ruling family, but it was officially awarded to the Ruband House – an experienced military family which had been put in charge of Dharam Castle – in recognition of an unparalleled achievement that they had accomplished. It was also at that time that the principality was cleanly divided into the domains of the sovereign-prince to the north, and the fiefs of the vassal-lords in the south, the two being separated by the Iron Chain, a mountain range that ran straight through the centre of the country. The seventh head of the Ruband family indulged in dissipation and debauchery, bringing his House to ruin, and it was the Actica House, a branch family of the Rubands, who inherited the domain.

Within the principality, it was a region known for its rich harvests. As it was also situated roughly at the centre of the country, large market towns had easily established themselves at the heart of the trade routes, and as the grain-producing area also faced a river, the region quickly gained wealth. It was simply because Darren had the financial means to employ large numbers of mercenaries whenever necessary that he was able to oust the previous sovereign-prince.

Right now, that same Darren had only been able to mutter “Impossible...” before finding himself at a loss for words.

It was around midnight, and he was on horseback. After sending troops for the surprise attack on the holiday villas, Darren Actica had climbed into the saddle so as to personally take part in capturing Guinbar.

His hobby was hunting, but he had not organised a hunt since the death of his oldest son, Togo, and throwing himself onto a horse, and grasping sword and bow again after so long had left him feeling exhilarated.

I'll thrust this sword at Savan's grey head.

His blood grew heated at the thought.

He had been waiting impatiently for the report that 'Lord Leo has been killed', yet those who rushed to find him were not only messengers, but also several dozen soldiers, all of them wounded and staggering as they walked. The report they brought was that Lord Leo's assassination had failed, that their commander had been killed in action, and that they had also lost over a third of their numbers.

At first, Darren was left speechless, but then, his armour-clad body started to tremble violently. This was the second time that he had been caught out, and he was by now truly afraid of the man called Leo Attiel.

"Retreat!"

All Darren could do was utter that single word, and return to his castle. On the way, he was constantly worried about what was at his back.

Given that Lord Leo had laid an ambush to turn the tables on Darren's forces and encircle them, he must naturally know who the ringleader was, and what actions he, Darren, had been taking.

Then what will the prince's next move be?

Would he strengthen Guinbar's defence, or would he meet up with Savan's troops and attack Darren's territory?

No, that's impossible. Even a prince wouldn't be able to invade a domain within our own country without first consulting the sovereign-prince. So in the meantime, I need to come up with a new plan.

He arrived back at his castle. It was called Olt Rose, and was said to have been named after the lover of one of the heads of the Ruband family. He had been going to remove his armour as soon as he entered, but before he could do so, a soldier who had been sent out on patrol came tumbling in before him.

"The prince's troops have broken into our territory!" He announced, in a voice so high-pitched it was almost a squeak. They numbered approximately six hundred. What Darren had thought *impossible* had become real.

They had moved fast. In what had virtually been a night attack, Leo had captured the fortress on the border of Darren's territory. Most of the troops which had originally been stationed there had been called up for the assault on Guinbar. The remaining soldiers had never dreamed that Lord Leo would be attacking them, so there had been virtually no fighting, as they had surrendered at the first sound of warning shots from the enemy cannons.

Continuing northwards, Leo's forces had also taken a fort that was governed by one of Darren's relatives. For all that it was a castle, it was on open ground; since it only had jurisdiction over the neighbouring villages, the building was not large, and had no more than twenty or so soldiers guarding it. There was no way they could oppose Leo's Personal Guards, who were charging towards them with cannons and guns.

The prince had waited at the castle for the three hundred men in his rear guard, before setting off once more with a troop of six hundred. And so it was that Leo was approaching Olt Rose Castle, with his soldiers mostly unharmed.

"T-That bastard! He can't possibly be planning to put to the torch the territory of a vassal to the ruling House? That devil's spawn is finally revealing his true nature!"

Darren hit the gorgeously-made table before him. Normally, he should have broken into Guinbar Castle by now; at around about this time, Savan, the man who had harmed his son, was supposed to have been driven into a corner, and Darren should have been gloating down at him. Yet in reality, it was Darren who had been driven back against a wall by those who had destroyed his son.

How can something this absurd be...

Fortunately, the troops which had been meant to capture Guinbar had all been led to Olt Rose Castle. Although they had fewer cannons and guns, Darren's side had more soldiers.

With Leo's forces drawing closer and closer, it was time to make a decision. Should they face them in open battle, or should they prepare for a siege?

In those days, the warrior code was strongly entrenched and held that, "Since we outnumber them, we should attack them head on, not sneakily hole ourselves up."

The people of Atall had very little experience with war and yet – or, no, perhaps it was *because* they were not used to it – many of their men were mesmerised by those warrior values, and the soldiers were beating their spears against their shields, insisting that they should launch themselves against the enemy.

Foremost among them was Dingo Actica, Darren's second son. The desire to avenge his brother burned just as fiercely within him as it did in his father. He was only twenty years old, but he was built along the same burly lines as his father and brother, and, again just like them, he had gone as a marauder to lay waste to other territories. With his teeth bared as he yelled, he cut an impressive figure.

“Father, our enemies aren't mercenaries – half of them are just peasants and traders. We should boldly sally forward and overpower them head-on.”

Yet Darren did not give his consent. He had felt the sting of his previous lessons, and had learned that *you can't make light of Leo*.

He simply placed riflemen along the outer ramparts of the town, then firmly closed the gates and gave every sign that he was readying himself for a siege. At the same time, he sent a messenger post-haste to Tiwana, the capital, with a request for Sovereign-Prince Magrid to intervene. The way he saw it, *Leo can't have gotten Magrid's permission to get rid of me*.

Which meant that Leo had, once again, acted on nothing but his own judgement. Ever since the incident at Conscon, the sovereign-prince must surely be nervous about what Leo might do, and if he was informed of the circumstances, he would probably bring his son under control.

“If I make my excuses convincing enough, the prince who ‘arbitrarily invaded a vassal's territory’ will lose all trust. I'll be able to have his Personal Guards taken away. And... right, if Leo's falls from his hero's pedestal, then Savan, who is so strongly tied to him, will also be brought down.”

That was how Darren justified himself to his son and to his vassals.

“We only have to wait, and not only will Leo self-destruct, he'll also provide us with plenty of excuses for invading Guinbar. There's absolutely no reason to get impatient at this point.”

The next day, he managed to persuade his vassals, and they agreed on a siege.

Another unexpected event occurred, although this time, it was a fortunate one for Darren. When they had arrived before the ramparts of the town of Olt Rose, Leo's troops had assumed that Darren's forces would charge out to fight them, and so they had taken up position to the south of the walls.

It was close to dawn when they were attacked by surprise. Right, not 'Leo attacked by surprise', but 'Leo was attacked by surprise'.

The prince had set up camp to the south. The roads along the gently-sloping hills were bathed in the pale light of dawn when, all of a sudden, that light was covered in dark shadows. Upon closer inspection, the shadow turned out to be men on horseback, drawing closer to Leo's camp while the sound of their horses' hooves rang out.

When the soldiers standing sentry raised their voices to sound the alarm, their heads were cut off. The enemies were fast. Leo's men desperately tried to fight back, shouting to wake their companions as they did so. The riders flung their lit torches in every direction, and many of the tents caught fire.

Leo was also pulled out of sleep, but by the time he had gone out to take command, the group of riders had already picked out an archery unit, and vanished. They were as swift as a gust of wind.

They left behind them three dead, and five who were too seriously wounded to be able to move. Moreover, some of their provisions had been burned.

While fires burned within the camp, a group of bowmen, thought to be allies to the riders, had lined up in formation before anyone had time to notice them, and released their arrows into Leo's base.

This was clearly an outside attack, but nobody could figure out where on earth they came from. Leo had naturally placed guards on watch-out in the area around the camp, so just how skilled must the enemy be to have easily slipped through that net of sentries?

The next evening, the same thing happened again.

The camp's defence was a lot tighter than it had been the previous night, but

the enemy concentrated on attacking at a single point, and easily ploughed their way through to Leo's headquarters.

Unlike the previous night, he had arranged for riflemen to be on duty in shifts, yet the enemy seemed to have perfectly seen through that as well. The riders in the lead were pulling carts, and the instant that Leo's side opened fire, they jumped from their horses and set fire to the hay inside the wagons. They then struck the horses' rumps, and directed them towards the camp.

A second group of riders appeared, with bowmen riding pillion and, just like the night before, a hail of arrows rained down.

The billowing smoke dulled the aim of the riflemen and, despite the threat from fire and arrows, riders came charging in, and once again brought chaos to the camp. At about the same time, the guards that the riders had previously broken through came racing towards the camp in a mass, and immediately tried to chase the enemies down.

"Fools. Do you think you've outmanoeuvred us? Those guys actually believe we'd fall for a pincer movement, huh?"

The second wave of attack started up. A detached enemy force which had been lying in wait further back had been waiting for the moment when the guards would turn their back on them. Given the situation, a pincer attack was no longer feasible for those on Leo's side.

While the guards were thrown into confusion, the first wave of troops made a leisurely exit, and the detached force soon followed suit. They had been fast both when attacking and when pulling back. What they left behind them was soldiers in agony, voices crying out the names of those who had been pierced by arrows, and brightly burning fires.

"Damn it!" shouted Leo, violently flinging down the helmet that he had just been about to put on.

This was the second time they had been had by the enemy. Thinking that those in the castle might seize the opportunity to open the town gates, Percy, Camus and Kuon had strengthened the defence at the front, and had ordered most of the soldiers to stay awake, but, in the end, there was no more movement before dawn. All it did was increase the soldiers' fatigue.

Leo summoned Percy and the others early in the morning.

“Did Darren pretend to hunker down in his castle for a siege, while actually having forces hidden in the surroundings?” Leo suggested a first analysis, but Percy disagreed.

“The troops that attacked us were the best of the best; and I don’t see how Darren could have hired people that good in so little time.”

The assailants excelled at handling their horses. While there weren’t that many of them, and although they had seemed to charge headlong in, their movements when they were disrupting the camp were coordinated, and when the time had come to retreat, they had turned their horses around with impressive speed.

There weren’t that many highly-skilled horsemen in Atall, so they were probably marauders or mercenaries who were used to setting towns and villages ablaze. And among them, there was only a very limited number who could boast of such outstanding abilities...

“It’s probably Lance Mazpotter,” Percy suggested a name.

“Who’s that?” asked Camus. There was an irritated crease running down the centre of his forehead, and he had hardly slept since the previous evening.

“He’s the leader of well-known band of marauders here in Atall. He’d recently been keeping quiet, but...” According to Percy, the man had been born in Atall, but when he was young, he had apparently been a pirate and a bandit who had laid waste in the northern coastal countries. Towards the end of his twenties, he had returned to the principality and taken up trade as a marauder. He was skilled with a sword and proficient in strategies that made use of horses, so his considerable talents had been sought by any number of territories. By the very nature of the marauders’ trade, it was often difficult to know who their employers were at any given time.

“A little while ago, there was a rumour or two that he had recently been spotted at Oswell Taholin’s castle.”

“Oswell, is it?” Leo ground his teeth.

They had met face-to-face during the banquet. Oswell Taholin was the only

one of the vassal-lords who had argued that the sovereign-king should send reinforcements to Conscon Temple. Yet when Allion had sent an envoy, his attitude had been that he knew nothing of Conscon, and after that, he had not said anything further on the matter. Ever since then, Leo had found him strangely suspicious.

“So basically, he’s secretly connected to Darren?” Camus’ indignant words were ones that Leo agreed with.

As a result of their council of war, Leo decided to move their camp.

The river that flowed through the centre of the castle town became wider to the southwest of the ramparts. Although not on a scale that you could call it a forest, there were trees growing on the south bank. With the river behind them and the trees to defend them against another surprise charge from the riders, Leo had his men take up position again. The ground dipped slightly, so in all honesty, it wasn’t the best place for observing or intercepting an enemy, but it was far better than staying out in the open in front of the castle town.

“How are we going to take the castle from here?” Kuon voiced his displeasure. This passive attitude of having to helplessly wait for the enemy to make their move was sure to get under his skin.

“We've got cannons. We could just blow holes through the walls.”

“We want to avoid harming the town as much as possible. When we took our previous position right in front of it, it was to deliberately lure the enemy out,” explained Percy, but even so, it was originally only supposed to be for three days.

The reason for that was not so much that they were granting Darren a three-day grace, but because they were intending to spread rumours that, “even though Darren has a greater number of soldiers, he is a coward who would not come out to fight, and his lack of character caused the town to suffer needless damage.”

Their aim had been to change the target of criticism within the town, by turning it away from Leo and towards Darren instead. So because of that, these surprise attacks were a very serious blow to Leo's side. Moving the camp's position seemed like a definite sign of weakness but, understandably enough,

Leo could not think of any alternative.

Part 4

“So it’s Lance Mazpotter.”

That was a name that even Darren had heard before.

A messenger from Lance had circumvented Leo’s camp to enter Olt Rose Castle. The excitement was at fever pitch inside the castle when they learned that Lance had twice hindered Leo’s troops by attacking them.

Here were unexpected reinforcements.

According to the messenger, their unit had, on Oswell's orders, gone to lend a hand in capturing Guinbar, but when Lance heard that the situation had reversed, and that Leo was attacking Darren instead, he had immediately altered his plans, and had decided to cut through Leo's troops from behind.

That's Oswell for you. Definitely a guy worth using.

While maintaining an outwardly calm expression, Darren was inwardly considerably relieved.

He had been dreading that Leo might mount a surprise attack from some unknown direction, and that any carelessness on his part would lead to castle town being invaded. Thanks to this, however, he could stall for time far more easily than he had expected.

But still...

Frankly speaking, Darren did not like this messenger who had come from Lance. His bare arms were crossed in front of his worn-out chest armour, and even though he was before an Atallese noble, he did not show the slightest sign of courtesy. Although his moustache was neatly trimmed, he wore his hair long and had it tied back in a bunch behind his head. As he also wore an eye patch over his left eye, he truly looked like a mountain bandit.

I guess this just goes to show what kind of origins his 'leader' Lance comes

from...

Even so, these were unmistakably valuable reinforcements, and Darren did his best to act amiably.

“Please convey my thanks to Sir Oswell. To Sir Lance as well.”

“I'll tell 'em.”

The messenger had helped himself uninvited to a piece of fruit from the tray placed on the table, and he made his answer while bringing it to his mouth. Although Darren had a hard time swallowing his anger, this turn of events had bolstered the spirit of Olt Rose's soldiers far beyond anything that he had hoped for.

These were originally men who had been enthusiastic about setting another territory to the torch, and they almost seemed to be slobbering like stray dogs waiting for food.

“We should seize this chance to launch our offensive,” they kept insisting one-by-one.

The leader of the movement was once again Darren's son, Dingo, yet Darren shook his head at the suggestion.

“Don't make light of Leo.”

“I am not suggesting we kill him here and now,” Dingo's face was red, “but instead of waiting for the sovereign-prince to mediate, if we strike a hard blow against the prince and drive him away with our own strength, then afterwards, we'll be able to take a stronger attitude towards the princely house. And those within our domains who view Leo as a hero will wake up to reality.”

His father fell silent despite himself. Certainly, relying on the sovereign-prince to help him would affect Darren's reputation: even if he was able to socially destroy the prince, he might lose the ability to coerce the ruling house itself.

“Father, we won't chase them too far. Please give your permission,” Dingo asked insistently.

Darren hesitated, but he was a man whose power and influence had long been a match for the ruling family's; he was not used to reigning himself in at

the last moment like this. And then, there was also that information about how Leo had moved camp – it was obvious that he had done so as a precaution and out of fear of Lance’s attacks.

If we attack them now... the thought took root in Darren’s mind.

He granted his son permission.

With unconcealed delight, Dingo went to wait on standby by the gate with seven hundred men. There was a risk that Leo might get impatient and lead an onslaught against the castle town first, but Dingo was determined to fling open the gates and ride out to fight if that happened.

As soon as he saw an opportunity, the quick-witted Lance would definitely attack from behind with his cavalry troops. Those new models of guns and cannons that Leo’s men were equipped with would become useless once the fight turned into confused close-quarter combat.

Early in the morning, two days after the second surprise attack, riders launched an assault on Leo’s camp for the third time.

They struck from the southern direction. Since Leo’s side had taken position on low ground, it was ideal for a cavalry attack, and the riders swooped down the slope.

Leo, however, was naturally not just sitting there helplessly: riflemen had been placed between the trees growing south of the camp, and they were ready for the riders. Cannons also belched out fire, and the projectiles crashed into trees even further south. Several cavalymen fell.

A group of soldiers stood waiting to intercept the remaining riders, their spears at the ready.

At about that same time –

“Open the gates!” Dingo Actica roared, and his troops launched themselves out from the gates of the castle town.

The charge was timed to match with Lance’s cavalry attack. The first to leave was the central column, which consisted mostly of mercenaries. They headed straight towards Leo’s camp, which of course now found itself forced to deal

with them.

Although they looked like they had dashed out without preparation, a second unit followed right behind Dingo's central column. This was the left wing, centred around its cavalymen, which made use of its speed to quickly flank Leo's interception unit, which was now surrounded.

Meanwhile, the right wing, which Dingo led in person, started to move along the river. Leo's attention was occupied by Lance's attack, and he failed to grasp how the army which had left the castle town was manoeuvring as a whole. Leo's troops were lured in by the central column and the left wing, leaving their encampment insufficiently defended.

As a result, Dingo's group was easily able to break through the camp's outer guards. With the cannons immobilised in the south, there was no risk of cannonballs falling towards them.

At around that same time, Lance's riders, who had led the initial charge, brought their first attack to an end and altered their course. Although they had taken damage from the riflemen and cannons, their cooperation was unimpaired as they briskly commenced their retreat.

Leo's cavalymen gave chase.

"Don't let them escape!"

"Kill them!"

Their angry bellows echoed from every direction. And there were many of them.

Or rather – there were too many of them.

They could finally give vent to their fury over Lance's repeated attacks, and that spurred them on so strongly that they forgot to look back towards the encampment behind them. Which meant that they had been lured away by Lance's troops.

This made things even easier for Dingo's unit, which was edging up towards the enemy camp. They continued onwards, while the soldiers set fire to the simple watchtowers, and either demolished the perfunctory abatis placed

around the camp, or avoided them altogether.

When Dingo's group came crashing into the camp, the soldiers who had stayed by Leo's side ran away, screaming.

“What ‘Personal Guards’? What ‘hero’?” Dingo roared with laughter from horseback. “You might have defeated Allion's forces, but your luck ran out when you made an enemy of House Actica! Lord Leo, come on out! I'm a generous warrior: I'll fight you in single combat.”

One after another, he cut down the flags with the emblems of the ruling House and of the Cross Faith, whose presence indicated that these were the troop headquarters.

Dingo's group pushed its way in even further before suddenly realising something: they had expected there to be very few soldiers at the headquarters since they had lured the enemy away from the camp – but there were too few soldiers around. In fact, the place was practically empty.

By the time Dingo's expression had changed because of the realisation, it was already too late.

There was the roar of cannon fire, and earth went flying, mixed in with the blood and flesh of men and horses, spraying their entire surroundings. The shots continued to rain down on them, uninterrupted.

Dingo was shaken from the saddle, and fell to the ground. As a result, his collapsed horse served as a shield against the storm of bullets, but it would be hard to say that luck was on his side. Simply said, it was Leo who had successfully lured the enemy.

After the first surprise attack, Kuon – who excelled at night-time espionage – had been ordered to lurk in the area around Olt Rose's castle town. Percy and Camus' prediction was that if this attack corps was Lance's group which had been sent by Oswell, then, without a doubt, there would come a time when they would act together with those from inside the castle.

And Kuon had commendably managed to detect a person surreptitiously slipping into the castle area under cover of night. His night-vision was

impressive, and there was no doubt that the one he had seen was a messenger from Lance's troops.

They'll work together to attack us from both sides – was Leo's guess. Basing himself on that reading of the situation, he had drawn up a strategy to entice the enemy into his headquarters.

He had his troops pretend to take the enemy's bait and all but desert the camp, then waited to launch an assault on their assailants' core force. The cannons had been aimed towards where the ruling House's flags were planted, and they were set off as the enemy approached them.

But then, where was Leo Attiel at that moment?

He was leading the group which was chasing after Lance's cavalry unit. Although... the 'chasing' was no more than a pretence, aimed at emptying the camp.

He was wholly focused on galloping forward until he heard the roar of artillery that blew apart Dingo's group. At that signal, Leo called out to his men and turned his horse around. Along with his two hundred riders, he started to charge.

Ahead of them was the first interception unit. Since they were in a defenceless forward position, they were surrounded by the enemy's central column and left wing, but that unit's role was precisely to keep those two forces immobilised.

They had essentially been given the most dangerous duty. If they had been annihilated in a short time, the entire strategy would have collapsed at that point. Which was why the elite fighters that were Percy, Camus and Kuon had been included within that unit.

Each of them fought hard.



Percy and Camus excelled with the spear.

When they had headed out to intercept the enemy, Kuon's unit had deliberately fallen behind, allowing them to flank the opposing troops which had eagerly started their encirclement, come up behind them, and scatter the enemy's attention with their manoeuvre. For all that they were highly skilled, Percy and Camus were still unused to group combat, so this was not a trick that they could have attempted.

It paid off, and they were able to hold out astoundingly well.

Just when Darren's soldiers were losing their cool, Leo's cavalry unit attacked the left wing from behind. Darren's side did not have the mental preparedness for that, and so neither did they have much persistence. Carried by the momentum of Leo's unit coming to the rescue, the interception troop once again went on the offensive – the mercenary-based central column was the first to start pulling back, and when their centre collapsed, the left wing gradually lost its will to fight.

When messengers came hurrying with further news of how the right wing had been routed, and how Dingo had to be carried back to the castle, carried on his companions' shoulders, there was clearly no longer any way of winning, and Darren's men all started running back to the castle town.

Darren's face had turned ashen when he saw his blood-covered second son being carried in to the castle area, and although many of his men were still outside, he ordered that the gates be shut, not only to the castle, but also to the town. Finding themselves locked out, most of the mercenaries considered fleeing, then fell to their knees on the spot, and begged for mercy.

Good.

Leo Attiel slowed his horse's pace, and breathed a sigh of relief beneath his helmet. For now, things were going according to plan.

He sent messengers again to every one of the units, and, by noon, they had set up formation right outside the main gates. The cannons had also been hauled over, and were aimed at the town's walls.

They had intended to ride the momentum and break in, but, as though to chip

away at their spirits, Lance's cavalry corps launched an attack on them. Platoons of two or three hundred men rushed towards them again and again.

At noon, they came from the south then, just half an hour later, it was from the east. Another hour and a half later, it was from the west, even though the river should have been in their way. It was clear that they had made the considerable detour to avoid it, but it still gave the impression they had appeared as though by magic, since the cooperation between the platoons was so perfect that they almost seemed able to time each other's breathing.

Taken individually, none of these were large-scale attacks, but since Leo's side was not numerous enough to surround the castle, they were forced to rush to repel them each time.

When Darren's soldiers, who had taken refuge back in the town, saw that Leo had run into an unexpected problem, they rallied once more, and started shooting from above the ramparts while infantrymen left from another gate to create a diversion.

From the outset, Leo's side had never had the numbers to topple the castle. Leo had nevertheless made the attempt by relying on their superior speed and equipment, as well as on their fully-loaded cannons, which would serve as siege weapons. However, Lance's intervention had outdone theirs in terms of 'speed', crushing Leo's optimistic hopes.

The battle which had begun in the early morning had continued throughout the afternoon, and showed no signs of ending even when evening was drawing close. The people of the castle town were certainly terrified of the fighting, and they had locked themselves up in storehouses and cellars, trembling as they huddled close together. There were even some who had put boats out on the river, and made their escape northwards.

The time for Leo's plan to succeed had long since passed. Yet even so, Leo Attiel was not going to call back his troops.

"Your Highness!"

Percy knelt down beside Leo beneath the dark red sky. The face under his helmet was covered in sweat, and his armour's breastplate was stained with dark blood from those he had killed.

“Our units are reaching a level of damage that we cannot ignore anymore.”

“ ... ”

“I deeply apologise – our strength was unable to live up to your expectations, Your Highness. For now, let us retreat.”

Sitting on horseback, Leo Attiel removed his helmet. He seemed about to fling it to the ground again, but then immediately changed his mind and placed it back on his head.

He could hear birds making a racket by the side of the river. They must be swarming because of the blood and flesh splattered about by the cannonballs.

“Withdraw,” Leo cried out. “We withdraw!”

While leading the movement, Leo glanced up towards the heavens. Dark black clouds seemed to be pulsating in the blood-red sky.

He ground his teeth.

They had obtained victory after victory. Yet in the end, the soldiers up on the ramparts were the ones shouting out triumphantly, and hurling abuse as they watched his soldiers leave.

He had lost.

Chapter 4: Child of the Land

Part 1

Having returned to Guinbar, Leo immediately sent out scouts. This wasn't only because he was wary of Darren being in pursuit, but also because he wanted them to investigate the terrain around Olt Rose.

Their defeat stemmed from a lack of information. Just a single piece more might have allowed them to predict how Lance's troops would move.

After that, the other problem had been the number of soldiers. After meeting with Savan Roux, the castle lord, Leo had informed him that, "Darren is scheming to capture Guinbar," and had ordered him to hire a great many more troops. This was, of course, to defend Guinbar, but also so as to add part of them to his own attack corps.

In other words, Leo had not yet given up.

As long as his information and troops were complete, he would probably have ridden his horse the very next day after his defeat, to raise his sword a second time, while the walls of Olt Rose and their surroundings were filled with the stench of gunpowder smoke.

Leo chaffed with impatience.

'Speed' is crucial.

He had already thought so when they went to capture Olt Rose, but the meaning was not limited to tactics on the battlefield: it also concerned his strategy for what to do after having subjugated Darren.

Darren plotted Lord Leo's assassination, and was immediately cut down at Leo's own hands – He wanted that to become a reality. With just that, he would be able to speed up the plan to unite Atall as one.

He could not afford to have trouble simply because of one man like Darren.

“We need airships,” Leo asserted to Percy and the others. “There’s nothing better to investigate the layout of a battlefield. They would be useful for messengers too. Is there any way to get five or six... no, even just three would be enough.”

However –

While they were still only halfway through the preparations for the second attack, envoys came from Tiwana, sent by the sovereign-prince. He demanded that both Darren and Leo explain the situation to him.

“Your Highness, you are requested to leave at once for Tiwana,” said the envoy.

“My life was targeted,” Leo answered however, “I will not stay in the same place as Darren.”

Thus, he refused to go to the capital

A second messenger soon came to see him, but Leo again turned him down. Once the prince was wedded to Florrie, he would have the duty of being a 'bridge-builder' with Allion. Leo's assessment was that since the sovereign-prince was aware of the importance of this, he would yield if his son remained firm.

But Leo's actions at Conscon Temple seemed to have worried his father more than Leo had anticipated. When yet a third envoy arrived, the message he carried was:

“If Second Prince Leo refuses the summons a third time, I will have a notice proclaimed that he is to be chased down and dragged before me.”

In front of the messenger, Leo's expression remained calm, but he was inwardly surprised. If he had received that letter when he was alone, he might even have started trembling uncontrollably.

First, there were the “summons” to explain himself before the sovereign-prince. They had been sent out as an official document, and were synonymous to declaring that, “you are simply a retainer, not a member of the princely house”.

And needless to say, the “proclamation that he is to be dragged before me” was essentially an order to “capture a fugitive criminal”.

Did something happen to Father? Leo wondered, completely blind to his own faults.

Once the messenger had left the room, Leo kicked the wall as hard as he could.

I knew 'speed' was important.

If he could have captured Olt Rose, he could have branded Darren a 'criminal', and then the situation would never have turned out like this. But it was too late for regrets.

“What will you do?”

In response to Percy's question, Leo's expression looked like he was about to burst into laughter at any moment.

“What can I do except go? I want to unite the country, so I can't be the one to divide it.” His eyes were filled with anger and self-mockery. Yet even so – “I swear by all that is holy that we did nothing wrong. I'll explain that in person to Father.”

He did not seem to be in despair. Percy understood that, and nodded carefully in response.

“I understand. Then we too...”

“No. The only guard I'm taking is Kuon. Percy, there's something I want you lot to do for me.”

After a short discussion, Leo prepared what he needed for the journey.

Some ten days later, Leo was gazing the northern meadows as he arrived at

Tiwana, the capital city, which almost seemed to be binding together patches of countryside. Before he even had time to wash off the dirt from travelling, he and Darren were summoned together before the sovereign-prince.

It was already evening by then.

Father must be absolutely furious – thought Leo. He remembered how, after he had wilfully gone to meet with the king of Allion, his father had called him to his personal chambers to yell at him.

Leo steeled himself for having angry roars flung at him as soon as he appeared, but the sovereign-prince's expression, as he sat on the throne, was stern, and his gaze was equally cold, whether he turned it towards his son or towards Darren.

Apart from a few Royal Guards, there was no one in the audience chamber, and no other retainers present. Given how things stood, he probably wanted to bring things to an end as discretely as possible.

“Let's hear what both of you have to say about the reasons for this ruckus,” at Magrid's words, Leo was the first to speak.

“It was because Darren turned his blade against me,” he explained.

After telling about how he had been targeted by a surprise attack to the holiday resort area, and how about how he had just barely managed to overcome it, he went on to talk about how they had captured and interrogated several soldiers, who had confessed that Darren was the mastermind.

“That's impossible,” Darren Actica vociferously interrupted.

“What's impossible?” Leo shot Darren a sidelong glare. “We arrested several soldiers, and I can have them brought here.”

“Even if the soldiers were fooled into believing that I was the mastermind, it is nothing but a trap set by someone who wishes for my downfall. Something similar happened not so long ago. Sir Savan called me to his castle on the grounds that the leader of the marauders who were causing havoc at Guinbar's quarry apparently looked like my son. Your Highness Leo, wasn't that misunderstanding supposed to have already been cleared up?”

Darren deliberately crossed that dangerous bridge. In bringing up that past quarrel, he was playing the card that “Lord Leo has already suspected me unfairly before this.”

Leo had captured Darren's son, Togo, but he had deliberately presented him as a 'stranger' with the intention of subsequently blocking any of Darren's manoeuvres by keeping Togo under guard at Guinbar Castle. The prince had wanted, if at all possible, to draw Darren's faction to his side, but the way he had dealt with things back then had provoked a bitter enmity.

While Leo stuttered, Darren instead continued speaking.



“Your Majesty, there must be some nefarious actor at work who wishes to drive a wedge between House Actica and the princely House. His Highness Leo, who is known for the heroic way that he saved the temple, is honest and upright. It is for that very reason, however, that his emotions are easily provoked, and I fear that His Highness might have been duped by vile rumours spread by that nefarious agent.”

How dare he... Leo felt like punching Darren in the face.

Standing there, next to him, was the man who had unmistakably targeted his life. Yet Darren didn't breathe so much as a hint of that fact as he calmly proclaimed his innocence to the sovereign-prince. Was this what was called a devil in human skin?

Or maybe humans, who are supposed to be fashioned in God's image, are actually closer in nature to the devil? Unbidden fury filled his heart.

Leo was unable to smash through the play that Darren was acting out. In which case, what he needed were the words and attitude capable of swaying the sovereign-prince's heart and influencing the judgement he would hand down, but this discussion was something that Darren himself had originally asked for, and the sovereign-prince was increasingly inclined to view his son as dangerous. The odds had been stacked against Leo from the start.

While Leo could not say half of what he was thinking, the sovereign-prince raised a hand and stopped the two of them.

“Fine, I understand what both of you are saying,” his decision was more or less exactly what Leo had been expecting. “At the moment, I do not have enough information. Until I have had it investigated, neither of you is to start a fight with the other. Whatever the circumstances may be, I fully intend to punish whoever made the first move.”

Leo had no choice but to obey, while Darren had no reason not to.

Leo did not even stay three days in Tiwana. During that short time, Florrie had asked to see him, but Leo refused on the grounds that “my health isn't great.”

Please be sure to make things up to Miss Florrie – it wasn't that he had

forgotten Percy's repeated reminders, but right now, and even if it was Florrie, he did not think that he would be able to talk normally to anyone.

His tactics had been aimed at strengthening the central power by forcing the vassal-lords to submit, even through sheer strength if necessary. Yet he had tripped over the very first stumbling block. Leo was furious over his own incompetence.

He could not deny that he had been careless on every single point. Yet simultaneously, and for the first time, he felt irritated by his father, the sovereign-prince – *Father doesn't understand anything!*

The ruling House has to strengthen its central power – at least as it is right now, with the vassal-lords not even falling in line with its policies, we won't be able to compete against Allion and Dytiann. Even though everything I've done is for Atall's sake, why doesn't he understand ?

When he and Darren had been presenting their excuses, his father's attitude had been strange: it had been that of a ruler, coldly and emotionlessly staring down at those far beneath him. Whenever Leo recalled that gaze, he could not help but feel chilled to the core.

He requested several times to have a meeting alone with his father, but was turned down each time.

Stark Barsley, who was in Tiwana at the same time, came to see Leo. It was impossible for Stark to feel anything but flabbergasted at Leo's actions, but outwardly at least, he simply gave advice like an elder.

“For now, you need to stay quiet. You cannot expect our sovereign to tolerate fights within our borders. And all the less so when one of the parties involved is his own kin. If His Majesty appears to be dealing with you so strictly, it is only to protect your House. Give it time, and His Majesty will be willing to listen to you.”

Leo, however, paid him no heed. In the end, angry, irritated and faintly uneasy, he returned to Guinbar three days after arriving in Tiwana.

Those at the head of Atall who gathered around the sovereign-prince only had an even worse impression of Leo because of it.

His Highness does not understand His Majesty's heart, and will apparently only rely on Savan, who is loyal whom he knows to be loyal to him.

One of these days, he might come up with some other excuse and break into our territories.

Darren, on the other hand, was gaining momentum. He had lost his eldest son in a series of incidents, and his second son had been gravely wounded, but now he saw a chance to shift the blame, and started spreading all sorts of insinuations.

“It seems the prince bears a grudge against me for not having contributed to establishing his Personal Guards.”

Or else –

“It's doubtful whether that attack on the resort area even happened. Isn't it possible that he used marauders that he had to hand to try and stage his own little play?”

“As a faithful vassal to our ruling House, I stopped at merely sending the prince packing. However, while I am a tolerant man, if this happens again, then if the prince gets hit, it might not just be from a stray bullet. Let's hope he's learned his lesson.”

His words were vehement, but Leo, having returned to Guinbar, wasn't sitting idle either.

The Personal Guards had, for the time being, been garrisoned in Guinbar, but there was the risk that the sovereign-prince might soon declare that “until my judgement has been handed down, Leo is not to move any soldiers,” and then use that as a pretext for dissolving the unit. Before that could happen, Leo had his guards transferred beyond the sovereign-prince's reach – to Conscon Temple, which had a good relationship with.

The prince had already given Percy the order to take the Personal Guards away while he himself was in Tiwana. Since there needed to be at least some kind of official excuse for it, the explanation given was that they were going to perform large-scale joint drills. With Camus' help, the temple's bishop had written a letter to that effect to the sovereign-prince, and Savan would be

shouldering the cost of having them stationed in one single place.

This was what Leo had been talking when, just before leaving Guinbar, he had said that there was something he wanted Percy and the others to do. Thanks to that, he had for now avoided having his troops confiscated, but it was no more than a temporary measure, and it did not change the fact that his military strength had been moved far from him .

Which meant that he would not be able to mobilise them quickly.

It was at around about that time that the target of the rumours actively being spread by Darren's side slowly shifted from Leo to Savan.

“From the time there was that banquet to welcome Hayden, Savan has blamed me for the attacks on his quarry.”

“That story didn't have a word of truth in it. Now that I think about it, it was from that time onwards that Lord Leo started getting closer to Savan. Could it be that Savan was planning from the start to trick the kind-hearted prince?”

“In that case, when the prince led his onslaught against our Dharam, Savan might have been the one pulling the strings from behind...”

Darren used people to circulate similar stories in Tiwana and in other castle towns. To Leo's mind, his goal was not only to criticise and checkmate the prince, but also to lay the groundwork for an attack on Guinbar. In the near future, he would definitely come up with some reason or another, then march on Savan's territory.

In a way, Darren's existence was emblematic of the vassal-lords. He had been pivotal to ousting the previous sovereign-prince, and he took great pride in his power, which all but allowed him to stand on the same level as the ruling House. If he captured Guinbar, then not only would his momentum increase, but Leo's ideal of “strengthening the central authority” would vanish completely, like a heap of sand in a child's sandpit kicked away by adults.

Stark had talked about “giving it time”, but if he just stood by with his arms folded, the situation would only head in a worse and worse direction.

What do I do? Leo's impatience grew with every passing day.

Percy and Camus were both at the temple, so he did not have any advisors close by. He only had Kuon by his side to act as his guard. Currently, there was also Sarah, whom Camus had sent over “in case of communications with the temple,” but neither of those two were suited to complex talks about politics.

It had already been two months since he and Darren had stood before the sovereign-prince.

During that time, Savan had recruited a great many mercenaries, and had issued orders to the various keeps and fortresses within his domains. The principal keep lords and fortress commanders had gathered at Guinbar Castle, and in all, they managed to scrounge up two thousand soldiers. As was to be expected in a region that guarded the border, it was easier to find fighters here than in other areas. Their equipment, however, was old, and besides not having any airships, they only had a few guns and cannons.

Moreover, it proved impossible to keep that many men stationed at Guinbar Castle. Darren was gradually starting to bare his fangs.

He fell back on his old trick of using marauders to start skirmishes. Throughout all the villages in the area, groups of bandits, thieves and penniless mercenaries suddenly appeared, setting the houses on fire. They killed the men who resisted, kidnapped the women, and stole the crops and livestock.

The keep lords and commanders who had arrived in Guinbar Castle were forced to hurriedly go back to where they had come from and deal with the attackers. The castle's defences continued to be chipped away, and Leo's impatience turned into anger and irritation.

One day, unable to bear simply staying still, Leo dressed up as one of the people to go down to the castle town and take a look at the assembled mercenaries. In terms of numbers, there were quite a few of them but, just as had been the case at the temple, recruiting soldiers far and wide made it easy for the enemy to slip spies in among them.

How many of them can I actually use?

Among the soldiers were some who had been labourers, working on the church's construction until just the other day. Was it because they had decided that they far preferred wielding a spear to cutting and carrying stone, or was it

perhaps because the church might be destroyed if the town was attacked, and so they had chosen to take a stance to defend their work?

That church was where Leo and Florrie were supposed to one day hold their wedding ceremony.

If Guinbar is set alight, I'll lose my authority. Relations with Allion and the temple will become uneasy.

It happened on the way back...

All of a sudden, among the people who were coming and going along the night-time streets, two men who were entangled together, came tumbling into view just in front of Leo. A fight had broken out between ruffians who had come to work as mercenaries in the tavern which doubled as their inn.

To the startled Leo, it felt for a second as though Darren's assassins had come to target his life. The story about how Darren's oldest son, Togo, had been killed with a single strike to his back flashed through the prince's mind.

Kuon was with him, acting as his guard, but since they were pretending to be part of the populace, neither of them carried a sword. Kuon quickly stepped in front of the prince.

“You taking that bastard's side!?” One of the brawlers misunderstood his action and thrust Kuon aside.

The boy dodged his arm and delivered a kick to the man's stomach.

The assailant was knocked backwards but the blow must have been a shallow one, since he immediately got back on his feet. He unsheathed the sword at his waist with a cutting motion.

Although he had intended for it to be a threat, Kuon instead drew right up to his opponent. While the man panicked in his confusion, a fist struck him in the throat, and the sword was snatched from his hand.

“Kill him,” Leo ordered.

“Hiii,” the man shrieked, and sank to his knees.

Just in the instant when Kuon stepped up towards him –

“Wait,” Leo cried, changing his mind.

He was too late, however, and the blade whistled through the air.

Leo gasped and the flash of steel halted. The tip of the blade quivered right before the man's eyes. These promptly rolled until only the whites could be seen, and he fell in a dead faint. The people who had been coming and going along the street, as well as those who had come out from the tavern, broke out in chatter. Leo and Kuon hurriedly continued on their way back.

“Kuon,” after a while, the prince called out to his bodyguard, who was scanning their surroundings in every direction. “What is it?”

The prince stared intently at the boy. Leo had held a sword; stopping a blade which had gathered momentum required a corresponding amount of strength and leg power. Yet Kuon had halted that sword without staggering even by a single step.

“You never actually intended to kill him, did you?”

“Sorta...”

“Hm?”

“I sort of thought that you wouldn't want to go through with it, Prince.”

“I wouldn't want to go through with it? Atall's Lord Leo isn't that soft-hearted. You saw how I cut away at Darren's soldiers, didn't you?”

“...”

“I told you to kill him. A soldier obeys orders.”

“But...”

“Enough,” Leo started to walk even faster. He realised himself that his nerves were on edge. Having a retainer ignore his orders out of concern for him was no good, so part of the reason for his irritation was anger at himself.

After taking a few more steps, however, he stopped. Sarah was in front of the castle's drawbridge. She was, as usual, dressed in her novice's robes.

When Leo waved his hand, Sarah looked relieved and came up to them. Kuon wrinkled his nose.

“Why're you here?”

“Because the two of you disappeared from the castle. I came rushing out because I was worried that something might have had happened.”

Everything about her speech and demeanour revealed that Sarah must have received a high level of education, yet whenever she was speaking to Kuon, her tone became oddly common.

“I'm with the prince.”

“Then that's even more reason for concern,” she stuck out her tongue, which irritated Kuon.

“My skills are trustworthy.”

“Your arm is, yes. But that's only if things are straightforward. If I was an assassin, I could think of a hundred ways to get you away from the prince. I could run after pretending to make a first attempt on his life, and lure you away; or else I could shout out 'over there, there's an enemy general you can kill to earn glory'; or I could win you over with the luscious skin and flesh of a sexy and scantily clad woman... ah, but that might be kind of a pain. Or even more simply, I'd just have someone jeer at you and say 'Kuon's an idiot, a fool, a stupid-face,' and you would immediately abandon the prince's side to go chase after that person.”

Leo's eyes opened wide. Sarah's tone and attitude were exactly the same as if she had said, 'Alright, my lad. Come at me from any angle.’ Yet what was surprising was that she herself wasn't trying to provoke Kuon. What brought Leo to that realisation was that she got angry as Kuon became irate from her deliberately taunting him.

Even now, Kuon was yelling, “What's that, bratty girl?”

“Even if you call me a 'bratty girl', you're still younger than me, Kuon. Monkey boy, stray dog,” she barred her teeth and fought back.

Leo cleared his throat and Sarah put a hand in front of her mouth, her expression saying 'Oops'.

After a moment, Leo indicated one of the high-restaurants that could be

found in the quiet side streets.

“Let's stop by there,” he suggested to the other two.

From the staircase, the first and second floors were no different from those of other restaurants in the area, but the third floor was a series of private rooms for the use of honoured customers, and Leo entered one of them. The three of them sat at the fairly large table there.

Leo drank a mouthful of ale flavoured with ginger. It was certainly not high-quality alcohol, but right now, he wanted the stimulus.

“What's going on?” Sarah asked Kuon in a low voice.

It was rare to see Leo drink, and it was equally unusual for him to eat out or to invite any of them to share a meal with him.

“Nothing. It's nothing you need to know about,” replied Kuon, which was tacit admittance that *there is something going on*.

Sarah frowned, bristling.

“What's that? Do you think that while I was away at the temple, you got closer to the prince than anyone? My, what a great and distinguished gentleman you've become.”

She had spoken in a low voice but, since their surroundings were quiet, Leo had also been able to catch what she said. Kuon looked irritated but, just then – “Ah!” Sarah suddenly exclaimed so loudly that both he and Leo were startled.

“What is it now?”

“You... Have you grown a bit taller? You definitely have. Are you going to just impertinently overtake me? Here, turn around.”

“Shut up. And stop touching me.”

Leo laughed at the exchange between the two of them, which remained the same as ever and which was continuing on from earlier. Thinking about it, these two had been like that ever since he first met them. Back when they had been fleeing through the mountains in the dead of night, not knowing when Allion's

army might find them, Kuon and Sarah had been bickering incessantly, like two small birds pecking at each other, and Percy had to keep telling them off.

Then there was also the time when the battles at Conscon Temple were over, and Leo had invited the two of them, along with Percy and Camus, to eat with him and Florrie, his fiancée, since she had been saying for some time that she really wanted to thank them. She had not seen them since they had met in Allion.

The conversation had flowed pleasantly. In front of Leo and Florrie, Sarah had adopted a meek and modest attitude.

“I need to apologise to you all. Back then, I had completely lost my calm, and far from thanking you, I even...” Florrie had started.

Kuon who, after fidgeting about uncomfortably for a bit, had been stuffing food into his mouth at a startling rate, piped up:

“Yeah, I was really surprised when you turned a sword towards us, Lady. You looked like you were stronger than any of Allion’s soldiers.”

It was rare for him to make a joke like that, and Florrie hunched her shoulders as though she wanted to disappear from sight. Sarah had furiously berated Kuon.

“Do you want me to sew that mouth shut for you right now? All you’ve got is a nasty tongue and no manners,” she shouted.

“Those two are like that every time they see each other. They must have a really bad affinity.”

Leo said, while Sarah had still been going on at Kuon, but for some reason, Florrie had smiled slightly.

“Hmm. Who knows?” She answered, tilting her head.

Leo had realised something at that point. Namely: that women were a mystery.

He drank another sip of ale. It felt like it had been a long time since he had thought about Florrie like that.

Having gotten worked up, Sarah seemed about to drag Kuon up from his chair

and force him to stand, when her eyes met Leo's and she sat back down, her face red.

"I beg your pardon, Your Highness. I was causing a fuss."

"It's fine. More importantly... I'm the one who needs to beg your pardon," Leo said, looking at Kuon.

"Eh?" Not surprisingly, the boy looked surprised.

"Despite your achievements, I haven't been able to give you a reward."

"Ah, no... that's..."

"If only I'd done a bit better. Around about now, the Personal Guards would be double the number and you might be a company commander with five platoons under you, Kuon. Actually, no – since you're familiar with every weapon and every way of fighting, it might be better to put you in charge of a troop of mercenaries who've come from all over."

"That would be nice. But it's story for much later, when Kuon is twice the height that he is now, right?" Sarah joked. "With Kuon's current size, the mercenaries would just make fun of him."

Kuon gave her sidelong look, but he didn't protest. Perhaps he was mindful of the prince, but it was also that he had never been good at dealing with being the topic of conversation.

"I'm fine as is. As long as I can eat every day, that's plenty."

He tried to quickly bring the topic to a close, but Sarah wasn't going to let him escape so easily.

"What a strange fellow you are. All you would do every day was look irritated and say, 'I want to earn glory, I want to earn glory'. And big brother would always say, 'You're still immature. You need to patiently hone your skills. Those who rush out to meet tomorrow before anyone else are the ones who will lose their lives without ever seeing that tomorrow'."

Sarah lifted her eyebrows with her fingers and spoke in a deep voice, imitating her brother. As was to be expected from a sibling, it was surprisingly like him and Leo almost laughed. This time, however, he stopped himself.

Sarah was still going on,

“Even though you never seem to listen to what anyone says, starting with my brother, have you given up now? And in the first place, why were you in such a hurry to earn glory? Is it for money, or because you want to go up in life? Do you need social standing because you’ve promised to marry a high-class young lady?”

Kuon looked towards Leo with a completely fed up expression. Normally, this was where Percy or Camus would bring a stop to things, but, just this one time, Leo was not going to let Kuon off either.

“I’m interested too.”

“P-Prince...”

“I don’t know how you feel about it, but for me – who doesn’t have many allies – you are a trustworthy retainer, and also an irreplaceable companion, and even a friend. I would be troubled if you were to think ‘I really can’t earn glory as long as I’m around that prince’ and leave; or if you got too impatient and ‘died without seeing tomorrow’. If you have circumstances or reasons, then I very much want to hear about them. Of course, I can’t tell you that I’ll arrange for a new war tomorrow, but I might be able to help you in other areas.”

“...”

For a moment, Kuon opened his eyes wide with surprise as he stared fixedly at Lord Leo. He then almost immediately turned them away, unable to bear Leo’s equally unwavering – and far more enthusiastic – gaze. In the end, however, he gave an answer.

“There’s nothing.... amazing about my circumstances... my Lord,” Kuon said heavily. “There’s just that one prediction about me – maybe if it comes true, everyone will be surprised... but that’s all.”

“Who was it who made a prediction?”

“Old Granny Mist. A priestess to the god of the mountain, Tei Tahra.”

Sarah was about to interrupt, but Leo sent her a glance over Kuon’s head to stop her. *Let me handle this*, it said. He then adopted a deliberately nonchalant

tone.

“A priestess? I’ve heard that in the religions of the mountain lands and other remote areas, priestesses aren’t just women priests, but that they can hear the voices of the gods, and that their role is to convey the divine will to the people of this world.”

When he mentioned that knowledge that he gleaned from books, Kuon agreed in a subdued voice.

“They are like that... my lord.”

“Then, what is the prediction about you”

As Leo asked his questions one-by-one, Kuon returned answers, bit-by-bit. It was at that point that Sarah noticed: Leo was using their conversation as a starting point to learn about the place of Kuon’s birth. The boy had occasionally let drop fragments of information, but he had never seemed to want to follow them up by confiding everything about his past.

Which was why Leo was pretending to make casual conversation, repeatedly asking questions one after another in a deliberately dispassionate voice, and at a relaxed pace, so as to not put Kuon on his guard. And Kuon was carried along by that pace, like someone rowing a small boat away from the shore and who, while enjoying the slow, rocking motion of the waves, didn’t realise that they were drifting away from the coast. And so, unusually for Kuon, he continued to tell his tale.

He was by no means a good talker, and he tended to confuse his listeners with the way he unconcernedly brought up names and knowledge about the mountains that they were unfamiliar with. Nevertheless, Leo listened without getting impatient. Even if there was information that he wanted, he never tried to jump straight to the answer he was looking for, and always advanced methodically, step-by-step.

Sarah was anything but patient, but although it was sometimes so irritating that she was almost shaking, she too gradually got an understanding of the full picture.

Part 2

Kuon was born and raised south of the Kesmai Plains, at the foot of what was known, in the principality, as the Fangs Mountain Range. The settlement that existed there naturally had its own distinctive beliefs and culture, separated as it was from the outside by rugged peaks.

It was also for that same reason that neighbouring countries did not send armies against it. Less prudent powers, however, had time and time again attempted to invade. Criminals chased out from their own countries, bandits, as well as nobles or generals who had fallen into ruin had all tried to break into those isolated lands and turn them into their new stronghold.

And each time, the young men from the village picked up their weapons and fought back.

While the overland route was almost inaccessible, they had built a port in the bay, and through this, they had some – very limited – contact with the outside, which meant that they held a large number of weapons, including swords and guns.

Most of those who lived by the mountain remained there for their entire life. They naturally had the advantage of terrain and they were subject to none, so their sense of independence was unusually strong compared to people from other lands. They banded together with terrifying solidarity whenever anyone from the outside threatened their families, their livelihood in the mountains, or tried to defile the sanctuary to Tei Tahra, the mountain god.

Kuon was born a member of those ‘mountain people’. However, as he himself had once said, he was not a ‘pureblood’ from the mountains.

At one time, a mercenary from ‘outside’ had strayed into the tribe’s bay.

The man had apparently been on the losing side of a naval battle, and had drifted for many days in a small boat, until he had washed up in their gulf by

chance. The tribe's punishment for entering their land without permission was death, but because the man was so haggard and emaciated, and because the tribe head wanted information about the war that had taken place on the southern sea – there was, after all, the fear that trouble might come to them – he was allowed to recuperate in the village for a while.

A few months later, the man had recovered and, perhaps fearing that he would be killed by these barbaric savages, he fled the mountain under cover of darkness.

Yet by that time, one of the women of the tribe was carrying his child.

That child was Kuon.

They were a people who had built a world for themselves and, for a very long time, no foreign blood had entered it. Mother and child were, of course, treated harshly. They were entirely forbidden from taking part in the village ceremonies, and were never invited to other houses.

Whenever Kuon wandered around, playing by himself, if other children of the same age caught sight of him, they would jeer at him –

“Look, it's Kuon.”

“Only half his blood is human. He was born when an evil spirit impregnated his mother.”

Their tribe believed that a person's forehead was the doorway to their soul. And since good and evil spirits were constantly feuding in the mountains, the people feared that the evil spirits would enter someone's forehead and control their body like a soul would, turning them into 'betrayers' who harmed the tribe. Because of that, members of the tribe marked their foreheads with a protective charm. On each and every one of them, the shamans who served as priests tattooed a red, oval-shaped bead surrounded by an intricate pattern.

If the tattoo was given to a young child, however, it was said that, “it will hinder the influence of the good spirits, and will stunt the child's growth,” so the tattoo was permitted only to those who had come of age and who had their own families.

Still, the balance between good and evil spirits varied considerably according to time and season. Once a year, Tei Tahra's protection weakened, and evil spirits were said to proliferate within the mountains; it was only during that time that children were allowed to wear charms. Early in the morning, their father would lift them onto his lap and paint the protective pattern on their forehead with red dyes.

Only Kuon's forehead remained bare at those times. Women were forbidden from drawing the amulets against evil spirits. He had no father, and he and his mother were estranged from her relatives, so there was no one to draw the charm for him.

And so, the children taunted him more than ever.

"If you touch him, evil spirits will come for you!" They said as they hurled stones at him.

Kuon had been hot-tempered ever since very young, and he threw stones back. While they were running away, screaming with excitement, he caught them and deliberately struck them on their hated foreheads. He was, of course, at an overwhelming numerical disadvantage. Even more importantly, he did not have a single friend. The other children quickly surrounded him, punching and kicking him to their heart's content. Kuon was covered in injuries, but if any of the others had even a single scratch, their parents would kick up a fuss.

They went to Kuon's mother, protesting loudly.

"Drive out that loathsome *beast!*"

"Tie it up to a pillar of the house!"

Kuon heard their angry roars time and time again.

His mother, who had broken a tribal taboo, had lost her right to her own home. Even when illness forced her to stay in bed, none of her relatives came to see her. Unable to bear hearing his mother crying out from a fever-induced nightmare, Kuon ran out of the house in the pouring rain, and left the village at the foot of the mountain.

He had gone to beg for help from the shamans. Usually, they lived in isolated retreats in the mountains, far from other people, and he had heard that they

were knowledgeable about illnesses and medicine. But a child's feet could not travel very far. He walked for an entire day and night but, in the end, he did not find any of the shamans, and could only return to the village, drenched through from the rain. When his mother's older brother saw Kuon in that state, maybe he felt some compassion after all, because he secretly brought them medicinal plants, and concocted a remedy that he had once learned from a shaman.

Kuon's mother had always been in frail health and, when he was eight, she died of a chest illness. For a while, the tribe argued over what to do with him. None of his mother's relatives wanted to take him in.

In the end, a man called Datta Wei took charge of Kuon, giving as his reason that "my house needs an extra pair of hands."

Datta Wei.

He had a surname, which meant that he was a warrior.

Datta had about two hundred subordinates, all of whom also bore the name 'Wei'. His wife, on the other hand, could not take that name, and neither could his own children unless they officially joined the unit once they were adults.

The same, of course, held true for Kuon. Even though he received food and a place to sleep, his position was close to being a servant, and his circumstances had certainly not improved.

The adults still despised him, especially the women who looked down on his mother for her 'wanton' behaviour. The children from the same age-group as him also continued to bully him. Datta's son, Diu, was particularly violent about it. He was three years older than Kuon, and was always going around saying,

"Don't speak to me like we're equal, you fucking 'unwanted spawn'. I'll definitely become a man of the 'Wei', but you won't. If you go to the battlefield, it'll just be to die as a shield for me or my father. Now doesn't that sound nice?"

Without a word of warning, he would knock him down as soon as he saw him. He stole Kuon's share of food, then kicked him in his growling stomach. Diu was outstandingly good at hiding his behaviour from his parents and from the comrades-in-arms of the 'Wei', while Kuon got pushed around as the lowest-

ranking member of the household. On top of doing a servant's work inside the house, he was always sent out to accompany the hunters.

– If asked whether he felt nothing but unhappiness at his circumstances back then, Kuon would have to say that he couldn't really remember.

Of course, he resented Diu. The other boy was older and larger than him and, because there were adults around, Kuon couldn't fight back like he used to.

Naturally, he felt depressed. But at the same time, to Kuon in those days, the mountain life that existed thanks to the blessings from Tei Tahra was the only world he knew.

The world outside...

His imagination ran rampant about it. Whenever he heard the adults who worked in trade at the port talk about the surrounding countries, he always told himself –

One day, I'll leave the mountains and go to other lands too.

That wish grew especially strong right after his mother's death. Surely there, the children his age wouldn't throw stones at him, and the adult women wouldn't gaze at him in contempt for no reason.

As he got older, that simple, innocent yearning turned into slightly more realistic plans, as he thought about whether to run away one night through the mountains, or whether to steal a boat from the harbour and row himself into the open sea.

Yet at the same time, Kuon had a tremendous fear of breaking the mountains rules, which also came from the fact that he was not a pureblood. His existence was one that the mountain rejected and, if he failed to follow along with its god and its people, even if only by a little, he was terrified that he might be eliminated. His young heart never stopped trembling from that one fear.

In particular, there was the coming-of-age ceremony, which was performed once a year. This was the time that Kuon feared the most. As a minor who could not take part in it, he had no way of knowing anything about the ceremony itself, but when the time for it drew close, a 'betrayal' would inevitably appear within the community.

During that period, the priesthood spoke as one, saying that:

“The mountain’s energy is changing. The good and righteous are starting to go into hiding, and the evil spirits are starting to swarm.”

The mountain god, Tei Tahra’s, divine protection was at its weakest at those times. During that period, hunting was restricted, fishing was completely banned, and it was forbidden from leaving the house once the sun had set. This was also the period during which fathers drew the protective charms on their children’s foreheads.

Moreover, it was said that, “those with evil thoughts are easily possessed. Those who do not believe in Tei Tahra’s divine protection, those who disagree with the decisions of the tribe head, and those who use their cunning to deceive others – all of them have wicked hearts which can be drawn in by evil.”

Because of that, Kuon was made fun of even more than usual at those times.

“The only thing you can do, Kuon, is to stay and tremble inside the house. You’re not a pureblood, and you don’t have the charm either, so there’s no way Lord Tei Tahra will grant you His protection. You’ll get possessed as soon as you breathe the air outside.”

“Don’t worry, if that happens, I’ll exterminate you along with the evil spirit!”

Kuon pretended not to be the slightest bit scared of their threats, but inwardly, his anxiety grew exponentially: for all that the people of the community usually faithfully observed the taboos, during this time of the year, there were always some who became possessed by evil.

Once a year, a single trail of smoke would rise in the evening sky.

“Look, look!”

“The great shamans are casting the protective spells against evil!”

Pointing at it, the villagers would start clamouring.

These spells were cast because this was the one day when Tei Tahra’s protection was all but lost and, before long, a member of the tribe would inevitably vanish.

There was never any exception.

One of the men from the village would definitely disappear. Sometimes it was an old man of over sixty, sometimes it was a child who had yet to undergo his coming-of-age ceremony. That man was called into the mountains which were overrun by evil spirits, and it was said that one night, he would stagger aimlessly into the wilderness, responding to those summonses.

The family grieved for him, but there was nothing they could do. Once someone became possessed by evil, they were no more than 'a betrayer who will harm Divine Tei Tahra and the tribe.' It was said that not even the shamans could exorcise them.

Kuon had never seen anyone who was possessed by evil spirits, but it was for that very reason that a strange terror enveloped his heart. "This year, you're the one who's going to go missing" – whenever they pointed at him and said that, he couldn't help but shiver uneasily.

He wondered where those who were possessed by evil went to. What were they looking for, there, beyond the protection from God and the mountain? He wondered if maybe, before going to sleep, he should ask someone to bind his hands and feet. So that he wouldn't be able to stagger out into the night.

I don't have a wicked heart. I hate Diu and that bastard Tubai, but I've never thought of killing them. Lord God Tei Tahra, I'm not a pureblood, but I'm part of your people. Please protect me. Please don't let me be carried off outside.

Up until the moment when he fell asleep, he would desperately pray in silence, while drawing the protective charm with his fingers again and again. It seemed to work, because Kuon never became a 'betrayer'.

Or at least, not until he came of age.

Among the children of the same age group as Kuon, there was a girl called Aqua.

She was a year older than him. Since very young, she had joined in with the boys, and loved playing with slingshots, duelling with sticks, or any kind of rough game. Ostracised by the boys his age, Kuon sometimes became a target for them to throw stones at, and Aqua also took part in that.

When she was eight or nine years old, she was thin, swarthy-skinned, and when she laughed, she seemed to be missing several teeth. Since he didn't have much to do with the other children his age, for a long time, Kuon didn't even realise that Aqua was a girl.

He was nine by the time he noticed it. By then, he had already been with the Wei household for a year.

That day, he had gone hunting with his seniors from the Wei. Although having said that, Kuon's role was, at best, to carry bags, drive the prey to the hunters by shouting, and generally just run around; he had not yet received a gun or a bow. When they were heading back, a bird suddenly flew out from the undergrowth, and one of the hunting dogs belonging to the Wei household followed after it and disappeared off the path.

Having been ordered to "Look for it and bring it back," Kuon waded alone into the bushes, calling its name.

Stepping out onto the path on the other side of it, he found Aqua, equally alone, coming down from the mountain. She was holding a small bow in her hand. Her eyes were brimming with tears but, when she saw Kuon, she glared sharply at him.

"What are you looking at?"

"I'm not looking at anything. I'm searching for a dog. I've got nothing to do with you."

"A dog? Hmph, well you are basically being kept by the Wei. So the pet dogs get along well."

Kuon didn't offer a retort and continued with his search, but Aqua came with him.

"Why are you following me?"

"I'm not following you. I'm looking for prey. Don't lump it with a kid's chores."

It wasn't rare for women in the mountains to have guns or bows. Quite the opposite: be it for self-defence or to be ready for when invaders broke into the mountains, women were generally encouraged to be familiar with weapons.

And in practice, whenever there were trespassers seeking to harm the mountains, women joined the armed units to go and greet them at gunpoint.

Unlike fighting, however, only men were allowed to go hunting. The mountain god Tei Tahra had only bestowed unto men the right to track the birds and beasts that came under his jurisdiction, and, although they could go fishing, no woman was ever permitted to hunt.

Aqua was not happy about it. She was sure that, whether it was at using a bow or at advancing along the mountain paths, she would do much better than any boy her age, so she was constantly pestering the hunters of the 'Holo' and her father, the head warrior, to “let me go hunting too”. Since her father had always firmly refused, that day, she stealthily tailed the hunters. She believed that she could earn recognition if she managed to bring down at least one bird or animal but, in the end, the adults had found her and, after giving her a harsh scolding, they had sent her away.

Which was when she met Kuon.

The bow she held in her hand seemed to be something she had made herself. Perhaps she thought that Kuon had realised it, given that it was considerably smaller than the ones used by adults.

“This bow is much stronger than it looks,” Aqua said proudly, even though she hadn't been asked anything. “The guys who can only bring down beasts with huge weapons are the ones who are really idiots. They don't have any dedication.”

Maintaining a reasonable distance between one another, the two of them continued to search the mountain, but neither of them obtained any results.

The sun had already started to set, and night was the time when Tei Tahra transferred his protection from the humans to the beasts. Unless there was a compelling reason to make an exception, hunting at night was forbidden.

Kuon turned to head back to the village, but Aqua berated him for it.

“Coward. Your unit gave you a mission but you're abandoning it halfway – how are you even a man? This is why you're just a halfwit.”

Kuon was completely fed up by then.

“Shut up. The guy who was sniffing because the adults got angry has nothing to say. *You're* the one who's not being a man. You want me to try Lord Tei Tahra's 'thousand arrows of courage on you?’”



Shouting loudly, he took a step towards her, and Aqua's shoulders suddenly jerked in surprise before her expression quickly turned to fright.

Up until then, Aqua had joined in with the boys when they insulted Kuon, and thrown stones or sticks at him from afar. When he had angrily chased after them, everyone would run away laughing, or would gang up to attack him. It was all part of playing.

But judging from Aqua's expression, she had just realised that now, she was all alone. She closed her mouth shut, hunched her shoulders, and shrank away from him.

Kuon was bewildered by her reaction.

At that moment, the bushes in front of them started to rustle, startling both of them. Something was making its way through the tall grass and would soon be in sight.

In the distance, they could hear the voices of adults calling their names to one another. This was probably the prey they were chasing after.

Kuon was ready to leave at once, but Aqua's expression turned from fear to delight as she readied her bow.

“What're you doing? Run away!”

“If you want to run away, do it by yourself. The first kill I'll bring down has come to find me all by itself!”

Just then, scattering blades of grass in its wake, a grey-brown wild boar appeared.

It was huge. It was so massive that it looked like it could keep running even if Kuon and Aqua both clung to the mane along its back. What drew the eye more than anything were the tusks that curved higher than its snout.

Aqua shot an arrow, but she her timing had been far too hasty. She had been too impatient. She immediately nocked another arrow to her bow but, this time, she was too slow. Lowering its head, the boar charged.

Kuon could picture how Aqua would be flung into the air, and he rushed forward. While he ran, he picked up rocks that were rolling at his feet, and

hurled them at the boar.

Aqua fell backwards. Just as she was about to be trampled underfoot, the second stone that Kuon had thrown struck the boar. It almost hit it in the eye.

The boar backed off noisily.

Just then, adults armed with spears and guns arrived, and the boar, with a high-pitched cry, changed its course and fled. The adults were surprised to find Kuon and Aqua there. They raced after the beast without a moment's delay, but as they were doing so, and because the children had gotten in the way of the hunt, they told them something that was sure to scare more than anything:

“We'll have the shamans punish you after this.”

The shamans, who lived in mountain hermitages away from human settlements, were said to transform children who bothered adults into beasts who prowled the mountains.

“You alright?” Kuon reached out to touch Aqua's shoulder as she started to get up, but his hand was shaken off.

“I couldn't bring it down,” said Aqua, hanging her head. Her voice was shaking, maybe because of how frustrated she felt. The next moment, she lifted her face and screamed,

“It's your fault! If you hadn't interfered, I'd have killed it. Then they wouldn't have gotten mad. I'd have been accepted. I don't want to go to the shamans. I don't want to be turned into a beast or a frog. If someone's going, you go by yourself!”

She was crying as she shouted. She flung herself face downwards against the ground and wept loudly. She seemed to be at a complete loss. So was Kuon: he had intended to go home by himself, but he couldn't leave Aqua behind while she was crying. And that was because he had only just realised that she was a girl.

He stayed rooted in the same spot.

After about five minutes, Aqua stopped crying and slowly stood up. She threw away the bow that she had been holding the whole time and started to walk

back towards the village. Kuon let her put a short distance between them, then started after her. As soon as he did so, Aqua looked back. He expected her to tell him not to follow her, but instead -

“What are you doing? Pick up the bow.”

“Didn't you just throw it away?”

“I'll give it to you. Something like that suits a child like you better.”

That was all she said before briskly walking forward.

Kuon couldn't remember if he picked up the bow or not.

Yet after that, Aqua didn't join the boys to play anymore. She didn't insult him or throw stones at him.

It wasn't because she had become meeker, though – she started to join the 'Holo' men in diligently training at archery.

A woman came of age when she turned twelve. That was three years sooner than the men. Usually, within the next two or three years, they would marry a similarly adult man and start to bear children. In a very small number of cases, the priests would find that a girl had an aptitude for becoming a priestess during the coming-of-age ceremony, and she would then begin her training. There was no right of refusal. It was a very great honour for a family to produce a priestess, so even though the training and religious learning were said to be harsh, there was no way for anyone to reject the call to serve near Tei Tahra, the mountain god.

Yet it wasn't that there was no way at all to be allowed to go hunting or to be given a warrior's surname. It was just that it meant giving up on being a woman.

Since girls were encouraged to handle guns and bows, there were sometimes, albeit rarely, women who demonstrated talent in using them that was equal to a man's. “Perhaps God made a mistake when assigning them their sex.” In those cases, and as long as the person themselves wished it, they could be assigned to the afore-mentioned duties.

Upon choosing that path, however, one was no longer a woman. Naturally, they were forbidden from getting married or giving birth. If one of those people

who 'were born women but who are not women' were to form a relationship with a man, then both of them would be banished from the community.

Aqua had apparently set her sights on walking a man's path.

Yet contrary to her fervent desire, after a year or two passed and she had undergone her coming-of-age ceremony, in appearance at least, she gradually started to look more and more like a girl. "She really has become a beauty" – Kuon could remember how even Datta, the head of the Wei, had said so.

More and more men asked for her hand in marriage. One of them was Diu, who reached adulthood three years before Kuon. Yet Aqua refused them all. In order to be able to convince the priests and priestesses that she had a man's talent, she continued to single-mindedly train with gun and bow.

Part 3

When Datta's son, Diu, came of age, he officially entered the Wei, just as he himself had declared he would.

At the around the same period, Kuon received a bow for hunting, and his skill with it slowly became famous throughout the community. He had no fear of beasts. His arrows never missed the mark. He was fleet of foot when it came to giving chase...

Every time he accomplished another feat at hunting, the way that people looked at him, starting with his comrades in the Wei, began to change, and, at long last, his interactions with his surroundings also started to shift.

Perhaps he could be called lucky since, at around about that same time, intruders came to the mountains.

Upon being defeated by Allion, a certain powerful clan had braved the danger of crossing the Kesmai Plains to the southeast and of pushing into the 'Fangs' in search of new land. Although they had been driven back once, it seemed that had been no more than an advance party and the second time, when they were again spotted by the lookouts, they were marching in such great numbers that all the ground that should have been within sight was covered in the colour of their armour.

The mountain people needed as many fighters as possible. Accordingly, and although it was unusual, Kuon was incorporated into the unit before having his coming-of-age ceremony. He donned the leather armour that the unit had snatched away during the previous battle, hung a sturdy sword at his waist, and rushed onto the scene of actual combat.

Although it felt like his feet were going to be swept away from under him, and his mind was almost blank from fear, but all that disappeared the moment he charged at the enemy.

Every day, the seniors in the Wei put him through intensive training in how to use weapons. Having learned to hunt was also very useful when it came to fighting.

Kuon took down five enemies.

On the one hand, the tribe practiced exclusivism but, given the harsh environment that they lived in, it also applied meritocracy to an important degree. Kuon's military achievements were so highly evaluated that they were greeted with cheers.

A year later, he took part in his second battle, which was also highly unusual and, as a result, Kuon officially joined the group of adults a year earlier than he normally would have.

"He is already on par with adults."

"The mountain god wanted Kuon's lifeblood a year early," the priests all agreed.

Saying that 'the mountain god wants his lifeblood' was the same as talking about his death but, at the same time, it also meant that 'the mountain god loves him'.

Kuon took part in the coming-of-age ceremony with the boys who were one year older than him. As I mentioned earlier, this took place in the period when Tei Tahra's protection was all but lost. That year as well, three days before the ceremony, smoke was seen to rise from halfway up the mountain to ward off evil.

The next day, a man disappeared. He was an elderly fisherman who had also been a blacksmith, by the name of Gosro. When Kuon heard about it, he was stunned.

Previously, he had never had any interaction with the men who vanished, but now that Kuon had been allowed to take part in hunting and fighting with the adults, he had gradually developed more of a relationship with his surroundings. Gosro was an acquaintance of his.

Once, when Gosro had told him, "my son prefers hunting, so I'm short a pair of hands," Kuon had ridden in his boat and helped haul up the nets.

Gosro was nearing sixty, but his legs were still strong, and it was instead Kuon's which were shaky on the unfamiliar boat. While Gosro repeatedly hurled rebukes at him, Kuon had desperately pulled up the nets.

When they had finally got back to shore, he slumped down in exhaustion.

"I'll make you a sword," said Gosro. "You're small. You'll need a sword that suits your build."

The next time Kuon had gone into combat, the sword at his waist had been forged by Gosro.

It hadn't even been three months since then.

But why him?

Rather than grief, what Kuon felt the most strongly was confusion. Gosro was a heavy drinker, he could be rough, and he was a merciless commander on board a ship; Kuon had even heard that he had kicked his own son from the boat when he wouldn't listen to him. But at the same time, he loved his family, he never forgot to pray to Tei Tahra, and was generally very well-liked.

How could a man like that be possessed by evil spirits? Kuon found it hard to believe.

Be that as it may, the day of the ceremony arrived. Kuon had eagerly been counting down the days to it. At long last he, the 'unwanted spawn', the one 'who's blood is only half human', the 'beast', would join the lines of those whom Tei Tahra would recognise as adults.

This should have been the most splendid day of all for him.

Although it was called a ceremony, the first part of the proceedings was unspeakably dull.

Early in the morning, he was shut away in a hut with the children who were a year older than him, and made to listen to long, tedious legends about Tei Tahra and the mountain people.

Afterwards, they went to the sea. Not only was it forbidden to go fishing on the day of the ceremony, but other people were also prohibited from going

near the shores. There, they were daubed in multicoloured dyes by priestesses young and old who had purified themselves beforehand. The symbols that were drawn on them meant that they would have appearances befitting of warriors when they went before Tei Tahra. The boys pointed and laughed at what each other looked like.

It was the first time that Kuon had ever had the protective charm applied to his forehead. While the priestesses' fingers skittering over his body felt ticklish and embarrassing, at the same time, he held an immense sense of pride.

From then until sunset, they sat around an open fire, passing around jars filled with alcohol and stuffing their cheeks with meat from beasts which had been consecrated for the occasion. More and more adults came to join them. While offering each of them their congratulations, they too drank, ate meat, and sang songs.

What the... thought Kuon. Children who were not yet adults could not go to the ceremony. They were forbidden even from watching, and so were locked up at home from early morning onwards on those days. Because of that, the children's imagination ran wild about what might be happening. Rumours flew about how "the priestesses dance naked," or "they hold sword duels" but, now that he himself had reached the stage where he could attend, it wasn't so different from the banquets that were held whenever the hunters brought back a large catch.

That, however, only lasted until sundown.

The adults left one after another, until only the boys taking part in the ceremony were left around the fire. The festive atmosphere changed completely, and in a silence as still as death, a new group of people appeared. These were the priestesses who officiated at the ceremony, several shamans, priests, the soldiers who were guarding them and, lastly, the strongest man in the tribe – the warrior Raga.

He wore a mask.

Raga was the name of a hero from the mountain legends. He was one of the 'Five Honoured Ones' who first praised Tei Tahra's name, and in reward for the courage with which he had defended His shrines, the mountain god had

granted him eternal life.

The myths told that –

“Even though life completes a full cycle every hundred years, Raga will be reborn again and again. No matter where or when, his sword skill will surpass anything within heaven and earth, and he will be entirely removed from the laws of death that he should have been bound by.”

Naturally, the ‘Raga’ before them now was not the hero from the legends. In imitation of how Raga neither aged nor died, every generation, the warrior who demonstrated that he was the very strongest would obtain the name and position of ‘Raga’. More specifically, during a festival which was held every four years, when Tei Tahra descended from the mountains, a tournament to decide a single winner was held between those of the men who asserted that “I am worthy of inheriting the name and soul of Raga.”

They fought with a single sword in hand, and because of how dangerous that fight was, it was not at all rare for them to kill each other. Yet nobody who killed another during that struggle or who fought until their own death was ever praised for it. Dropping their sword once their limbs were wounded, and recognising that they had lost was the correct attitude for a warrior to take pride in. That meant in turn that there was nothing more splendid than to win by giving a brilliant demonstration of the difference in ability without inflicting any fatal wounds.

Every time that festival was held, some twenty or thirty men met at the ceremonial grounds, sword in hand, and fought amidst that solemn, even stern, atmosphere. The last man standing was the winner, and he received blessings from the priestesses and the shamans, a ritual was held through which Raga’s soul was said to enter his body and, for the following four years, he abandoned his own name and became worthy of calling himself ‘Raga’. In imitation of the half-human, half-beast figure which God had given the warrior, he was given a beastlike mask to wear.

During those four years, ‘Raga’ held a special position within the tribe. He lived in a residence close to where the priestesses dwelt and, since the villagers brought him food every day, he was released from routine tasks such as hunting

or fishing. When battles occurred, he was always given the chance to stand at the vanguard; for warriors, that was an unequalled honour.

On the other hand, since 'Raga' was the living symbol of warriors within the community, he did not take part in politics. He was required to remain silent during the frequent talks that the head of the tribe held with the village's adult men. He could not give his support to anyone, nor could he ever oppose a decision made by the head.

Conversely, if there was someone else who was dissatisfied with anything the tribe head had decided, and if he reached the point where he believed that – *Talking is useless. I need to prove I'm right through strength* – then that person was obliged to fight a duel with Raga.

Those who fought Raga one-on-one had no alternative but to win. It was believed that the mountain god Tei Tahra granted victory to the one who was in the right. A man who was reluctant to go through with it, and who instead tried to change the situation by force – perhaps by recruiting like-minded companions and rebelling against the head – would never earn the respect of the tribe. Instead, as 'a coward who ran away from a fight with Raga,' he would become an object of contempt to men and women alike.

Accordingly, anyone who wanted to change any of the community's policies had no choice but to face Raga in single combat. Yet that fight occurred under horrifyingly unfair conditions. The challenger was always placed under a harsh handicap, and it was the village head who had the right to choose what that handicap would be. For example, whereas Raga would be armed with his weapon of choice, the challenger might be forced to fight barehanded, or his dominant arm might be tied back with ropes, or there was even one ancient precedent in which a man was said to have been made to fight blindfolded.

Fighting against the strongest warrior in the community while being placed under that kind of handicap – needless to say, there was not a single person who was capable of winning. Nor had there ever been a single case of anyone overturning the head's policy through strength.

There was no possibility of branding Raga a 'coward' or 'unfair'. The decisions of the tribe head brought the entire community together, and they were made

according to the advice from the priestesses, who could hear the voice of Tei Tahra. As such, there should not be any call to overturn them, and Raga *had* to win, in part so as to demonstrate the god's infallibility.

So if one intended to claim instead that, "the priestesses have misheard Tei Tahra's voice, and the head is taking a path that goes against God's intentions," and since Tei Tahra granted victory to the one in the right, then no matter what handicap they were placed under, they should be able to defeat Raga and prove that they were correct.

This then was Raga, who arrived in front of Kuon and the other boys.

Since the residence he lived in was near to the priestesses' community, he was almost never seen. Even in combat, Kuon had only ever glimpsed him from afar while the warrior was commanding the troops.

While Raga watched, the soldiers guarding the priestesses came up to the boys, and each of them took the sword that was hanging from their waist and pierced the ground with them right in front of the boys.

Don't tell me there's going to be duels? Kuon wondered if they were going to be told to prove their courage in front of Raga by fighting to the death with their fellows, but then again, he had never heard of anyone dying during the coming-of-age ceremony.

The boys exchanged doubtful glances.

"Soon, the betrayer will be executed," Mist, the oldest of the priestess announced in a voice as raspy as if it was rubbing against a tree branch.

The priestess then explained again what everyone living in the community knew: that at this period, somebody would inevitably be possessed by evil spirits and would become a betrayer who would harm the mountain.

"When this time arrives, we give the soldiers, Raga included, the order to capture the betrayer. As you know, once someone is possessed by evil spirits, then even with Tei Tahra's protection, we cannot expel the spirits from his body. The only way to save that person is to extinguish the spirits. The person's life must be taken, after which, we cover their corpse in sacred ashes and purify it within the flames. You will undertake this ritual. Do not make a single mistake

in any of the proceedings. Once you have purified the evil energy with your own hands, you will receive the path that will lead you to Tei Tahra after your death and, at the same time, you will be born in the true sense in these mountains.”

Kuon and the others were made to take hold of the swords. The open fire was extinguished, and only the pine torches held by the soldiers illuminated their surroundings with their red flames.

Thereupon, the ‘betrayed’ was dragged out.

That year, it was Gosro. Kuon had thought that he might perhaps have run away, but it seemed he had already been captured by Raga and the others.

At first, however, Kuon could not recognise the face which was supposed to be familiar to him. That was how much Gosro had changed.

He was naked and tied up with ropes. Was it for some kind of magic spell that he was completely covered in white powder?

His entire body had been dyed pure white, and the only colour came from his red and bloodshot eyes. Yet they made him look even more like a demon which roamed the world of night.

His mouth remained gaping open, and drool overflowed from it as he growled like a beast. He sometimes scratched the ground with his toenails. Perhaps because he already done it so often, those nails were cracked and oozing blood. Most disgusting of all was how the ‘arrow’ that the mountain god Tei Tahra bestowed only to men was standing at the ready.

Gosro’s goggling eyes restlessly moved around and, when he noticed the boys standing in front of him, he gave a shrill shriek of laughter. Again and again, he jumped where he was, bending then straightening his back as he laughed.

The boys screamed.

Gosro was about to charge right at them. The soldiers who were holding the rope gave it a strong pull. By repeatedly striking him in his flanks and legs with the butts of their spears, they finally managed to stop his charge, but even though he was now covered in blood, his shrill laughter continued to echo.

This was no longer Gosro. His sternness when he had scolded Kuon on the

boat, and his kindness when he later forged a sword for him, had all vanished completely along with his power of reason.

So this was how atrocious possession by evil spirits really was? It brought you down to the level of a beast?

“Do it,” ordered Priestess Mist.

“Do it!” Raga shouted.

“Do it!” the soldiers raised their spears threateningly.

One of the boys made up his mind and pierced Gosro deeply with his sword. A howl like a beast’s rose to the heavens. Another one did the same. Then another, until only Kuon was left.

Gosro was already dead. Yet even though he was dead, Kuon still had to jab his corpse with the sword. He was in tears as felt the sensation of tearing through Gosro’s flesh and organs. He stopped when he reached his breastbone, but an adult soldier pressed down on his shoulder from behind.

“Do it.”

He pushed the blade in further. Although he didn’t realise it himself, Kuon had apparently been screaming.

Afterwards, they all carried the corpse on their shoulders towards a different ceremonial ground where they tied it to a stake and, while the priestesses and shamans chanted the words of some kind of spell, they set fire to the kindling. As the flames flared into life, they crept up the stake and enveloped Gosro’s corpse. Kuon watched as the fire washed over the old fisherman's blood and blistered his skin.

“You did well. With this, Gosro and the mountain have been saved.”

Having finished reciting spells, Mist whispered as she stood behind them all.

“And with this, you have all of you safely reached adulthood.”

Kuon continued to breathe heavily for a long time.

The fire engulfed Gosro’s face. As his flesh burned, it gave off an unpleasant smell, yet in that moment, a strange sense of relief filled Kuon’s chest: with his

eyes closed as though he were sleeping, Gosro's face had once more looked like it always used to.

We did it. We saved him.

When that thought sprang up in his mind, he felt elated.

Part 4

Like that, Kuon was able to officially join Datta's subordinates and to obtain the surname 'Wei'.

Later, there was dancing around a bonfire and the priestess Mist, who headed the ceremony, threw animal bones into the flames then, after carefully scrutinising the fissures that had appeared, she made a curious prediction:

"One day, Kuon Wei will bring forth more gold than the mountains can hold."

This was taken as meaning that Kuon would become a warrior without equal in the mountains.

"That's something to look forward to, isn't it Datta?"

The pillar of the 'Wei', that his friends were trying to draw into conversation, was usually a man of so few words that he almost seemed gloomy, but, this one time, he beamed with delight.

"He's still just a half-size, but one day, he'll definitely be skilled enough to even be able to compete for the position of Raga," he squeezed Kuon's shoulders.

At some point, the children of Kuon's age started to gaze at him with envy. Nonetheless, half of the blood flowing through his veins was that of an outsider so, naturally, there was bound to be some who were not amused by this situation.

Chief among them was Diu Wei, Datta's son.

Although Diu also possessed outstanding skill for his age, and the adults had applauded him for the excellent results he had achieved in one battle after another, he did not stand out given that Kuon, who was younger, had performed every bit as well as he had.

And now he too was already an adult. Publicly, he did not ill-treat Kuon, but

because of that, hatred and impatience smouldered all the more strongly within his young heart. During hunts, he had already been told off by his father for giving Kuon one absurd order after another.

“I’m the patriarch of the Wei, not you. Don’t just go about giving orders any way you like” – that was the only meaning behind the rebuke but, this being Diu, he took it as implying much more. He was probably even afraid that – *my father might be planning to leave the ‘Wei’ family to Kuon.*

About two years after Kuon had been accepted as an adult, invaders came to the mountains again. This time, it was a group of former mercenaries.

In Allion, where battles were never-ending, they had fought for a side that unsuccessfully opposed the king. They had fled after laying utter waste to several villages to create a distraction. Several platoons had banded together, and the men now numbered about five hundred.

In the mountains, there was a little under eight hundred men capable of fighting on the front lines. If you added in the women who fought with guns or bows and arrows, as well as the more elderly people who provided logistical support, then that number doubled.

Naturally, the Wei Unit was among those who were sent out to intercept the invaders.

As former mercenaries, these were well-used to fighting, and the mountain people did not have sufficient numbers to overwhelm them. Thus the fighting dragged on for three or four days.

The Wei Unit suffered damage because of it, and several of the seniors whom Kuon admired for being brave warriors were killed. Even so, they had an overwhelming advantage in term of terrain, and no matter how many of their companions were taken down, they continued to attack the enemy with undaunted daring.

Faced with that kind of opponent, and once they realised that they would not be able to easily seize the mountains, the former mercenaries abruptly started to withdraw. With the enemy pulling back, Diu, as Datta’s oldest son, organised a troop to give chase and deliver follow-up attacks on them. Its members were the Wei Unit’s elite, Kuon among them.

Datta was at the camp set up halfway up the mountain slope, and when he heard about this, he had a bad feeling about it; he chased after Diu's troop on horseback, without taking a single soldier with him.

His instincts proved correct.

Diu had the warriors disperse to give chase to the would-be invaders, but he deliberately lied to Kuon about where they would join up again, with the result that Kuon found himself isolated right in the middle of their enemies.

All alone, he fought against the enemy troop. He cut down one, then two of their soldiers, but, because of his small frame, Kuon was forced to constantly be moving around and, in a situation where attackers were coming at him from all sides, his breath was soon ragged.

Who knew how many opponents he fought. Just as he was joining swords with yet another one, his legs were knocked out from beneath him and he fell backwards. The enemy figures vanished as he found himself looking up at the sky. Within it was the blazing sun and a few strands of clouds.

Ah!

In that moment, death was so close to Kuon that he could almost feel its breath against his ear. It was as though his consciousness, which had been wholly focussed on fighting, was about to leave his flesh and soar into that sky.

He experienced a strange sense of elation, a lot like he had at the coming-of-age ceremony. Perhaps it was the sensation of things coming together: life and death, the individual and the group.

"Kuon, get up. Get up!"

In that very instant, he heard Datta's voice.

"It's too soon for you to offer your blood to God!"

At the last possible moment, Datta came charging in on horseback, driving off the enemy soldiers who were swarming around Kuon.

Awareness returned to Kuon, and he quickly sprang to his feet. Datta rode his horse up to him while parrying the enemy's spears.

"Get on, Kuon!"

Obeying his order, the boy nimbly leaped up behind Datta, and the horse broke away at a gallop.

Their enemies hurled spears at them, but Kuon quickly cut them down. When he looked at Datta's broad back, it was shaking. Neither of them spoke. But then, neither had ever been talkative. Kuon had hardly ever seen him talking affectionately even with Diu, his own son. And yet, it was Datta who broke the silence.

"I won't ask you not to blame my son," he was speaking fast, entirely unlike his usual self. "There's no doubt that he's in the wrong, but he's far, far more childish than you. The only reliable thing about him is his skill. One day, he and you will make the 'Wei' even stronger and more outstanding."

Kuon didn't make any reply. He was entirely focussed on the enemies chasing behind them.

At long last, their shouts faded into the distance. It happened at the same moment that the horse's pace changed to a trot; Datta's back, which had been like a bulky wall, gave a great heave, then he fell from the horse.

He had taken a fatal wound to the chest when he rushed into the enemy soldiers to save Kuon.

– As Leo and Sarah watched, holding their breath, Kuon – clumsily, bit-by-bit – piled his words one on top of the other.

"...And then what happened?"

Kuon voice was almost a mutter as he answered,

"Did I tie Datta's body to the horse and go back to the village? Or did I leave Datta and the horse where they were? I can't remember. But I remember Diu, screaming and crying with his face bright red, 'It's your fault', 'You killed my father'. And also, 'You led him into a trap'. Well, I wasn't a pureblood after all, so pretty much everyone believed what Diu said."

What the hell! Sarah was about to say something, her expression furious, but she just managed to hold herself back when Leo gave her a warning glance.

“And after that?”

In exchange, Leo prompted Kuon to continue in a serene tone of voice. Kuon blinked, as though he had just woken up.

“After that... After that? Right, after that, I came here.” Kuon pointed to the table. “I’d become a traitor to the mountain. It’s like I said earlier. Betrayers can appear even in the mountain god Tei Tahra’s sanctuary because evil spirits enter from the forehead. And that why betrayers are... how can I put this... right, in order to ‘purify’ them, betrayers are burned at the stake. Like what happened to Gosro during the coming-of-age ceremony. But I really didn’t want to be burned alive, so, as a betrayer, I left the mountains.”

“ ... ”

For a short while, silence filled the room.

Kuon looked at Leo and Sarah in turn, a bewildered expression on his face. He couldn’t understand the meaning of that silence and it looked like he was mistakenly worrying that he might have done something wrong.

“I learned a lot; that was really useful. Thank you.”

After saying that, Leo let a while pass by before getting up from his chair.

“The bill has already been paid. I’ll head back to the castle first.”

“I’m your guard. Me too, I’ll...”

“The castle isn’t far. I’m not a child, so I’ll be fine by myself. More importantly, I’ve had you speaking for so long that you barely had anything to eat. I’m fine, I had plenty.”

Leo spoke in the same tone that he might use for a child, then left the private room. The sound of his footsteps disappeared from earshot.

“I wonder if the prince wasn’t hoping to be able to rely on the strength of the ‘mountain people’,” said Sarah, nibbling on cheese from the tray.

“What do you mean by rely on them?” Kuon drew the tray a little towards himself, worried that everything on it might get eaten. Although Sarah saw him do it, she didn’t get angry or make fun of him like she normally would.

“Darren might lead his troops any day now, the Personal Guards have been left at the temple, and the prince doesn’t have any soldiers he can make use of at the moment. So he was interested in the ‘mountain people’ that you’d spoken of before and, if possible, maybe he was thinking of asking for their help with you as an intermediary.”

“Don’t be stupid. That’s impossible.”

‘Right, it’s impossible. The prince also thought so after hearing your story. That’s why he didn’t say anything.’

“ ... ”

Kuon remained silent and another short while passed.

“Gah!”

Kuon started at the sound of a voice. Sarah had apparently just tried the alcohol that the prince had been drinking, and had spat it out on the table.

“What is this? It’s disgusting! God grants us tongues to savour flavours, but those guys who can chug this down looking like it’s absolutely delicious must have had them pulled out!”

“Your brother does the same.”

“My big brother?”

“Once, when we were in a bar in Tiwana, he quarrelled with a whole lot of people. It was probably because he’d stolen Percy’s drink.”

“An act unworthy of a monk.”

Sarah crossed herself, teary-eyed and looking truly indignant. Kuon shook his head in astonished exasperation. He finally had a chance to score a verbal victory over Sarah, who was always attacking him. Just as he was trying to think of the right words to make fun of her, Sarah spoke first.

“You get it, right? ...No, since this is you, you probably won’t get it unless you’re told.”

“What’re you talking about? You want to threaten me about keeping it a secret?”

“The prince was sorry when he heard your story. He’d asked you too much. Don’t forget that care for you. If it had been any other noble, even if they had to threaten you to do it, they’d have ordered you to link up with the mountain people, you know.”

Her almond-shaped eyes were faintly red. Maybe it was because she was already drunk, or perhaps it was because she was self-conscious about also having said ‘too much’.

Kuon shut his mouth tight again.

Chapter 5: The Kesmai Plains

Part 1

When staying in Guinbar, Kuon had a room in the barracks which had been built for the Personal Guards.

After parting with Sarah, Kuon had gone to his room. Usually, the soldiers shared a room between five or six, or even – in some extreme cases – ten, but Kuon had received a private one. It was often left empty since he was constantly coming and going between the temple and Tiwana, but then, it wasn't as though it contained anything but the basic necessities. True, there was the Cross Faith's sacred book, which Camus had forced him to take, but even that had just been left tossed in a corner.

It was already night-time.

Even though he hadn't done any training today, for some reason, he was exhausted down to the marrow of his bones. He immediately put himself to bed.

But he couldn't sleep.

That was rare for Kuon. The boy who could sleep anywhere, be it in the middle of the mountains or on a battlefield, with a tree root or the sheath of his sword for a pillow, could not sleep even though he was aware of being exhausted. Getting irritated, he let out a growl of annoyance.

He knew what the reason for it was.

This is the prince's fault.

He was taciturn by nature, so it felt like he had used up his lifetime's worth of words during the nearly two hours of talking that he had done earlier. And he hadn't been talking about another person, it was his own past, which he prevented himself from remembering too much about, that the prince had coaxed out of him and had him talk about at length.

When he thought of how he had been earlier, he could almost feel himself blush from embarrassment.

At the same time, he could not stem the flow of his memories. Up until now, those memories were supposed to have been locked away beyond his reach, but because he had spent so long reminiscing, the seal had fallen off entirely, and he could no longer prevent them from surging out.

He tossed and turned again and again, and kept telling himself that he wouldn't think about them, but his memories still would not allow him to escape into sleep. Even when he closed his eyes, the images rose clearly before him. Or else it was a voice which was vividly resurrected.

“You did it! Father was always reprimanding you and hitting you, so you resented him. That's why you caught him in a trap and dragged him to his death!” Diu had screamed at him in tears.

And the tribesmen had believed those words. No matter how much they might recognise his strength, at the end of the day, Kuon was not a pureblood, and that single fact decided the matter for them, and meant that they did not believe one word of his attempted explanations.

When explaining to the prince how he had arrived at Conscon, he had simply said that he had “come down from the mountains,” but the truth was that he had consciously obfuscated the details. It was impossible that he could have left so easily, after all.

Immediately after Datta's death, Kuon had been hauled away by muscular soldiers, and had been locked up in a prison within a cliff that was used for the tribe's criminals. While he was shut away, the priestesses would hold a ceremony to ascertain his guilt.

In the same way as divination was performed at the coming-of-age ceremony, they would burn an object related to the event – the armour that Datta had

worn, or a piece of one of his bones – and then, depending on things like the condition of the fire and the cracks that the heat caused in the object, the priestesses would divine Tei Tahra's will. Based on that, they would determine Kuon's guilt or innocence, and, if he was guilty, they would also determine what punishment to hand out to him.

Kuon, of course, knew that he was blameless. As long as Tei Tahra righteously guided the priestesses, his innocence should become clear at once. Yet swirling black doubts and misgivings easily enveloped that hope. And the reason for that was, again, that – *I'm not a pureblood.*

From the time he was born, he had never once been accepted by the mountain, so how could he overturn Diu's words? Even the priestesses might falsify their divination, while everyone gloated about how they could finally get rid of Kuon, the eyesore, and so wouldn't he end up burned at the stake?

That thought obsessed him as he lay on the damp stone floor. The ceiling was too low for him to be able to stand. Kuon was now lying down in his lodgings in Guinbar, and back then as well, he had been unable to sleep. In his mind floated the image of Gosro, his eyes open so wide that the eyeballs seemed about to fall out, and drool spilling from his mouth. His screeching laughter. His body engulfed in the flames...

“You're wrong, it wasn't me,” Kuon cried over and over.

He shouted until his throat was so raw he could no longer speak. His tears never stopped flowing either. In the end, he even felt like calling for his mother, who was long dead.

Then, when the night was at its deepest, he heard a voice outside. He wondered whether the executioner had finally come for him, and pressed his body close against the prison's stone wall, when an arm stretched out towards his shivering form.

He was dragged towards the open door. A man stood there. No, actually, it was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman since they were wearing a mask similar to Warrior Raga.

That person cut the ropes that were binding Kuon's hand and feet, and clapped him on the back.

“Run away,” they whispered.

Kuon didn't need to be told twice. He even considered that this person might be pretending to help him, only to then jab a blade in his back. Convinced that the entire mountain was already out to kill him, Kuon recklessly galloped down the dark mountain paths.

The only thing he could rely on was the light from the stars. Again and again, he slipped and tumbled against the rocks. He suffered more wounds than he could count, but thinking about it now, it was lucky that none of those had been fatal injuries. There were watchtowers built all along the mountain pass; Kuon avoided the light from their fires which illuminated the darkness, and carried on with as much force as though someone was pushing him from behind. In the end, a day later, he had crossed to the south of the Fangs.

He remembered how he had stared in almost blank amazement at the Kesmai Plains, which unfolded out before him. But even that only lasted an instant. He was worried that the figures of pursuers might emerge from behind him at any moment, so he pushed himself forward, despite his wounds and his exhaustion, and ran towards the north. Of course, he had no clear destination in mind, it was simply that it was the direction away from the mountains.

“Huh,” the gloomy sound he made was meant to chase away those scenes from his past which had come spinning back to him one after another.

In the end, he gave up on trying to force himself to sleep, and glared at the ceiling, both eyes open wide.

He could hear the sound of his heartbeat.

He stayed like that for a long time.

It was not yet dawn when Kuon headed towards the barracks' stables. He saddled a horse and jumped on its back; since the animal was familiar with him, it didn't make a sound. With his bag behind him, Kuon rode the horse down the quiet streets, but then soon brought it to a halt.

There, in the semi-darkness, was the figure of a nun of the Cross Faith.

Sarah.

She was leading a horse and, before Kuon had the time to say anything –

“I thought as much,” Sarah looked up at Kuon with eyes like a kitten's. “Are you intending on returning to your home mountains, and asking them for help?”

“...”

“Give it up. Kuon, aren't you a 'betrayer' to the mountain? You'll only be captured and burned at the stake.”

“Don't decide that for yourself.”

Did Kuon's bitter answer come in reply to 'return to the mountains', or was it because of the words 'burned at the stake'? Either way, something had hit the mark.

“Did I go too far? Still, it's a bit unexpected, you know?”

“What is?”

“The fact that you're even willing to run the risk of being burned to death. Percy and my brother seem to be placing their hopes on His Highness Leo, but what in the world is in it for you?”

“I just want to win the war.”

“Which is why I'm asking why. There are wars everywhere. There are places where you have a far better chance of winning compared to here, and places where you can make far more money.”

Sarah piled up questions as though to test him, until opposite her, Kuon growled in annoyance.

“I decide where I fight. It's got nothing to do with you. So leave me alone.”

“I can't do that. The prince said it too, right? You're his bodyguard. You're no longer a drifting mercenary: your position comes with responsibilities.”

“And who are you to say that? Are you in a position to give me orders?”

“I...” Sarah faltered for a second, then proudly puffed out her chest. “I am the beauty in heroic tales who guides the hand of destiny.”

“Whatever.”

Kuon had his horse start walking again. Sarah levered herself by putting her foot against the stable's gate and swung herself into her own saddle. Her movements were supple and nimble.

Kuon passed under Guinbar's main eastern gate, and started along the road heading south.

“Did you bring travelling expenses?” Sarah asked from behind him.

He ignored her at first, but eventually held up the bag that was at waist because of how persistent she was being.

“Right, I see. So, we should get what we need from one of the villages ahead. This isn't going to be a five or six day trip, is it?”

Weren't you planning on stopping me? Was written all over Kuon's face, but he didn't say it out loud. If he started talking, he would just get caught up in Sarah's pace. Determined to get away from her at some point, he urged his horse forward.

Half a day after leaving Guinbar, they arrived in a village where they bought provisions and sleeping bags. Sarah had something to say about every item of shopping. “It's best to visit another shop before making a decision,” she said, or, “Please be more careful about what you choose. Your life depends on the equipment you select for travelling.” She just wouldn't shut up. Kuon wasn't able to stay silent either.

“What are you, a meddling old granny? And how long are you planning on sticking around for?”

“I decide where I go. So leave me alone.”

After riding their horses further, they stayed overnight in a different village.

Kuon had intended to stay at an inn, but Sarah objected. Savan Roux had built centres for the Cross Faith throughout his territory, and in this village as well, a storehouse which had originally been under the joint management of merchants was in the middle of being remodelled into a monastery. There were still only very few monks living and studying there, but Sarah was able to

request that the two of them be put up for the night in the name of solidarity between members of the Cross Faith.

“Every little bit of money is worth saving.”

Kuon went along with it for the time being. Although there was still money to spare, it wasn't as though it were plentiful.

The two of them continued to ride forward for several more days. Sometimes Kuon had his horse speed up, or left a village after making sure that Sarah was fast asleep, but each time, Sarah would inevitably catch up with him. Once, they fell in with a merchant caravan – in effect, a group of peddlers – of several dozen people, and spent a night in their company in a forest. However, when Kuon stealthily got up in the middle of the night and seemed about to gallop away on horseback, young merchants who were standing guard came chasing after him, also on horses and with ugly expressions.

Thinking that something might have happened, Kuon brought his mount to a halt.

“Chase after him at once if that guy looks like he's going to sneak away without permission,” Sarah had apparently told them. “He took my chastity and we're fleeing from the pursuers sent by my parents. But now, it looks like he's trying to run away from me. Even though he's promised that we would go where we could be happy together.”

Because of that tearful explanation, the men were all on Sarah's side, and had kept watch on Kuon with glowering eyes.

“You shameless piece of shit, taking advantage of such a beautiful young lady then trying to run away!”

“I'd rather tie you to that tree over there and let the wolves eat you, but then the young lady would be sad. Right, come on – you're going back!”

Kuon was completely baffled to find himself surrounded and threatened like that. He gave up for a while on trying to shake Sarah off.

As the road grew more rugged, signs of human life gradually became scarcer. There were no more travellers and merchants to be seen, and hardly any houses. Normally, upon leaving the centre of Atall and approaching the border

areas, there would be marauders roaming, who would forcibly announce that they would “protect” wayfarers to extort money out of them, yet even those bandits were nowhere in sight here.

They arrived near the road through the mountain pass. Wedged between the highlands and the rocky mountains to its east and west, this path separated Atall from the lands that lay further south. Although the place was virtually deserted, the road appeared to be relatively well-maintained, which stemmed from the fact that before the southwestern country of Garanshar had been absorbed into Allion's domains, this route was frequently used by merchants from Atall and the surrounding countries when they went on business to Garanshar and did not want to cross Allion's border.

Because of the cliffs towering on either side of it, strong winds blew through this valley path, and because they sometimes sounded like a woman's weeping, it was called 'Pass of the Wailing Tresses'.

At times galloping fast, at others, leading their horses, Kuon and Sarah crossed the steep ridge. As the cliffs fell away behind them, there was suddenly nothing to obstruct their view and, instead, desolate fields opened before them.

The Kesmai Plains.

The gently rolling ground seemed to carry on forever. Diagonally west of the plains, the domains that had once been Garasharn continued until they adjoined the inland sea, which had now become Allion's border.

The temperature seemed impossibly high compared to the mountain pass, and Sarah's hair fluttered in the dry wind. Moisture was scarce, and there so were so few trees growing that they could easily be counted, which made this land look it was rejecting life.

“How did you cross these plains?” Sarah asked.

She stroked her horse's neck as though to soothe it, but in doing so, she was probably trying to hide her own unease.

“Nomads wander all over the plains. I followed them.”

“You sure are good at being reckless,” Sarah crossed herself with an

astounded expression. “Simply being able to find them was already a desperate gamble, and then, there are plenty differences between nomads. There are even some who attack caravans and towns, you know. You should give thanks for still being alive. Be sure to offer prayers to God.”

“Sure, humans are dangerous too, but from here on, they'll be more wolves than humans. Also, watch out; there are loads of valleys that look like the mountains have collapsed inwards. In places like that, there are plenty of holes where ashinaga have their nests.”

“Ashinaga?”

“That's how we call them. But in Atall and among the nomads, I've heard they're called 'armoured spiders'. They're giant, man-eating spiders.”

“Eh...”

Her tone was curt, but Sarah's answer seemed strangely heavy at the same time. His interest piqued, Kuon continued his explanation.

“In the tribe, there were men who hunted ashinaga at the foot of the mountain on the far side from the village. Because they only appeared a few times a year, on the morning after strong winds had been blowing, only the exceptionally skilled hunters were chosen. It's an honour to hunt ashinaga.”

“Why would you even be hunting them? To eat?”

“Of course not. The priests wanted the ashinaga's poison, the hunters used the hair from their legs as arrowheads, and the warriors took their hard shells as shields. I've never seen a living one though. – You scared? They say that if you take ashinaga poison, you'll die in agony.”

The implicit advice was that now was the time to turn back.

“Really? That sounds exciting. This means that from here on is where a great adventure begins, right? This could be the tale of how the brave and beautiful Sister Sarah, accompanied by a puppy-like attendant, found treasures and ruins hidden since long ago in this barren wasteland.”

Sarah straightened her back and urged her horse on before Kuon could do the same, leaving him to follow hurriedly after.

Travelling south across the plains, there were what looked like huts made out of solidified mud lining a narrow river. They looked like they probably formed a village. Back when merchants had frequently been going to and fro the north and Garanshar, they had probably been bustling with people, but now, there was so little life in the place that even the sun which was shining overhead seemed stagnant.

They therefore decided to stay at an inn. Well, for all that it was called an 'inn', it was more like an ordinary farmhouse. The talkative host threw open rooms in his house for the few travellers and merchants that came by in order to hear stories from the outside world. Yet when that genial old man heard that Kuon and Sarah were travelling even further south, *They're crazy* was written all over his face.

“There aren't any proper villages south of here. Even if you're on the run from the north, you'd do better to head west of the northern edge of Kesmai. There you'll find the remains of the highway that Garanshar maintained through the plains, back when the country still existed. It's a little far, but there should be several post-station towns along it.”

When Sarah insisted however that they needed to go south, their host pondered for a while, then told them,

“In this season, the Halia open up their bazaar. It's at the 'Moon Ring Stones'. Those guys trade with the towns, so there shouldn't be too much danger. You need to go further southwest along the river.”

The Halia were apparently one group within a clan of nomads, and a bazaar seemed to be a market which the nomadic tribes held at regular intervals.

Their host looked at Sarah, who was dressed in her novice's robes.

“The Halia are good-natured for nomads, but it would still be best if you changed your clothes. The nomadic clans have their own gods. And they're different from city-dwellers: they're mostly not very tolerant of other people's faiths,” he offered another warning.

Sarah might have been expected to resist the idea –

“These clothes have been reduced to tatters from the trip, so that's perfect.

Kuon, we still have travel funds, right?" Instead, however, she immediately demanded money.

Kuon pulled a sour face, but by then, he had given up on shaking Sarah off, so it was better to have at least one less source of trouble.

The next day, she visited the various houses in the village, looking to buy cheap clothes from the daughters of farmers or shopkeepers. By the end, she was wearing second-hand linen clothes that seemed to have belonged to a farm girl, and a traveller's cloak. When he first saw her looking like that, Kuon's eyes went wide for a second, but when he noticed Sarah's knowing smile, he immediately turned his gaze away.

Part 2

It was still early in the morning when they left the village and headed south.

The strong sunlight was beating down, and neither Kuon nor Sarah felt like idle chatter. Pouring with sweat and keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings, they silently urged their horses forward. Luckily, from morning until the sun's light faded into dusk, they met neither beasts nor bandits.

They came across a deep valley at the bottom of a gentle slope in which a large crowd of people had gathered. Tents with tapered points were packed close together, filling the valley. As they got closer, the sight of the nomads in their long robes of different colours and designs, the sound of the vendors' high-pitched voices, and the smell of spices and herbs all mixed together to create a jumbled atmosphere that assaulted Kuon and Sarah's five senses.

This was surely the Halil's bazaar. The 'Moon Ring Stones' seemed to refer to a series of low-lying boulders on the east side of the valley. At certain times of the day, the shadow that the boulders cast into the valley resembled the shape of the moon, hence the name.

These nomads were generally on the small side, with dark black hair and narrow eyes. They were split up into numerous clans, and never settled long in one place: as soon as they had built a base in one part of the wilderness, they would move to another destination. Occasionally, they would hold a market, to which other clans also came. Since the market was usually held in the name of the leader of the host clan, he was responsible for guaranteeing its peace. If clans were in the middle of a feud, bringing that quarrel to the market was strictly forbidden. Men dressed in long white robes, and armed with guns and swords that curved even more than the half-moon swords often used in Atall, were patrolling the valley and its surroundings. They appeared to be in charge of maintaining security, which meant that they were part of the Halil clan, which was sponsoring this bazaar. One of them had rushed immediately to

where a buyer and vendor had started yelling loudly at one another.

– This is a digression, but one theory holds that, several hundred years ago, a group of these nomads travelled north, then went separate ways to the east and west. The group which went east found a new base of operation to the north of what is currently the Grand Duchy of Ende, and it continues to this day to threaten Ende's northern borders. The group that headed west eventually reached the lands of Tauran, and it is said that after repeatedly interbreeding with the indigenous Zerdians, they became known as the Pinepey Tribe, which is famed for its skill in shooting from horseback.

Whatever the land in which they arrived, they chose the same way of life, faithful to their love for freedom and the wind, and to their traditions of violence and bloodshed.

“It's really crowded!” Sarah exclaimed in a somewhat excited voice. Apparently, she was fond of that kind of mixed and diverse atmosphere.

Kuon patted the bag at his waist to check what remained of their travel funds. They needed to resupply in provisions and water. Their host had mentioned that from here on, the sun's rays would be merciless, so new cloaks were another necessity.

Outsiders have come – it was clear that the Halia guards were keeping a watchful eye on them. Wanting to stand out as little as possible, Kuon was going to pay whatever price the vendors asked for, but Sarah interfered each time.

Which got them dragged into a strange situation.

Just as Sarah was complaining about the price of a bag of dried fruit, a hand swept the bag away from the side. It belonged to a man dressed in long black robes. There was a noticeable scar on his forehead, and he might have been in his mid forties.

“Now look here...” Sarah was about to protest that they were still in the middle of bargaining, but the man paid the asking price for the fruit, then held the bag out to Sarah.

While Sarah stared blankly back, the man crooked his finger to call over Kuon,

who was inspecting curved short swords at another stall. Kuon was offended at the gesture, which was just like that of a master summoning a menial, but what the man said next was a proposal which was so outrageous that it left the boy stunned.

“I want to buy this woman,” the man announced.

He spoke with a heavy accent. It brought back memories of Kuon back when he had first appeared at the temple, but Sarah seemed to have no problem understanding it. Instead of being angry, however, she answered with a sweet smile;

“Unfortunately, I'm not for sale. Although I am curious about what kind of price you might set.”

The man open his mouth wide in a hearty laugh, and named a sum. In that area, it would have been enough to stock up on ten day's worth of luxury provisions.

Kuon had been glaring angrily, but, so as to not stand out, he relaxed his shoulders and deliberately looked towards Sarah in amusement.

“What a strange guy. Do you really want to shorten your lifespan so badly that you're willing to pay for it?”

“Oh my, you've learned how to speak, little kuonkuon puppy.”

Although it could have ended there and have been no more than funny anecdote –

“I can add more,” the man was persistent.

There was an impression of strong will from the mouth buried beneath his black beard, from his narrow, upward slanting eyes, and from his forehead which was like the sheer cliffs in the surrounding area. Although he was slim, his shoulders were broad, and there was a red sash tied firmly around his waist. Kuon's feeling was that he was not simply some lady's man, and neither was he to be underestimated.

“Despite appearances, she's a daughter from a family of pretty good standing. She has a fiancé back home,” he said quickly, and reached out to take Sarah's

hand to get her away from the man.

His hand was blocked. When he looked around, he found himself half surrounded by a group of men wearing robes of the same colour. All of them had sheathed swords conspicuously on display.

“Then how about enjoying a little adventure before going back to that Mister Fiancé? I'm telling you, I, Bahāt, know far better how to please a young lady than any of those soft city-dwelling men.”

“Knock it off,” Kuon wanted to deal with this as calmly as possible, but the man called Bahāt wasn't giving up.

Sarah didn't say anything. For some reason, she seemed to be watching happily what Kuon, who was now grasping her hand, intended to do.

“Don't think that outsiders can do things their own way here,” Bahāt's lips twisted into a smile. “If you become too much of a pain, should I feed your flesh to the ravenous wolf god of Kesmai, Roh Gas?”

“What?”

“My advice to you, boy, is to scam and leave the woman before there's trouble.”

“Bastard,” Kuon started to reach for the sword that hung at his back. Seeing that, Bahat and his men burst out laughing; they didn't think for a second that he was a master swordsman. To them, the two looked like the son and daughter of good families who had come from the city for a small shopping adventure.

Sarah now looked worried. To go back to what was being said earlier, if outsiders wrecked the market place, they would make enemies of everyone there. She was about to say something to stop them, but it was already too late.

At that moment, a different group made up of several riders came rushing up. Just like the guards on duty, these men wore white robes, meaning that they must be from the Halil. The group of five horsemen advanced in a row, as though to force the cluster of black-robed men to part before their mounts.

“You got here fast,” Bahāt laughed. “This brat is going around trying to make

trouble. Won't you take him away for me?"

"What. Bastard, you're the one..." While Kuon was flaring up, the lead rider spoke,

"I did not think that you would do us the honour of coming to our bazaar, Uncle." Although he was young, his voice carried unusual dignity. Within the group, he was the only one wearing a pointed helmet. "Naturally, as you know, since this bazaar is being held in my name, everyone attending is my guest. Tell me, Uncle, do you have business with my guests?"

"None at all. As a guest, I was simply going to buy something which caught my eye. Exactly what you'd expect at a bazaar."

"Yet it looked like there was about to be a commotion because you were forcibly trying to buy something which was not for sale."

"Oh? Are you trying to say that I'm the one who was about to disturb the bazaar? And, in your position, what are you going to do to me? Expel the problem by force? This is great opportunity for you, since you can't seem to stand my company," as Bahāt spoke, the mood changed.

The group in black put their hands to their waist or to their breast pockets. Seeing which, the party of white-robed riders also put themselves at the ready.

Kuon grimaced: from being at the centre of the disturbance, his position had suddenly changed completely and he was now entirely left out. In short, it looked like there were certain ties and circumstances among the nomads there.

Amid an atmosphere so tense that blood might start flowing at any moment, Bahāt put on a smile, and shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Well, leave it. I'm still in the middle of shopping. It wouldn't be so funny to be turned away now. Let's go enrich your bazaar a little," saying so, he turned around.

Once he started to walk, the group of black-robed men all immediately did the same. A sand-laden wind started blowing from behind Kuon, and it was exactly as though Bahāt was guiding that wind as he strode away.

Kuon and Sarah were invited to the tent which was closest to the 'Moon Ring Stones'.

The one who had asked them there was the man in a helmet from the Halil clan. "Please allow me to treat you to a cup of tea," he had said.

Before Kuon had time to refuse, Sarah's eyes had lit up.

"Did you say that this bazaar was being 'held in your name' earlier? Does that mean, sir, that you are the head of this clan?" She asked, her eyes still shining.

Don't say any more than necessary, Kuon glared at her, but the young man laughed readily.

"Please know that I am Hāles Halia, O beautiful one."

While saying that, he showed the two of them into the tent. Hāles was still only about thirty. The image that city-dwellers had of the prairie tribes was that of bloodthirsty savages who attacked travellers every night, but Hāles had a clear pair of eyes, and when he smiled, there was a sophisticated air to him that was hard to disregard.

An Atallese carpet was spread out inside the tent, with a table and chairs from Allion arranged in proper order.

"None of these were plundered, they were bought at bazaars held by the other clans," although in spite of Hāles' explanation, these were almost certainly articles that the clansmen had sold at their markets after pillaging them from the towns...

Hāles served them tea himself. Maybe it was because some unknown animal's milk had been added to it, but Sarah felt something very off about the drink that she was normally used to, and had a hard time preventing it from showing on her face. Kuon, meanwhile, downed his cup in a single gulp. He wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible.

"Thank you for kindly for your hospitality and for the tea," as ever when speaking with excessive formality, Kuon's voice was too loud. "We have no intention of causing a disturbance at the bazaar. We have already found what we need, so we will be leaving immediately."

He took Sarah's hand and was about to stand up.

“Please wait,” Hāles was still half-standing as he stopped Kuon. Young though he was, and just as there had been with Bahāt, there was something in the way he held himself which made it clear that one could not be careless around him.

“We need to hurry to where we're going.”

“It will be sunset. Bahāt will definitely attack you if you leave now. Please at least stay the night and leave when the sun is high in the sky. The bazaar ends tomorrow, so we can provide you with guards.”

“Bahāt was the man who wanted to buy me, right? Lord Hāles, didn't you call him your 'uncle'?” Sarah asked before Kuon had time to say anything.

For a second, Hāles' suntanned face wore an embarrassed expression, but he immediately after started to explain the situation to them.

Bahāt was the younger brother of the previous head of the clan. When the previous clan leader – in other words, Hāles' father – had passed away from illness, the elders had gathered and had designated Hāles as his successor. At the time, however, Bahāt had been taking part in a skirmish caused by other clans – one of the parties had offered him money and horses for his support – and so had not been able to take part in the discussion to choose the successor. He seemed distinctly unhappy about it, and, along with several dozen companions who had fought alongside him, he had distanced himself from the clan, only appearing on occasion to harass those within it.

“Uncle probably came to stir up trouble at the bazaar. He wants to drag my name down. Still, if sheds the blood of a fellow clansmen for no reason, and for all that the plains are said to be unfettered, he'll find that they will suddenly become a very small place. Those who make light of the connection between clansmen who share the same horses and who drank the same milk will unfailingly find that Roh Gas will howl their infamy far and wide, and they will become objects of hatred and scorn even to the other clans.”

“And so when I appeared, it was like a boon from the Heavens for Bahāt,” Sarah nodded.

He was going to target an outsider to start a fight. This wasn't the first, or

even the second time that Bahāt had performed this kind of harassment.

The bazaar held at the 'Moon Ring Stones' was so large that even merchants from the lands of the northern civilisation – Atall included – used to form a caravan to come and trade there. Half a year ago, however, Bahāt had attacked them on their return journey. He had stolen their carts and left several dead, so from then onwards, the merchants in that caravan no longer had the slightest inclination to set foot in the Kesmai Plains again. Given what kind of man he was, it was indeed entirely possible that he might swoop down upon Kuon and Sarah as soon as they left the valley.

Hāles seemed both worried by Bahāt's actions, and considerably enraged by them. Realising that, Kuon revised his intention of leaving at once. And with it –

“That man is no longer your uncle,” even Sarah was startled by his words. “He's simply a traitor to the clan – an enemy. You should kill him. Why haven't you done so?”

Hāles glared for a second, then got his emotions under control and showed them a serious expression. He was a man who had become head of his clan at a young age: his hand and feet were no doubt bound by any number of shackles. And besides –

“Uncle is well used to the plains, and usually, we don't even know where he is. And I have to take into account that if we attack him, he might call for help from other clans. I can't decided to start a large-scale conflict simply on my own judgement.”

“You could always find a pretext to lure him out.”

“A sneak attack is out of the question. Instead of my uncle, it's my infamy that Roh Gas would spread across the wide plains,” as Hāles spoke, he once again gave a momentary glimpse of anger.

He would do what he could, but this was not Atall or Allion; the plains had their own way of doing things.

“You shouldn't be the one to do it.” Why was it that, having gotten to this point, Kuon was showing an abnormal amount of enthusiasm? “But how about if an outsider kills him?”

Not long after that, Kuon and Sarah were once more sitting astride their horses as they swiftly left the Moon Ring Stones behind them. Sunset was closing in, and the dark red sky was melting into the plain's vast ground.

In the end, the two travellers had apparently decided to ignore Hāles' advice. And it wasn't even half an hour later that clouds of dust appeared behind them and to their side.

“Ay-ay-ay-ei, ay-ei,” the group of black-robed nomads bore down on them, raising their rough voices in a way peculiar to them.

There was a dozen or more of the men. All of them wore the cruel, predatory smiles of wolves, and as they rode forward, they had their curved and twisting swords raised high. Horses and men alike all seemed to be feverish at the promise of bloodshed.

If Hāles could have seen them, he would certainly have sighed – *Didn't I tell you so?*

The assailant galloping in the lead was none other than Bahāt. The gentlemanly manner that he had just barely maintained at the bazaar had been entirely flung aside, and his cruel laughter was echoing loudly.

Kuon and Sarah tried to get their horses to run faster and shake off their pursuers, but the nomads were superior in their handling of horses, and in their knowledge of the terrain. The outsiders barely managed to run away for more than a few minutes before being chased and cornered by a steep cliff.

Several more men joined the group, until there were about twenty of them spread out in a fan shape and surrounding the two who had been forced to halt their horses. The assailants also slowed their horses' steps.

“You should've listened back then, boy,” positioning himself in front of them, Bahāt was laughing enough to make his black beard quiver. “I'd have let you go if you'd given over the woman. But this isn't the bazaar where your sort can fit in anymore: here, you're in the Kesmai Plains, where wolves, and storms and giant spiders prowl. There aren't any rules or laws here. This is a land where the strong take, and the weak simply get taken from. After having that woman

while you watch, I'll slice you to shreds and leave you tied up here. Will you be torn apart by the fangs of wolves while you'll still alive, or will you be pecked to pieces by birds of prey? Or will you be gobbled up by armoured spiders?"

As Bahāt laughed, his eyes almost looked blood red, like those of a man possessed. It was clear that he loved fighting, and that he took pleasure in cornering his prey then taking the time to torment it. There was no doubt from the look in his eyes that when he attacked and captured men from other tribes, merchants, travellers, or anyone else, he was used to torturing them to death like this. As for what happened to those who were left alive, they were sold as slaves to the western countries.

Bahāt's like-minded friends were also laughing as they called out in their coarse voices.

"Choose how you want to die."

"We could let you have the woman before that. If you can actually get it up while we watch."

While the men on horseback were all laughing at once, Kuon kicked his horse's flanks and raced it towards an opening in the fan-shaped encirclement.

"You going to just let the woman die, boy?"

The nomadic rider who was positioned at that edge spurred his own horse forward.

"Don't kill him yet."

"Cut his arm off and knock him off the horse."

Accompanied by the voices of his companions, the rider swung his greatly curved sword to block Kuon's path. It should have sunk into the boy's shoulder, except that it was instantly parried.

The man on horseback had his posture thrown off. At some point, Kuon had drawn the sword at his back. Or perhaps it was better to say that he had parried the blow with the very action of 'drawing his sword'. While everyone there was still having a hard time believing their eyes, Kuon struck again and slashed his opponent through the throat.

The man fell from his horse in a spray of blood.

A moment passed. Then Bahāt's eyes flew open wide.

“Don't let him get away!” He howled.

The vulgar smirks had completely vanished from the nomads' faces, replaced instead by a terrifying killing intent.

As they circled to draw the net tighter around Kuon, there was also one who moved his horse towards Sarah. Terror must have rooted her to the spot, because she wasn't moving.

“Boy, do you value this woman's head? If you do, then...”

The man had been about to press his sword against Sarah's neck, when he suddenly saw a gun muzzle appear from beneath her cloak. He didn't even have time to blink: his forehead was shot through, and he fell backwards from his horse.

Sarah aimed one after another at the men on one end of the group encircling Kuon, and pulled the trigger. She was unused to shooting from horseback, so she did not hit them, but it caused a shock to run throughout Bahāt's group.

Then another situation arose: multiple arrows were shot from behind Bahāt and his men.

Two arrows struck true, and a man riding next to Bahāt screamed in pain as he fell from his horse.

What the hell? Bahāt could not comprehend what was going on. He had not imagined for a moment that the 'outsiders' might have companions. While he was hesitating about whether or not to turn his horse around, Kuon stole up to him, unnoticed.

Another gunshot rang out.

A man who had drawing up to Kuon from behind toppled over in a spurt of blood.

Sword in hand, Bahāt stopped Kuon's blow just before it landed on his face.

“Boy, you're aiming a weapon at *me*? Do you know what happens in Kesmai

to those who bare their fangs at Bahāt?”

“How would I know,” Kuon answered while avoiding his counterattack. “There aren't any rules or laws here, right? The strong take, and the weak get taken from.”

In spite of how he looked, Kuon's blows were sharp. For a second, then a third time, steel crashed against steel so fast that sparks flew around their faces.



“Bastard...”

Bahāt was superior in terms of raw strength, but there was no time for him to leverage that advantage by swinging his blade wide. Kuon's attacks were incessant, and in a second when Bahāt twisted away to avoid them, it was instead Kuon's sword which drew a wide arc.

“Argh!”

The blade sliced through Bahāt's carotid artery. Blood gushed up and dyed the dry earth red. He still moved jerkily as though to swing his sword, but his sturdy body soon fell at his horse's feet.

Part 3

Having lost its leader, the group fled with shouts of “Withdraw!” while still being pursued from behind by the archers.

Sunset was near when white-robed nomads appeared over the ground which had been stained dark red. They were the ones who had drawn the bows. There were only five of them, but that had been sufficient to throw Bahāt into confusion. Leading the rest of the group was the young clan head, Hāles.

“That was magnificent,” Hāles cried out, his face still flushed with excitement. “I can't believe you're this much of an expert with the sword. To be honest, I thought it was touch-and-go whether you'd survive, even if you did manage to kill Bahāt.”

Just before leaving the Moon Ring Stones, Kuon had approached them with a suggestion:

“You don't know where Bahāt is? That guy wants to attack us, so if we leave now, without any guards, he'll definitely show up in front of us.”

Hāles Halia was astounded. Kuon was saying that he was going to lure Bahāt out by defencelessly going out in the open. And right now, at that.

“Gather a few people you can trust. The enemy will be confused if arrows are shot from behind them. I'll use that opening to kill Bahāt,” Kuon volunteered.

Sarah's expression turned surprised, perhaps deliberately so.

“I see. If we bring too many people, it will simply end with Lord Hāles becoming known for having attacked a kinsman. It has to be carried out by outsiders to the very end. Kuon, what's gotten into you? Since when were you infected with His Highness' intelligence?”

“Ridiculous,” Hāles turned the suggestion down flat. “Even if we're covering you, how far do you think you'll get, drawing their attention all by yourself.

With all due respect, a child like yourself...”

“He isn't a child, clan leader,” Sarah said about the boy that she was usually the first to make fun of. “He's a renowned warrior in the country of Atall. And as for me, I won't fall that easily at enemy hands. So won't you leave this to us?”

A man who looked like a child was saying that he would take down Bahāt, and a girl who seemed like a farmer's daughter was asking a warrior to “leave it to us”. The young clan head blinked in bewilderment.

“Why? Why would you do something like this? We've only just met. What benefit is there for you in risking your lives to take Bahāt's?”

“We only said we wanted to leave here at once. We're not doing this for you. You could actually that we're using your situation to get rid of a guy who's getting in the way of our journey.”

Hāles' astonishment did not abate. Still, even though he was usually a simple man, he was still a warrior nomad who gave his body over to blood frenzy whenever war broke out. In these wild plains, he had been reared on the milk of battles and hunting. He had fought both humans and packs of wolves that had come to seize the nomads' livestock.

“If you're going to go that far, I'll provide a few people. But we cannot be seen. Until we get close enough to shoot arrows, even if you get caught or if one of you gets killed, we will pretend to have nothing to do with it. Are you really alright with that?”

The two others nodded.

And thus, still half-doubting this plan – or, rather, despite being seventy or eighty percent sure that it would fail – Hāles chose four companions who were close to him in age, and with whom he had forged especially solid bonds, and together they had stealthily followed behind Kuon and Sarah, bows in hand.

The result was that Bahāt's corpse was now lying at Hāles' feet. This was a man whose conduct had been awful, and who had risked dividing the clan. Yet even though Hāles had hated him enough to want to kill him with his own hands, he had still been a kinsman. For a moment, Hāles was almost carried

away by the desire to offer his uncle a proper burial, but he soon revised that thought.

To the very end, they had to stick to the story that Bahāt had been killed by the ones he had intended to attack. What happened to his corpse was something that was best left to the ravenous hunger of the wolf god, Roh Gas, who ruled as he pleased over the plains. In short, and to use Bahāt's own threatening words, it would be left to chance whether he would be “ torn apart by the fangs of wolves, pecked to pieces by birds of prey, or gobbled up by armoured spiders.”

“I would love to invite you to my tent as heroes, but...”

“The sentiment is sufficient. If the honoured clan leader was to shower hospitality to 'outsiders' right after Bahāt's death, unfortunate rumors would be sure to spring up.”

Hāles gazed at the pair in considerable wonder. When he looked carefully, he felt that the boy called Kuon had something about him that made him far closer to them, the nomads who roamed the plains as the wind dictated, than to those who lived in stone cities.

“Where will you go?”

“South,” Kuon answered laconically. Hāles thought about it for a moment.

“I see. You're from the people of the mountain lands that received Tei Tahra's protection?” No sooner had he said so than he frowned. “No, they almost never leave the mountains. And besides, you don't have a tattoo on your forehead, either.”

Kuon remained as silent as ever, and simply allowed the question to be carried away by the wind.

Although Hāles had given up on offering them a heroes' reception, he still provided Kuon and Sarah with seven riders to act as guards and guides. Since these had brought plenty of equipment and provisions for camping, the two travellers were far more comfortable and relaxed than they had been before then on their journey.

After ten days of travel, the smooth plains gave way to a terrain of jagged ups and downs. Kuon and the others continued where valleys were nestled among rocky peaks. Or perhaps it was better to say that the rocky peaks besieged the valleys. There, they said goodbye to the nomads: they were afraid that if they penetrated any further into the mountain people's sacred lands, they would be seen as invaders.

Said otherwise, this proved that they were getting closer and closer to Kuon's birthplace. As they did so, he spoke less and less.

On the first evening when they were back to travelling as just the two of them, strong winds whipped themselves into a gale. Despite how the winds slipped through the cracks in the cliffs, by evening of the next day, the pair had ridden their horses as far as the mouth of a wide gorge. Continuing through it, the slope on the left side gradually became gentler. Climbing up it to reach the summit that gave into the gorge, would bring them to the foot of the mountains that were Kuon's birthplace.

Sarah gazed at the rugged landscape.

“The horses can't continue any further, can they? Anyway, the sun is already going down. Let's camp here.”

Kuon didn't move, even though he had seemed about to get down from the horse. It was as though he was now about to turn it back around.

“And, what is it?” Sarah raised her eyes. She understood that Kuon's birthplace was close. “You can't possibly be planning to tell me that from here you'll be going alone, so I should turn back? Don't even joke about it. Since I've come this far, I'm continuing forward no matter what happens.”

“...No, you can't.”

“Don't be stupid. I kept up in the mountains in Allion, even when it was the middle of the night.”

“Go back. I'm the one who was being stupid. Nothing good is going to come from going further.”

“What?” Sarah's voice rose higher. “That's right, you really are stupid. You'd have to be an absolute fool to have come all this way and turn back right before

your destination.”

“...” “Don't tell me you're scared?” Sarah was being harsh to raise Kuon's spirit. “Is this the great warrior Kuon? Since you ran away from the mountains, it makes perfect sense that you'd be worried about the people from where you were born turning their bows against you, but I thought that you'd ridden here fully aware of that. It looks like I've overestimated you. It's fine, Kuon. You can wait here, or go back to Lord Hāles' camp. I'm going forward. I'll talk with the mountain people and return to Atall in triumph with reinforcements.”

Kuon didn't answer. Feeling ridiculously irritated, Sarah was on the verge of speaking even more harshly when she noticed that Kuon's entire face was dripping with sweat. He was shaking a little, too.

“Seriously, what's wrong, Kuon? Have you come down with an illness?”

Sarah advanced her horse forward and seemed about to touch Kuon's forehead, but he shook off her hand.

“It's nothing. It's just like you said. It's just... I'm just scared.” Because of how frank Kuon was being, Sarah, for her part, was left speechless.

Kuon was utterly drenched in sweat and trembling from fear. It was hard to believe this was the same man who had undertaken to act as bait and lure out the savage nomads.

For a while, the two of them remained on horseback without saying anything, but then a strange sound filled the valley. It was like the shrill cries of wild birds, but as it drew closer, it became clear that it was overlapping with human voices. Kuon looked towards, his eyes flying wide open.

Rocks stretched out before them along the valley's path. At some points, they were piled up to an unnatural height. You only had to see them to realise that they had been placed there by human hands. The stones had been stacked up like walls to slow the escape of prey when hunters were chasing after them.

“Run, Sarah!” Kuon shouted as he grabbed the horse's reins.

“What's the matter now...”

“Ashinaga... armoured spiders are coming!”

Just as he cried out, a strange creature came rushing down the slopes. Sarah saw it too.

What made it spider-like were its six gnarled and spindly legs, which would be longer than Kuon or Sarah's full height if it stretched them out straight. Above those legs was a dusky black carapace that certainly looked solid and hard. That part of it looked less like a spider and more like a beetle.

Armoured spiders were fierce carnivores. They were simple creatures that did not act in swarms, but they were extremely aggressive by nature. Once they spotted prey – a human, for example – they would mercilessly leap towards it and seize it with the sharp, curved claws at the end of their legs, then devour it from the head down. Moreover, their fangs were known to contain poison, and simply having their skin grazed was enough to cause violent pain to their victims. That pain would soon disappear however. And that was because their nerves would rapidly become paralysed.

Kuon and Sarah turned their horses around to leave there at once.

The armoured spider must have originally fled that way as it was being chased by hunters but, perhaps because its appetite took over once it saw Kuon and Sarah, it started narrowing the distance between them, its legs squirming at a speed faster than the eye could see.

Kuon's horse steadily gained speed, but Sarah's fell behind. When she turned to glance back, the creature's torso, gleaming like black armour, was already so close that she had to look up to it. It lifted and waved one of its legs, with its claws sprouting from the bottom of it, casting a dark shadow over Sarah's face.

Turning his horse back round again, Kuon threw himself in the space between them. While the horse was neighing wildly in horror, Kuon had his legs firmly clenched around its flanks and used his sword to drive back the claws that were about to rip into Sarah. The horse and the giant beetle seemed to pass by each other.

Kuon planned to use that moment to cut another of the beast's legs, but instead, his horse's flank was torn through by one of the claws. The animal collapsed sideways, throwing Kuon to the ground.

Unfortunately, the armoured spider seemed more interested in the flesh of

humans than of horses. Its legs moving frenetically, it scuttled up to Kuon and leaned over him. On either side of his head were nothing but the claws attached to those legs.

Still facing upwards, Kuon swung his sword with the speed of lightning. He cleaved off the claws of the leg to his right as he rolled to the side. His movements were meant to have him crawl out from beneath the huge body, but he was a second too slow, and the talons from the left leg ripped into the armour on his back. They pinned the partly torn-off strip of armour to the ground. Kuon tried to hurriedly slice through the left leg, but because he was still half rolling to the right, he was unable to put any strength into his blow.

The armoured spider bent its huge body forward a little, its round head looming closer. Blackish and glistening with slimy fluids, it reminded Kuon of the mud balls he used to make as a child. Something heaved into sight from either side of that globular head.

Thousands upon thousands of fine orange hairs were closely packed together. No... every one of them was a razor-sharp fang. From the gaps between them, a viscous liquid oozed and seemed about to trickle down at any moment.

Poison!

Kuon forced strength into his limbs. No matter how great a warrior someone might be, if they were bitten by those poisonous fangs, that would be the end. He struck his sword repeatedly against the left leg that was pinning him to the ground. But the creature overhead was entirely unperturbed by his blows.

Just as the fangs were before him, a gunshot rang out. Vibrations ran through the huge body and seemed to transmit themselves to Kuon.

The armoured spider shook violently. Its legs flayed up and down wildly and, in the process, the claw pinning Kuon down was luckily pulled away, allowing him to hastily roll away and escape.

Sarah's gun was still smoking as she came rushing up to him. Dismounting from her horse was what had allowed her shot to aim true.

The creature raged violently for a while before finally folding its legs and collapsing where it stood.

“Kuon, are you hurt anywhere?”

“I'm good,” he answered, breathing raggedly.

He had not been hurt, but losing the horses was a serious blow. Just like the armoured spider, Kuon's horse was lying on its side, breathing its last, while Sarah's horse had bolted when its mistress dismounted, fleeing in terror. Sarah shrugged.

“We can only...”

Had she been about to say that they could only go forward?

At that moment, the huge creature which was supposed to already be dead lifted itself up. It could only struggle halfway to its feet, but, faster than Kuon could push Sarah out of the way, it lunged for her ankle.

As Sarah collapsed with a thud, Kuon raised his sword high and struck at the top of the round head. Although he met with a resistance like that of hard rubber, his blow seemed to have been strong enough to be effective, and the armoured spider once more sank to the ground, belching out poisonous fluids as it did so.

“Sarah!”

This time around, it was Kuon who was worried for her, but Sarah, forcing herself to smile, had already started to get to her feet.

“I'm fine. You pushed me out of the way in time.”

“Really? Show me your injury.”

“I said I'm fine. Ah, hey, don't touch my skirt!”

The pair of them were about to start arguing when they both suddenly stopped. They could hear the hoofbeats of horses approaching.

A group of about eight riders appeared from the other side of the valley, avoiding the stone walls as they rode, and occasionally jumping their horses over them. Above their sleeveless clothes, which were dyed a bluish-green, they wore fur pelts. One among them also wore armour. They carried long-handled spears and guns, and although their physique and facial features were similar to those of the nomads of the plains, these people had slightly rounder eyes, and

most of them had a red tattoo on their foreheads, painted in blood and in the shape of a dot.

“Who are you to have invaded our hunting grounds?” A man barked, his voice carrying a thick accent.

Without so much as pausing, they rode into a semi-circle surrounding Kuon and Sarah. One of them gazed at the corpse of the armoured spider, then shifted their line of sight and stared intently at Kuon.

“You're...!”

Similarly, Kuon also realised something with astonishment.

Among the men, this was the only one who did not have a tattoo on their forehead. Neither did they have a beard, and they seemed strangely slender next to the other hunters, but it was easy to understand why that was.

This was a woman. Or perhaps it would be better to say a *former* woman? Since 'she' had joined the hunters, 'she' must have abandoned the path of living as a woman.

“Aqua,” Kuon spoke 'her' name.

Chapter 6: Dangerous Pair

Part 1

“Kuon? Kuon, 'the fugitive from the mountain'!”

One mountain man was enraged at the name. Hearing it said, the others were all equally surprised, but that man's eyes were noticeably filled with fury.

“How dare you just come back here, you and your filthy blood, you fucking betrayer! To think that hunting game would lead to meeting a friend's enemy!”

It seemed that Datta must have been a friend of his. The man drew the broad sword at his waist.

“Don't move from there! By the horn of the bronze bull that Tei Tahra rides, I'll cut you down along with the evil spirit possessing you.”

He strode towards Kuon, his gleaming blade brandished over his head. Before Kuon had time to react,

“Kuon isn't a betrayer!” Sarah, who had only just managed to stand up, cried out.

Being yelled out face-to-face by a clearly foreign woman left the man considerably startled. Sarah opened her mouth even wider,

“Kuon never betrayed anyone. And first of all, there wouldn't been any point to his killing Datta! That man called Diu Wei set a trap. If you can't even understand...”

“Stop it, Sarah!”

This time, it was Kuon who yelled as he seized her. Sarah frantically broke free

from his hand which was gripping her shoulder.

“What? Are you going to just let him take your life because of a misunderstanding? You can't possibly have come all the way here just to get yourself killed?”

“Don't interfere. I'll explain it myself.”

“Weren't you going to run away just now? You're the one who shouldn't interfere. I've been pissed off at that Diu person even since I heard your story, Kuon! Now, get Diu here. I'm going to let him have it.”

“Sarah!”

Just when Kuon reached to grab hold of Sarah's shoulder again, her posture unexpectedly collapsed completely. Taken by surprise, Kuon's hand let go of her, and Sarah fell sideways to the ground. Kuon hastily crouched down and lifted up her head. Her entire face was drenched from large beads of sweat. Diluted blood was mixed in within them. Her breathing was shallow and uneven.

While Kuon had lost his calm, unsure what to do, Aqua knelt by Sarah's feet and rolled up the hem of her skirt without asking permission.

There were several wounds puncturing Sarah's slender ankle. There was less blood than might have been expected, but what there was plenty of was a viscous, dark green liquid that was stuck to the puncture marks. Kuon could not stop himself from moaning when he saw it.

“She's been poisoned by the ashinaga,” said Aqua.

Kuon shouted at 'her' almost on reflex.

“Medicine... Don't you have an antidote!”

“There isn't any antidote that works against ashinaga poison,” Aqua's reply was perfectly calm. “If one of the hunters had been poisoned, we could have given them into the care of the shamans. But even then, they wouldn't be sure to be saved.”

The blood instantly drained from Kuon's face.

Sarah's eyes were closed as she gasped weakly for breath, and her earlier,

reckless energy seemed almost impossible to believe. It looked like her voice could no longer even make a sound.

“P-Please,” Kuon pleaded in a trembling voice, “please take Sarah... this woman to the shamans. Sarah has nothing to do with my situation. So...”

“We've no reason to help someone who has nothing to do with us,” the man who had brandished a broad sword earlier laughed scornfully. But with a shake of the head, Aqua disagreed.

“Are you insane, Older Brother Koru?”

Aqua and him were not blood siblings, but that way of referring to him was probably because they were warriors from the same household and shared the same family name.

“Even if it costs them their life, a warrior's duty is to drive back those who try to invade the mountain. But this woman was injured by the prey we were chasing. What's wrong with at least giving her to the shamans to take care of?”

“It happened because that woman got in the way of our hunt,” the man called Koru, who seemed about thirty, squared his shoulders and shouted. “This is Kuon, the murderer whose despicable trap killed Datta, even though he'd always looked after him. Since that woman is with him, she's just as guilty. Her being poisoned by an ashinaga is Lord Tei Tahra's will.”

“Brother, that's...”

“Shut up, Aqua. You might be the head of the Holo's daughter, but you're no more than a newcomer to the unit. How dare a woman answer back to her older brother?”

In venting his anger, Koru provoked Aqua to utter fury. The circlets on 'her' arms clanged as 'she' strode up to 'her' 'older brother', 'her' slender face red with rage.

“Older Brother Koru, you've made three mistakes. The first was to act as though you know God's will even though you aren't a priest. The second was to talk as if this woman was a criminal. In these mountains, deciding who is guilty of a crime is the duty of the priestesses, who can hear God's voice. And finally, you treated me – a member of the Holo – like a woman. Not only did you spit

on the Holo family, your words also sullied Lord Tei Tahra by misunderstanding his nature,” Aqua declared in a single breath.

The man called Koru went pale and could find nothing to answer. At that point, the man in armour, who appeared to be the leader of the group of hunters, pulled on his reins.

“If we stay here, we'll be attacked by another ashinaga. We'll take the woman to the mountains. As for Kuon, there's no other choice but to leave anything about him to the head priestess,” he declared his decision.

Several of the hunters hurriedly started to dismember the corpse of the armoured spider, while in the meantime, the men from the tribe took possession of Kuon's sword and of the gun that was still in Sarah's hand. Kuon lifted Sarah onto his back before anyone ordered him to do so, and started to climb out of the valley with his former companions.

Sarah was light. He wondered how such a small body could have crossed Allion's mountains without a single word of complaint, or followed him on the journey through the Kesmai Plains.

Just before sunset, they finally arrived at the hut the hunters were using. He laid Sarah down; her breathing was even more ragged than it had been earlier. Seeing her shaking hands, Kuon wanted to wrap them up in his own, but as soon as they arrived at the hut, Aqua tied up his feet, and he was placed far apart from Sarah.

“There should a shaman at the nearby meditation grounds,” said one of the hunters as he left the hut.

“Don't move,” Koru Holo bared his teeth at Kuon, who had been thrown into a corner of the hut. “Just let me see you even try to call in evil spirits. I'll kill the woman right away.”

Kuon didn't say anything in reply. Even if his feet had not been bound, he had never had the slightest intention of moving from where he was.

After what seemed like an eternity, the man who had left the hut returned with a shaman.

The shaman wore long robes, the hem of which had been dyed red, while

strings of shells, animal horns or shiny minerals picked up in the mountain jingled and clanged as they hung from his neck down to his chest. His flowing, unkempt hair was partly white. His forehead and eyes were almost entirely hidden by a wide cloth wound around them, and, as though to replace them, a single large eye had been drawn in the centre of that cloth.

Generally speaking, those who conveyed God's voice to the people were all women and priestesses, while the priests, who belonged to the same priesthood, as well as the shaman were all men. Yet it was not as humans that they served by the god's side, as it was said that even though they were human, they all shared a divine protection. Just like the priestesses, they spent their time overseeing the various ceremonies, and, within the many hermitages that were scattered across the mountains, they underwent rigorous rites to ward against the incursion of evil. They also studied medicine and poison.

The shaman who entered the hut was followed by two priestesses. Both were teenage girls, and they had probably been entrusted to the shaman as they were in the middle of their training. They wore long, plain robes, and not a single ornament. Being close in age to Kuon, they were acquaintances of his, but right now, he didn't have time to care about it.

The shaman knelt by Sarah's side and first examined her wounds. He stretched his hand out to the priestesses, and one of the girls produced a bundle of medicinal plants from a leather bag. The shaman covered the wounds with them.

“Ashinaga poison does not have any specific antidote,” he said to no one in particular, “so there's no choice but to use the poison from a horned snake on it.”

From his words, you might expect that horned snake poison would have a neutralising effect, but in fact, it too was a substance that could snatch a person's life away from the mountain god. When the two poisons mixed inside someone's body, they transformed into a third type of poison, causing the patient to suffer a raging fever, which would last all night. The odds were fifty-fifty that they would survive, and even if they did, they might have to offer as consecration their eyes, tongue or the ability to move any of their limbs. In other words, they might lose their eyesight, speech, or be affected in their arms

and legs.

Kuon held his breath and did utter a sound.

“We don't have everything we need here. Let's carry her back to the hermitage,” said the shaman and, with the help of the hunters, he had Sarah carried out from the hut.

Naturally, Kuon could not go with them.

Wandering around the mountains after sundown was extremely dangerous, so they would stay at the hut until the next day. Kuon lay stretched out, his feet still tied together. He couldn't sleep. Even if he didn't want to think about it, he couldn't help but worry about Sarah. He would feel a lot easier if he just gnawed his way through the rope and ran to the shaman's place, but that would just cause unnecessary antagonism, and they might halt Sarah's medical treatment.

And so, he had no choice but to grit his teeth and wait for time to pass.

“Are you stupid?”

He suddenly noticed that Sarah was looking down at him from above. Her hair, which was longer than it had been when they had met, tickled the tip of his nose as she spoke.

“Did you think I was going to die? Too bad for you. Fate and God love me. That's completely different from some stray dog.”

Beeh! The image of her sticking out her tongue rapidly receded from before Kuon's eyes. He was going to chase after her, but his legs wouldn't move.

Right, I was tied up... The moment Kuon realised that, he woke up. He must have dozed off at some point, and, of course, that image of Sarah had been no more than an illusion appearing in a dream.

The next morning, the party left the hut.

Although his legs had been untied, Kuon was surrounded front and back by brawny hunters. When he asked about Sarah, the only answer he received was that “there's been no communication from the Master Shaman.”

Currently, he had no choice but to follow them. They continued in silence

along a path which was only discernible to the eyes of hunters who were very well used to the mountains.

At every one of the mountain passes, there were watchtowers for guards on lookout. Warriors were stationed there in shifts and every time the party passed by, they called out to them admiringly: “You've brought down some splendid prey!” Yet Koru and the others wore complicated expressions. The dead ashinaga – the dead armoured spider that they were carrying had been killed by Kuon and Sarah. But when the warriors on watch realised that Kuon was among the party, their attention immediately shifted and they started raising a fuss.

“Kuon the fugitive?”

“Yeah, that's Kuon, the guy who got possessed by evil!”

The warriors all made the sign to invoke Tei Tahra's protection. Kuon had survived ceremonial execution despite being possessed by evil spirits and betraying Datta, and all of them viewed him as an ominous existence.

“Tei Tahra, I implore your protection!”

“No, this is clearly God's will. Lord Tei Tahra's wooden staff has chased down evil!”

The party crossed the summits one after another, as voices rained down incessantly upon them. Just before sunset, they struck a course that detoured to the east of the mountain peaks, and lead Kuon to a cleft that opened up in a sheer cliff face.

Kuon felt a chill strong enough to make him shiver for a moment.

He remembered. On the other side of that boulder that was shaped like a beast's raised claws was the rocky prison in which criminals were incarcerated. In the past, right after Diu Wei had screamed that “You killed my father!”, Kuon had been locked up within it.

There were ceremonial grounds nearby. Whenever criminals were thrown into the rock of imprisonment, the priestesses performed a divination by fire to determine their guilt.

Entering the cleft meant having to stoop, but although the interior was wide, the ceiling got lower and lower the further you went in. The very deepest part had been fitted with prison bars, and Kuon, whose arms and legs had both been tied up this time, was thrown into it.

He was left there, alone.

This did not mean that his guilt would be determined right then and there, but that for the time being, Kuon's presence would be reported to the village, and that he would remain locked up while waiting for the head of the tribe and the priestesses to reach a decision.

Night fell once more. As he lay where he was, Kuon's body felt heavier than usual. He was exhausted from having walked all day along the steep mountain paths, and, since he had not been given anything to eat at all that day, he was intensely hungry. On top of that, he was lying on bare rock, and the cold, damp surface was gradually leeching away his body heat.

Yet Kuon quickly forgot his overwhelming exhaustion and hunger, as well as his frigidly cold body.

I came back. I actually came back?

Because of worrying about Sarah, he hadn't really thought about it the previous night, but he was, undeniably, back in the birthplace that he was supposed to have abandoned. Once he realised that, Kuon felt dizzy.

In replacement of the physical pain he had felt, a shadow crept up to his mind. It was so icily cold that it made him shiver. The shadow stretched out its clammy hand and stroked him. Kuon shuddered. This was the same stagnant *sludge* which had assaulted him just before entering the mountains.

“Ah...” A short, involuntary breath escaped from him.

Its mouth curved into a smile.

Getting yourself locked up in the same place as before – you really are one stupid bastard, Kuon. What have you been doing and what's been going on for you in between the two? Was it just a dream? Maybe I never actually took a single step out of this prison, and just had a really long dream.

Right from the very start, what Kuon had done had been stupid.

Needless to say, he had not crossed the Kesmai Plains and returned to the Fangs out of nostalgia for his birthplace. The conversation in the restaurant that he had with Leo Attiel had stuck in his mind. The prince had pestered him into telling stories of the past, then Sarah had explained to him that the prince had wanted to get help from Kuon's old home.

At first, he had thought that was just stupid. Was Leo really so cornered that he had to seriously consider something so ridiculous?

Kuon took pride in his own strength. Moreover, he believed that whatever the battle, it would be over once they took the head of the enemy general. The old Kuon would never have gone to the trouble of crossing the Kesmai Plains; instead, he would have ridden directly to Olt Rose to take down the 'enemy general' that was Darren. If Leo was having trouble, then removing the source of that trouble – Darren – would spell Leo's victory.

– But Kuon had learned a lot at Conscon and after it. He realised that some things were impossible to achieve with nothing more than his own sword.

We need allies.

All of a sudden, Kuon hadn't been able to stay still anymore.

Right, I'll go back to the mountains. Once the priestesses hear Tei Tahra's voice clearly, there's no way I'll be accused of any crime. And then, I can gather willing allies and the prince will be saved.

Considering Kuon's current situation, that had been some truly misplaced optimism.

But no, even back then, calling it optimism would be wrong, and instead, it was a feeling of needing to hurry.

Should I go?

Once that thought had occurred to him, his heart was filled with a such a fierce sense of urgency that it felt strange to think that he could have left the mountain for so long. As soon as 'should I go' turned into *I have to go*, he had crossed the Kesmai Plains as though he were chasing after that feeling.

Even so, once the mountains where he was born had been before his eyes, Kuon was struck with a different kind of emotion, albeit one that stemmed from the same root. For Kuon, it was exactly as Sarah had said.

“I'm scared” – And at the same time as he felt that emotion, Kuon could no longer comprehend why he had come back.

This has been mentioned plenty of times already, but he was not a pure-blood from the mountain. Because of that one fact, and just as he had said earlier, even his relatives had looked away from him. Yet Kuon was supposed to have been set free from that conflict. He was supposed to have obtained freedom, and to have escaped from the malice that was about to make him take the blame for a crime; from the guilt of “not being a pure-blood,” and the shackles and loneliness that went with it; and also from his fear.

So why did he come back? What was that sense of urgency that had made him feel that he had to go? Why had he been able to make this decision so easily?

Unable to set his emotions free or to understand them, in the end, he had been thrown into the same prison where he had been less than a year ago, and he was as frightened now as he was back then.

Whywhywhy?

He trembled in terror. Once he started shaking, he could no longer gain control of himself.

Was it just to die? Was it just to go out of my way to be killed?

“That's exactly right,” a voice answered.

Without Kuon realising it, the stagnant *sludge* with its viscous hands had taken on a clear form. He trembled even more violently than before.

Even though he tried not to see that figure, and tried not hear that voice, it was in vain. This was a creature that did not exist outside of Kuon's perception.

The *sludge* now had pure white skin. In the darkness of the stony prison, only its eyes were burning a brilliant, bright red as they stared intently at Kuon.

It was Gosro. The image of him as he had been after he had lost human intelligence and reasoning, and turned into a beast, hung over Kuon.

“You came back simply to die,” Gosro whispered, his breath carrying a strangely fishy smell. “Hey, boy. Hey, Kuon? I haven't forgotten. What you did with your own hands.”

Gosro stretched a white arm and grasped Kuon's hand. The boy's back arched under pressure from a strength that seemed unbelievable in an elderly man.

“There's no way I could forget. You pierced me through with the sword you were holding. And then you threw me into that burning hot fire. That means you chose to make me into a sacrifice so you could live as part of the mountain. But even so, you ran away?” Gosro's bright red tongue protruded from his mouth as he smiled. “You idiot. Like hell you could escape. Because if you could, why did I die? Why did you jab your sword through my flesh and bones and entrails?”

“Turning someone into a sacrifice means that you've agreed to suffer the same fate one day.”

Another Gosro peered upside down into Kuon's face. But no, it was yet another, lying flat to the ground, who brought his lips close to Kuon's ear.

“You should have realised 'who' I am by now, right? I, who was run through by all those swords and then burned in the flames, I became one with the mountain, the spirits and with Tei Tahra. That's right, Kuon. You didn't come here of your own will. It was me. I called you, Kuon.”

“Isn't it the fate you accepted yourself? The fate of offering your blood and flesh and soul to the mountain.”

“Say, Kuon,” at some point, the Gosro who covered him from the front had turned into Kuon's own figure. His skin was dyed chalk white, and his eyes had turned so red that it looked like tears of blood might start trickling from them at any moment. When the Kuon whose hands and feet were bound opened his eyes wide, swords were piercing the pure white Kuon from every direction. Next, a red dot of light flickered at his feet, which turned within an instant into a raging fire that swallowed his body whole.

“Help me!” Kuon cried. And struggled. He tried his hardest to swing his tied up limbs and shake off the images of Gosro and of himself being engulfed by flames. Yet as he squirmed and floundered, he, who could strike fear into the

enemy even as a lone swordsman when he held a weapon, looked exactly like a child struggling to go against an adult who was telling him off. Seeing Kuon in that state, the Gosros burst out laughing.

“Help me! Help me! Help me!”

Kuon continued to scream as he rolled this way and that. Eventually, his own laughter started to mingle in chorus with that of the Gosros.

Part 2

After the death of Bishop Rogress, Conscon Temple hailed a man called Neil as its new leader.

He had originally served as a monastic assistant to an abbot, and was only just in his forties. He had close-cropped hair, and he was always mindful about being clean and tidy. He was a man whose emotions easily showed on his face, who laughed often, and who cried in times of hardship along with his friends and disciples. As such, he was a complete contrast to Bishop Rogress, who had always seemed as solid as a rock, but Neil's earnest personality inspired the love and respect of all.

It was said that he had been a shepherd when he was young, but that he had taken up the sword to protect his native land.

Recently, after completing his holy duties in the morning, his daily routine had been to walk around the mountain. The temple was currently in the middle of being restored. Neil halted his steps when he came upon several men busy rebuilding the main gate, which had been damaged by Allion's artillery fire.

During the battle, Neil had been one of those at this very gate. Gun in hand, he had desperately fought back. The ruins of the gate had been sprayed with blood, and Neil crossed himself before it as a way of paying his respects to the many who had fallen there – be they friend or foe – and to give thanks for his own survival.

About half of the Personal Guards that Leo had left at Conscon were pitching in to help reconstruct the buildings and gates. The more people helping, the better, and Neil thanked them for it. Still, the Personal Guards had their own purposes, and as for what the remaining half of the soldiers who were not helping with the reconstruction work were doing, they were spending their days drenched in sweat as they cut down trees to the back of the temple, and

levelled a large patch of ground.

Camus, who was both Bishop Neil's assistant and a member of the Personal Guards, had taken several of the Guards with him and gone to Allion, and was currently there buying airships. Apparently, the prince had ordered him to do so. The ground which was being cleared and levelled was intended as a training space for airship pilots, and Neil had further been informed that there were plans to one day also purchase ships capable of holding several dozen people at a time.

The prince is full of energy, Neil thought admiringly.

Since he had learned from Bishop Rogress, he had absolutely no objection to increasing their weapons in order to defend themselves. Rogress had admirably demonstrated with his own life that one could not defend one's beliefs without power.

Yet even while Neil admired the vitality of youth, he could not help but feel suspicious. News of Atall's situation had reached the temple, and Neil was aware that the prince had picked a fight with a vassal-lord, and that as a result, Leo's position within the country had grown precarious.

The Personal Guards had been left at the temple because of that, and the fact that they were getting together something that could be called an 'air force' was proof that although he had temporarily been defeated, Leo was planning to mount a counter-attack at some point.

It was a fact that Leo Attiel was a unparalleled ally for the temple but, at the same time, Neil feared that his very existence might become dangerous to them.

It's fine as long as this is just meant to be a show of power to the vassals. But if it goes beyond that and he is actually harbouring a frightening ambition...

Leo was the second prince. His older brother Branton would one day succeed their father and become ruler. But what if Leo voiced an objection to that? What if he contended that "I deserve to be the sovereign-prince"? And what – if the time came – he intended to ask the temple to support him given their friendly relationship?

We'll be forced to make a choice. I believe that refusing to get involved in a country's internal power struggle would be the righteous decision, but then there's the fear that if His Highness Leo wins and becomes the next ruler of Atall, our relationship with them will deteriorate.

Even though they were currently at peace with Allion, he had heard that there were still many who still proclaimed hostile intentions towards the temple. If a rift appeared in their relationship with Atall, then Conscon would be surrounded by enemies on both sides.

Even if we just want follow God's warnings and live in righteous poverty, simply spreading those teachings to as many as we can... politics and war are never far behind, Neil lamented.

And thus, so that no power can threaten us, we unfortunately need 'power'.

It all came back down to Bishop Rogress' stance on the matter. And so it was that Neil spent his days with unease lurking not so far at the back his mind.

Camus came back a few days later, having apparently managed to purchase six airships. These were ornithopter-type vessels which had been built in the Kingdom of Garbera. In addition to ether repulsion, this model had wings which literally flapped, just like the birds whose shaped it mimicked. Compared to modern ships, with their unmoving wings, it was distinctly old-fashioned. Yet although they were lacking in speed, altitude capacity and flight endurance, their absolutely outstanding in-flight stability and low-cost engines meant that they were still being widely used.

The generic name for ships that floated in the sky was 'dragon stone ships', which came from the fact that the weightless metal which was the main component of airships was made from refining fossilised dragon bones. This refining process flourished within Garbera, and it was said that the make of their airships and the skill of their pilots was a clear cut above all others. It seemed that these ships, which Camus had managed to buy comparatively cheaply, had also originally been used to train new recruits in Garbera.

Moreover, the unfamiliar man he had hired and brought back with him to the temple had once taken part as a pilot in the airship races that were held at festivals and the like in Garbera. Camus intended to set him up as an instructor

for everything from maintenance to how to handle the ships.

Training began the very next day. All the young men in the Personal Guards applied for it, and they were as excited as children who had been given new toys.

The first thing the instructor did was to give them a demonstration. The engine made a raspy, metallic sound when the low-altitude ornithopter took off. Appearance-wise, it was modelled on a Steller's sea eagle. Its overall span was about three metres long, and when the men working on rebuilding saw the artificial bird dancing through the sky, they gazed up in fascination. Whether they stared open-mouthed, cheered excitedly or got scared, they too were like children.

“If you pay too much attention to what's above, you'll trip over a branch or stone at your feet,” Neil, who was walking around the mountain that day as well, called out to them in a friendly voice.

At the time, he was headed somewhere else.

While one might have expected that here too, everyone's attention would be held by the airship, a single man was actually giving them all an impassioned speech, the topic of which appeared to be Bishop Rogress. In spite of himself, Neil stopped too stopped to listen,

“He was a truly magnificent man. His pious way of life was so, but it was his way of death that truly moved my heart...”

His way of death...

Neil frowned in displeasure. It was just as though the bishop had simply been a warrior.

The man continued about how extraordinary Bishop Rogress' suicide had been. The man had originally come to the temple as a mercenary, and had apparently settled down in one of the villages at the foot of the mountain after establishing a family there. He spoke of how he had seen companions kill themselves on the battlefield because they were so badly injured that they could barely even move.

“At first, it looked like the bishop had fatally slit his own throat with a dagger, but on investigation, it seems that he had stabbed himself in the heart. They say

that the dagger had fallen to the floor when the bishop's corpse was found. So in other words, it wasn't a blade which was fixed in place, he actually pierced deep into his own chest with the dagger in his hand. That's not something you could do half-heartedly.”

The bishop had stabbed himself in the heart then had pulled out the blade. It was certainly an extraordinary scene to imagine. Neil unconsciously crossed himself, but as he did so, he felt a strong sense of incongruity. Given that it was Bishop Rogress, he would certainly have been able of going that far, yet Neil did not feel that he necessarily would have done so.

Did he do it to demonstrate his resolve? His resolve which was literally to die rather than to allow the King of Allion, someone he had once had a close relationship with, to go any further in his tyranny?

It was Lord Leo who had saved Conscon just before it fell to Allion's attacks. He had rushed from Atall, leading reinforcements, and had even slain Hayden, the enemy commander. But with that, they had only gained a temporary victory, and there was no denying the possibility that the war could have dragged on. Basically, it was Bishop Rogress' suicide which had led Allion to lay down its weapons.

Right, it was the bishop's death. If he hadn't died...

The forehead between Neil's eyebrows suddenly twitched and squirmed. A terrifying thought had taken shape in a corner of his mind.

At the around that same time, Leo Attiel was once again spending unquiet days in Guinbar.

When will Darren make his move?

His nerves were on edge as, unusually for him, he stayed in one place and helped organise the troops in Savan Roux's castle. Yet, unexpectedly, Darren was bidding his time.

Or perhaps it would be better to say that bidding his time allowed the situation to move in Darren's favour. The story of how Leo had led an army to invade Darham was now being talked about throughout the country. Even the

vassal-lords, who had maintained a cautious attitude towards the prince since the events at Conscon, were openly starting to criticise him. Leo had already pegged Oswell as Darren's chief ally, but he was now joined by Tokamakk, whom Leo had seen at the banquet held in Hayden's honour, and Gimlé, the father of Percy's fiancée.

“That permanent army that the prince was loudly insisting on, was it just to eat away at our territories?”

“Since there's been no suitable explanation from His Highness, those troops should be dissolved right now.”

Opinions were lined up against Leo.

His support among the people also visibly started to fall away. The number of spectators at plays starring Leo in the main role were now starting to dwindle. Moreover, since his wedding to Florrie had still not taken place, this in turn was inviting unfortunate rumours that “relations with Allion might turn sour again,” and with it, people once more began talking about how this would all be Leo's fault for having opposed Allion.

Leo had to admit that he had made a mistake. Not knowing when Darren might attack, he had decided to remain in Guinbar, but had allowed Darren to take action in the capital, Tiwana. With no obstacle to hinder him there, he could do as he pleased and was steadily gaining allies and support. And since he was switching positions with Leo, it followed that the prince's side were earning nothing but enemies and ill will.

In spite of this, Leo and Savan gathered soldiers in Guinbar. They needed to remain cautious against Darren yet, ironically, this gave Darren the perfect excuse to legitimately take military action.

“Savan has taken advantage of His Highness Leo's youthful ideals, he's twisted them, and he has won him over to his villainy,” Darren was now saying. “He's pursuing friendly relations with the temple. The prince's religious conversion was also all according to his plan. He's pretending to simply be building spaces for the Cross Faith within Atall, but in actual fact, he's extending his own power. It's the same as with the Personal Guards. Savan seized money and manpower from us, and created his own private militia.”

His powerful assertions didn't stop there.

“The marauders who attacked the prince in the resort area were probably also in his pay. And even now, Savan is continuing to gather soldiers. He is finally revealing his true colours as he prepares to send troops to each of our territories. And for now, his sights are on my Darham. Before now, he fabricated an issue at the quarry and was setting up a trap for me. On top of that, he probably hates me for having seen through him. It's not surprising that the first thing he wants to do is to shut me up, even if that means invading my lands tomorrow.”

His repeated tirades drew public opinion within the capital towards him.

You bet..

Leo Attiel was so angry that all the blood in his body seemed to be boiling.

You bet it could be 'even tomorrow'. It's that guy attacking us which wouldn't be in the least bit surprising. And I've gone and helped him prepare the ground...

Even though Sovereign-Prince Magrid had announced that he would investigate the matter at the resort area, he had not taken any concrete action. He had simply heard Leo and Darren's side of the story several times over through the messengers he dispatched. To misquote the King of Allion back when Leo had met with him, was Magrid planning to draw the curtain down by pretending that “each of you misunderstood the other”? Leo once again directed his anger at his father and sovereign.

A vassal raised his blade against a member of the ruling family, so why aren't you reacting more? Why can't you seem to imagine that the same bloodstained blade will one day fall on you, who shares the same blood? Are you afraid of changing the current situation? Are you so afraid of breaking the safe and fragile balance of peace and order?

That's right, it's fragile, Father. Even if it looks on the surface like nothing is changing, 'order' is constantly crumbling. You can't protect it anymore simply by looking away from trouble. If you turn your eyes away from fights, then even that fact alone means that your 'order' can't possibly maintain its shape, and is changing even now. Darren might be the very symbol of that. He makes sure to look like he is perpetuating the 'order' that the Sovereign-Prince believes in, but

deep in his heart – in revenge against me and Savan – he's planning to create chaos like you've never seen before.

Leo's feelings were in disarray. Neither Percy nor Camus were nearby to offer counsel, while Kuon and Sarah had both disappeared a month ago. He thought that he could guess the reason for that, but as they not left behind any message, he had not positive proof of it. It felt like he was going back to that time at the banquet, when he was alone in the darkness without a single ally, while his surroundings stared inquisitively.

Part 3

It was a long, long night.

Just when the images of Gosro and of he himself, transformed into a sacrifice, finally faded, hunger and thirst took their turn to torment Kuon's body and mind. He tried to sleep, but couldn't. Every time he was about to drift off, the stagnant *sludge* reappeared once more, surrounding him, sneering, cursing and laughing at him. Kuon couldn't help but have both eyes wrenched open.

Less than a year ago, someone had rescued Kuon from this same prison. In futile hope, he imagined the same arm extending from beyond the darkness and pulling him to the outside.

Even now, he didn't know who had gotten him out. Maybe it was the real Warrior Raga? Since Raga was said to have the power to expel evil, perhaps he had seen through to the truth and had helped Kuon out. But no – Raga wouldn't have been so short and slight. So who was it? Was there someone in this village who would have come to his help even though it meant breaking the mountain's rules? Or had they been sent by Tei Tahra?

Kuon's thoughts tumbled about in confusion.

And the night wore further on.

More than once, Kuon thought that it might never end. In which case, he wouldn't be thrown to the fire. In exchange, however, he would be slowly eaten away by hunger and thirst, and by so much exhaustion that it seemed to press down on him like a grey weight.

He pictured how, when the morning sun finally rose, it would faintly illuminate the white skeleton he would have turned into inside the rocky prison. He didn't even notice that he was sobbing.

Kuon lifted his head at the sound of the grate of iron bars opening. His sense of time had grown vague, and it felt to him that it had already been several days since he had been shut away. At some point, although he did not know when, even the fear which had once been greater than pain had been worn away by the passage of unchanging time. His senses had dulled, and now, it was only physical agony that continued to gradually break him down.

Have they come to kill me?

Which was why, when he heard the door opening, rather than fear, what he felt was joy.

The one who stepped in through the open doorway was the leader of the tribe, Suo. Kuon could dimly make out that he only had one person with him who seemed to be acting as a bodyguard.

Suo was a very old man. He had already been old when Kuon was born, and, as a child, Kuon had sometimes thought that when he himself was old and came to the end of his life, maybe Suo would still be head of the tribe, and would still look the same.

Kuon felt a strange sense of nostalgia at the sight of that white hair, and of those long, drooping white eyebrows. It had not even been a year since he had fled from the mountains, but even though Suo might be here to announce his death, Kuon almost wanted to jump at him in delight.

Suo however wore the same expression as though they had just seen each other yesterday.

“So it's you, Kuon,” he muttered softly. “I didn't think we would ever meet again.”

“This is surely Tei Tahra's divine guidance,” said the single soldier who was accompanying Suo.

His muscular torso was stripped bare. Tusk-like ornaments extended from either side of his forehead, and half his face was covered by a mask in the shape of a beast opening its maw.

It was the warrior, Raga. Looking at him, Kuon understood that this was a different person from the Raga he had once known. His eyes widened slightly,

but he was so numb to fear and to any other sensation that doing that was all the emotion he was capable of showing. "Lift him up," said Suo, and even when Raga put his hands behind Kuon's shoulders and placed his back against the wall, Kuon barely had any reaction at all.

For a while, Suo observed Kuon from beneath his drooping eyebrows.

"Why did you come back at this point in time?" He asked. "You must have known that things would turn out this way. Surely you couldn't have thought that your crime would be forgiven less than a year later?"

"He must have gotten scared after wandering around like a beast once he left the mountain. As a criminal, how could he survive far from Tei Tahra's protection?"

"Raga, don't interrupt. I'm asking Kuon."

Raga gave a respectful bow.

His eyes fixed on Kuon, Suo asked him the same question once more. Kuon remained distracted for a while, but when Raga's heavy hands struck him on the cheeks, he dully shook his head, then coughed repeatedly.

"I get it. I'll talk," he said in a rough voice that sounded like it belonged to someone else, and began to briefly narrate what had happened to him since he had left the village.

He talked about how he had gone to Conscon Temple as a mercenary, how he and the companions he had met there had headed to the enemy headquarters to attack them by surprise, and how that had then ended in a strange meeting with Leo of the Principality of Atall. He also explained about how, since then, he had followed Leo and had been involved in the fights against Hayden and Darren.

With his senses still numbed, and talking in a voice that didn't seem to be his own, he found himself wondering whether he was truly talking about himself. No, in the first place, it seemed doubtful that this could possibly be his own experiences.

Raga appeared to feel the same way. Kuon had always been a poor talker, and he clearly found it irritating to listen to his words.

“Enough already. Chief, what's the point of listening to this endless talk?”

“I believe I told you not to interrupt.”

“If it's to hunt down a beast or an enemy, I can wait without moving while the sun rises and sets any number of times, but the time spent here is just wasted. From the very start, everything that's come out of this guy's mouth is just random nonsense.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Even here, where he was born, Kuon has never had either friends or companions. And on top of that, he's the bastard who killed the leader of the Wei, who looked after him. It's completely impossible to believe that he's found and fought for a master and companions in a some culture we know nothing about. Even if he got hired somewhere as a soldier, he'd definitely cause trouble all day long until he finally got himself killed.”

Neither Warrior Raga nor Suo, the village chief, noticed it. With his hands and feet still bound, and his back leaning against the wall, Kuon smiled faintly.

True. That really is true.

It felt to him like the story he had told was a tale belonging to some other person.

Obviously, I got dragged to the rock of imprisonment after Datta died. That was just a dream I had in the meantime. I'm an unwanted spawn with half of my blood not even human – how could I have left the mountain...

“What's the matter, Kuon? Can't talk anymore?” Raga gave a small, scornful laugh. “You're no good at lying. All you've been doing after slipping out of your shackles is run and hide around here like a baby rabbit. But now that you've given up on running away and come back...”

“He's not lying.”

They heard the voice of someone who could not possibly be there.

The one who had appeared, her hand against the cleft in the rock, was Sarah. Kuon actually suspected she was another illusion.

“Who the hell are you?”

Raga reached for the sword at his waist, but when he saw the face of the next person to walk in through the opening, he looked surprised and took his hand away from the hilt.

“Come and give me a hand.”

Prompted by that hoarse voice, Raga hurried to the cleft and stretched out his brawny arms. The one he helped pull inside that way was Mist, the highest-ranked of all the priestesses.

This elderly lady was even older than Suo, and her back was so terribly bent that she could no longer walk by herself. Whenever she moved through the village, she did so carried in a hamper on a soldier's back. With the passage of time, her eyelids had grown heavy and hooded her eyes, so that it seemed likely that they must barely be able to see anymore, yet when she turned towards Kuon –

“Oh, Kuon. It's you, Kuon. It really is,” she spoke in a strangely happy voice.

“This *is* a surprise, Mistress Mist,” Suo brought a hand to his chest and offered her the greeting given to priestesses. “Why have you come to such a filthy prison? Is it perhaps because you have heard the decision from that exalted voice?”

“To be sure, that child left the mountain without waiting to hear the voice of Tei Tahra's decision. I'll need to ask for it again.” Mist continued inwards, supported by Raga's arm at her waist, and pointed a bony finger at Sarah. “More importantly: this girl. This morning, I learned that this girl, who had only just woken up by the grace of Tei Tahra was saying that she wanted to see Kuon no matter what. Through the other priestesses, I also heard a very interesting story. So I felt like bringing myself over here, even if it meant breaking these old bones to do so.”

“Story? What story?”

“Didn't you both hear it too? The story of why Kuon deliberately returned to the mountains after having left them.”

“You can't believe a single one of his words,” Raga roared.

“He isn't lying,” Sarah once again flatly contradicted him. She stared unflinchingly at the eyes drawn on the beast mask. “He is, incontrovertibly, a platoon leader in the Personal Guards affiliated to His Highness, Prince Leo Attiel, second prince of the Principality of Atall. I, Sarah, a nun from Conscon Temple, swear to it.”

“By the crown of ivy that Tei Tahra wears, I don't need to listen to the words of a heathen.”

“Now, now, listen to her story, Warrior Raga. Not everything can be settled with swords and bulging biceps, you know.”

Rebuked by Priestess Mist, Raga could not longer say anything. Having successfully caught Mist's interest, Sarah formally knelt in front of Suo.

“In the name of His Highness, Lord Leo of Atall, I present a request to Master Suo, chief of this village.”

Kuon stared vacantly at her as she did so. For him, everything separated Suo and Sarah – they existed, so to speak, in different worlds, so simply seeing them face each other and have a conversation was a strange scene in and of itself.

Another thing which he found surprising was how smoothly Sarah stated her business. She explained that their lord and master, Leo Attiel, was currently caught in an appalling trap and was facing a terrible plight. He needed strong soldiers to extricate himself from it. Hearing that there were warriors well-suited to his crusade in the land that Kuon – a platoon leader in his Personal Guards – hailed from, Leo Attiel had shown considerable interest.

“We implore your assistance, Master Suo. It goes without saying that we will prepare rewards worthy of you all as thanks. Please lend us the strength that your brave warriors have fostered in these mountains, and help Lord Leo carry out justice.”

She had been in the grip of a fierce fever up until just that very morning, but she fervently appealed to her listeners' emotions, and spoke so eloquently it seemed unthinkable that she had recently been suffering. Suo gazed at the girl with admiration.

“And so that was why you crossed all the way over the dangerous Kesmai

Plains? You truly went to great lengths to get here. However,” Suo's long white swayed as he shook his head, “our tribe does not take part in any fights beyond these mountains. We have never sided with any power, nor yielded to any threat. No matter how righteous and just they might be, nor how many rewards they have piled up, it has nothing to do with us. The weak will be destroyed, and the strong will prosper; that is all there is to it. Please transmit that message to your lord, Leo.”

“But, Master Suo...”

“Enough!” Raga let out a thunderous roar. “The Chief has already made his decision. If you want to overturn it, then you have to defeat me, the strongest warrior of our tribe. But an outsider like you doesn't have the right to try.”

“It's as he says. I ask that you leave at once. We will not spit on Lord Leo's honour, so I will have several of our warriors accompany you until you have gone down from the mountain. We will also provide you with horses and provisions.”

After he had finished speaking, Suo turned away from her, as though he had already lost interest in the outsider. Having received an eye signal from him, the soldiers were about to draw towards her.

“Please wait,” Sarah hurriedly strung her words together. “You said that I'm to leave the mountain, but what about Kuon?”

“Since Kuon is a member of our tribe, an outsider has no business interfering.”

It was Raga who had answered her. Sarah glared fearlessly at him.

“Are you planning on killing him?”

“Kuon is a criminal. As for what form his punishment will take, it is not for mere humans such as ourselves to know.”

Raga's words implied that what came next would be left to God's decision. Sarah interpreted it as saying that – *Kuon will be killed*. Her face pale, she looked around her. She had no allies. Even Mist, who had declared that Sarah's story was 'interesting', showed no sign of speaking up in Kuon's favour.

In that instant, the courteous expression vanished from Sarah's face, and it was replaced by one that Kuon knew well. In other words, it was the look she wore right before exploding with anger. *Now listen here, you savages!* – Kuon shuddered at the thought that she burst out with that any moment now.

The warm feel of his blood flowing slowly started to return to Kuon's limbs, which had been as cold and numb as though they had been turned to stone. Or perhaps it was returning to his heart itself.

That's enough already, Sarah, just leave it – Just as Kuon was mustering his energy to open his cracked lips and speak, Sarah was a split-second faster, and said something that no one there had been expecting.

“That won't be tolerated.”

“What won't be tolerated?” asked Raga.

Sarah scowled at him – or rather, she glared at all the mountain people gathered there, Kuon included.

“It's obviously already been decided. Kuon will be killed.”

“And? *Who* won't tolerate it?” Raga's voice held the trace of a smile. “The pagan god you believe in? Are you saying divine punishment will fall on us from the heavens the second we kill Kuon? How stupid. We're under Tei Tahra's protection, and that kind of threat won't...”

“The one who won't tolerate it is neither God nor myself. It's His Highness Leo Attiel,” Sarah's voice was shot out like an arrow. Her upturned eyes were filled with strength.

“It's just as we told you earlier: Kuon is now a retainer to Lord Leo. If he hears that Kuon brutally lost his life while requesting your help, His Highness certainly won't leave things at that. Raising your hand against him means making an enemy out of all of Atall. And? Isn't it your tribe's policy not to take sides in any fight?” she said straight out.

Raga stayed silent for a moment. On the other hand, Suo, the head of the tribe, seemed to have regained the interest that he had previously lost.

“And how would Lord Leo know what fate befell his retainers? You might

have been attacked by ashinaga on the Kesmai Plains. Or maybe targeted by bandits before you had even crossed the border,” he said.

Contained in his words was the implicit meaning that *we can kill you as well as Kuon to keep your mouth shut.*

But Sarah didn't back down.

“Didn't you notice? We didn't arrive all the way here, just the two of us. One of the nomadic clans guided us, and they know that we were coming to these mountains. And if we fail to return within a month, a search party will be sent without fail from Atall to the south. There, they will hear about things in detail from the nomads. And once His Highness Leo learns that Kuon and my tracks end here, in these mountains, well, what will you gentlemen do?” she threatened in return.

The earlier situation had reversed, and Suo stopped talking while Raga now took his place.

“Let him try!” he barked as he took a step forward. “We'll get rid of any intruders. Who cares if it's Atall or whoever, as long as we have Tei Tahra's divine protection, and Warrior Raga's strength, we won't let anyone take these mountains from us.”

Kuon had gone beyond surprise and was momentarily bereft of speech he was so dumbfounded. Sarah's retorts were completely absurd. Even though she could leave if she just forgot about him, she was placing both the tribe's fate and Kuon's on the scales, and adding her own for good measure as she risked her life in these negotiations.

What an idiot, he thought in spite of himself. He'd felt the same way when he had watched her shoot a bandit through the head at Conscon, except that time, he had noticed that her legs had been shaking, ever so slightly.

Why, Sarah? Why are you doing something so stupid?

Kuon couldn't understand. And it wasn't only Sarah that he couldn't understand.

No, it wasn't just Sarah.

For Kuon, the many people he had met after leaving the mountains, and the numerous events that had happened were impossible to decipher. Whether it was those who believed in a god other than Tei Tahra, or the young nobleman who had no sooner finished fighting a neighbouring country than he turned his blade against his own countrymen, or those who didn't stand up to fight even though they knew danger was approaching their land, or the many customs that prevailed in towns – he didn't understand any of them.

Ah...

Within Kuon's mind, scenes had begun vividly spinning around. At first, they had been grey-tinted and had sunk into darkness, just like illustrations of stories far removed from reality. But, as he stared intently at them, they had started to glow faintly with colour. The colours gradually grew in number and in brightness, until finally, various scenes from his memory were painted in a flood of brilliant hues.

“It's impossible to believe that man found and fought for a master and companions. Even if he got hired somewhere as a soldier, he'd definitely cause trouble all day long until he finally got himself killed.” – That was what Raga had said a while earlier.

And he was exactly right: Kuon had barely been hired as a mercenary at Conscon before he was already causing an uproar. He had fought over food with a bandit chief, whose name he had already forgotten. The bandit leader had a whole bunch of subordinates, but Kuon was all by himself. Any mistake would have gotten him killed. No, even if he hadn't been killed that time, the same thing would have repeated over and over, until one time, he would definitely have died, and his corpse would have been left to rot among the weeds on the side of a road, without anybody taking any notice of it.

Nowadays, he realised that himself. So how did someone as stupid as he had been manage to survive in an unfamiliar culture in the middle of war? How... he didn't even need to wonder about it.

It's because I wasn't alone.

Thinking back on all the fights since Conscon, there had always been people beside him. And not only during the fighting, but also in the scenes of daily life.

“Kuon” – There was always some there who called out to him.

“Were you brawling again, Kuon?” Percy asked helplessly, even though there was a crease between his eyebrows.

“Kuon, it looks like you're steadily memorising the tenets of the Holy Scriptures. What, still not? From now on, I'll be instructing you while keeping you under strict supervision, so there's no escape!” Camus pronounced with a stern expression.

“Kuon,” when she caught sight of him, Sarah came running up, the hem of her novice's robes fluttering.

Even though he himself couldn't remember having done anything, whenever he saw her rush over like that, he felt a strange feeling of guilt, and wondered if he'd done something bad to her. That was probably because Sarah was always far too honest about her emotions, and because she was always launching attacks on him. Even when the reasons she gave for them were completely unreasonable. Like, for example: “Our match from last time hasn't ended yet. What will it be today? And let's forget about a rematch footrace, because I definitely won't lose at whatever we do next.”

And then, there was one other. Leo Attiel.

Even a man from the tribe who had known and spent time with Kuon since he was born had concluded that “there was no way Kuon could live in that civilisation,” yet Leo had made him his subordinate, and had sometimes even entrusted him with hundreds of men.

They had barely exchanged any private conversations. If you added up all the time the two of them had spoken together, it probably wouldn't amount to more than three hours. Still, in his own way, Kuon understood how difficult Leo's situation was. And because of that, and even if it was only ever so slight, he felt a certain sympathy for him.

Kuon's senses, which felt as though they had been paralysed by poison, slowly started to return. The blood circulated through his veins, and warmed his hands and feet. It was certainly as though blood and flesh were returning to an abandoned corpse but, at the same time, it meant that the fear he had forgotten for a time also came back to him.

Let us say it as often as it needs to be said: Kuon was afraid. Not since coming back within sight of the mountain; no, he had constantly been afraid ever since he had fled the mountain, just after Datta died.

Just as he had told Sarah, after escaping from the mountains, Kuon had headed north by tracing the location of the nomadic tribes who roamed the Kesmai Plains.

He had always been watching his back. For Kuon, who had never had the opportunity to be involved with trading, it was the first time he had even met human beings other than the mountain people. And so, while he was of course cautious because he had no way of knowing when the nomads might turn those large blades they used to hack off the meat from their livestock against him, what made him tremble more than anything was the fear that his native village might send assassins against him.

Finally, he had crossed the Pass of the Wailing Tresses and entered into Atall's territory, where he had heard the rumours about Conscon that had led him to become a mercenary.

Facing actual combat, the wariness of not knowing when a pursuer might appear was soon just as worn down as Kuon himself had been only a few minutes earlier.

As he learned about the rules of the outside world, he started feeling that the laws and rituals of the mountain were hideously distorted. Besides that, he had wanted to burst out laughing when he realised that there innumerable gods in this world other than Tei Tahra. To think that when he was living in such a confined space, he had been terrified of a god that only tyrannised such a tiny world, and of that god's messengers.

When he had first started as a mercenary at Conscon, all he had wanted was food enough to survive but then, before he knew it, he had become eager to accomplish some glorious feat. He wanted to become famous, to be called a hero, and to prove that he had been right when he chose to leave the mountains.

Or perhaps what he was anxious to do was to fulfil the prediction made at his coming-of-age ceremony, when it had been said that “Kuon Wei will one day

bring forth more gold than the mountains can hold,” and show all of them, back at the mountain.

This was supposed to be the proof that he had overcome the traditions and the shackles of his birthplace, but in reality, it was the exact opposite: it was sign that his native land still continued to hold him back.

I didn't run away. One day, I'll day go back with my hands filled with gold. So my existence isn't harmful to Tei Tahra. Holding on to that belief was simply a way to obtain a sense of security, to still be part of the mountain and to still be with Tei Tahra, even though he was far from his birthplace.

The fear which was deeply ingrained in his heart and soul could not be wiped away so easily.

After he had become a mercenary, both the overflowing zeal that Percy and the others had observed with amazement, and the dull listlessness he had sometimes displayed were simply the result of his unbearable insecurities.

Suo had asked him, “Why did you come back?”

And Kuon himself had wondered the same thing – *Why did I come back?* – as he stood before his native mountains, and also as he writhed across the prison's stone floor.

It was obvious.

The answer was exactly the same as the one to 'Sarah's stupid behaviour,' which had seemed 'incomprehensible' to him just a short while ago.

“Throw this woman out,” Raga bellowed in a voice that seemed to rumble to the pit of his stomach. “Chief, there's no need to kill her. Let her hurry back to Atall. It doesn't matter what kind of man this Leo is, I won't run from any challenge.”

Raga's figure was undeniably valiant, but Kuon did not fail to notice the anguished expression that flitted across Suo's face at that moment. No matter how much the mountain people might have the advantage of the terrain, or how brave their warriors were, fighting against the forces of an entire country would be far too much for them.

Yet having said that, allowing Kuon – who had once fled the mountain – to return to Atall would mean utterly disrupting the rules that protected the mountain.

Having understood that hesitation, Kuon came to a decision.

“If no one else is going to do it, I'll throw her out. Chief, you won't be stopping me, right?” Raga strode towards Sarah and reached to grasp hold of her shoulders. Just as she was about to quickly dodge –

“Chief Suo...”

Everyone there started in surprise, and turned to look at the boy whose back was leaning against the stone wall. It was as if they had all forgotten his existence until that moment.

Below the mask, Raga opened his mouth wide.

“You stay silent, Kuon. The priestesses will be sure to judge you not only for murdering Datta, but also for the crime of having brought war to the tribe.”

He took a swipe of his brawny arms towards Kuon, as if to tell him not to interfere. However –

“It's just as you say, Warrior Raga. I'll wait here for Tei Tahra's judgement.”

“What?”

“Whatever Sarah... – whatever that woman says, I'll stay here.”

“Kuon!” At his words, Sarah was the first to cry out.

“This is what I've decided for myself. Since I accept whatever crime the mountain accuses me of, as well as whatever punishment they decide, it's impossible for Lord Leo to retaliate in revenge.”

Those words brought an end Sarah's negotiation tactic's, even though she had finally managed to make Suo falter and hesitate. She was just about to scream at him, half-frantic with fury.

“But, before that,” Kuon spoke forcefully, looking at Raga, “you said something, Warrior Raga. You said that as an outsider, Sarah didn't have the right to try and change the Chief's policy by challenging you to a duel.”

“And what about it?”

“What about *me*?”

“What?”

After gasping in surprise, Raga then shook head contemptuously towards the one he was speaking to.

“What do you think you're saying? A criminal can't challenge Raga. If that was possible, everyone who received the death sentence would choose to challenge me, since they would already have one foot in the grave anyway. Do you want Raga to have to deal with every single criminal?”

“Wrong. The only time anyone can challenge Raga to a duel is when they oppose a decision from the chief. Only the mountain god, Tei Tahra – or basically, only the priestesses who can relay his voice, can decide if someone's guilty. Not the chief. So a criminal can't challenge Raga just because he's not happy with his sentence.”

“You fool. That's why I said...”

“My guilt hasn't been decided yet, so I'm not a criminal yet.”

“What?” This time, Suo said it too.

The two of them looked towards the aged Priestess Mist, and she replied in a voice that was like the low pipping of a flute.

“Kuon disappeared before we could clarify his crime and decide whether he was guilty. It's a fact that Lord Tei Tahra has not yet pronounced His judgement.”

“That's completely ridiculous,” Raga yelled, his brawny shoulders heaving up and down. “Even if that's true, this man escaped from the mountain. A man who left the tribe can't challenge Raga.”

“That's wrong too.”

“What's wrong!”

Raga's fury was now so strong, it was as though thunder was about to crash down. But Kuon's eyes were also blazing with the force of a fire.



“I said I'd wait for Tei Tahra's judgement. Both Suo and Mist look like they intend for me to receive it too. Since I'm leaving my fate to the mountain god, I'm not an outsider. And, Warrior Raga, you yourself said it to Sarah, too: 'Kuon is part of our tribe'. And that's exactly right. Even if my innocence is in doubt and I left the mountain, right now, I'm still a member of the tribe.”

Even Raga was left speechless.

I'm a member of the tribe – just how long had Kuon waited for the day he would be able to proudly declare that? Yet right now, Kuon wasn't boasting.

“As so, in the same way that I have to obey its laws and fulfil its obligations, I can call upon my rights as a member of the tribe.”

It was in order to survive. It was in order to save Sarah, and to rescue Leo, Percy and Camus from the danger he wanted to help them out of. For that, Kuon was willing to wield his words like weapons as much as he needed to.

“I object to Chief Suo's decision to refuse Lord Leo's request. I make use of my right, and challenge Warrior Raga to a duel. Whether I win in a fight with him, I leave to Tei Tahra's judgement.”

Afterword

While I was writing this book, my main PC broke down, but although I ran into quite a few heart-stopping situations in which my data almost went flying away, I somehow managed to get to the point where I'm writing this 'Afterword' on my dust-covered secondary PC... Continuing on from the last time, and still filled with suffering (mostly the author's), 'LeoDen' has reached its third volume.

Previously, Lord Leo just barely managed to protect his country from the intrigues of major powers. And he then determined that the next target he needed to swing his sword at was not a group of foreigners but those in his own homeland, Atall. From here on, we will gradually be seeing the historical events that earned him the distinction of being later known as the "Headhunting Prince", and also the "Headless Prince".

What kind of destiny did he follow, this boy who threw himself down spread-eagled in the grass in the opening of this story? And why does posterity treat him like an utmost villain?

Dear readers, please be sure to check it out for yourselves.

Now then.

Recently, along with writing the main series, I've been made to write – er, no, I've been given the opportunity to write short stories and vignettes as shop-exclusive extras or for the web as a way of promoting sales.

In part to sort them into order for myself, here is a list of the stories that I have written so far:

1: Vignette: A story about Florrie trying her best to congratulate Leo on his

thirteenth birthday.

2: Vignette: Set in Conscon Temple, a duel (?) between Kuon and Sarah.

3: Vignette: After battling at the temple, a story about how Camus lost a certain spear contest.

4: Short Story: A story about Leo and Zanakk, a 'drunkard' who was one of Claude's subordinates.

1 and 2 were shop-exclusives extras (currently unavailable – it doesn't seem like there's any point asking at the bookstore), 3 was featured on Dengeki Bunko's NicoNico web channel, and 4 was published in the Dengeki Bunko Magazine, vol.44.

If you're interested, please don't forget to check again at a later date, in case I have the chance to write more.

With that, see you next time!

--- Sugihara Tomonori