

IV

TALES  
OF  
LEO ATTIEL

✦ 首なし公の肖像 ✦

# アレオ 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

アツテイル伝

IV

❄️  
首なし公の肖像  
❄️

杉原智則  
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「いままで、ラガに勝利した者はいるのですか」  
「わしの知る限り、この儀式でラガに勝利をおさめ、  
長の方針を覆した者はない」

✦ 山の部族出身のレオ親衛隊 ✦  
クオン

✦ 山の部族、最強の戦士 ✦  
ラガ





✦ 山の部族の戦士 ✦  
✦ アクア ✦

「見た目とおりはなんだ。  
わたしがレオ公子に仕える『男』に  
ふさわしくないというのか。  
なら、その『男』どもをつれてこい。  
片っ端から矢で射抜いてやる！」

✦ 勇猛な修道尼 ✦  
✦ セーラ ✦

「ええ、ええ。あなたと同じ部族出身の男たちなら、  
神さままだか巫女さままだかのお言葉があれば  
そう認めてくれるでしょうけど、ここは『御山』じゃないわ。  
アトールの男たちに、テイターラ神のお声なんて関係ないの。  
あなたは見た目とおりに見られるだけのこと」

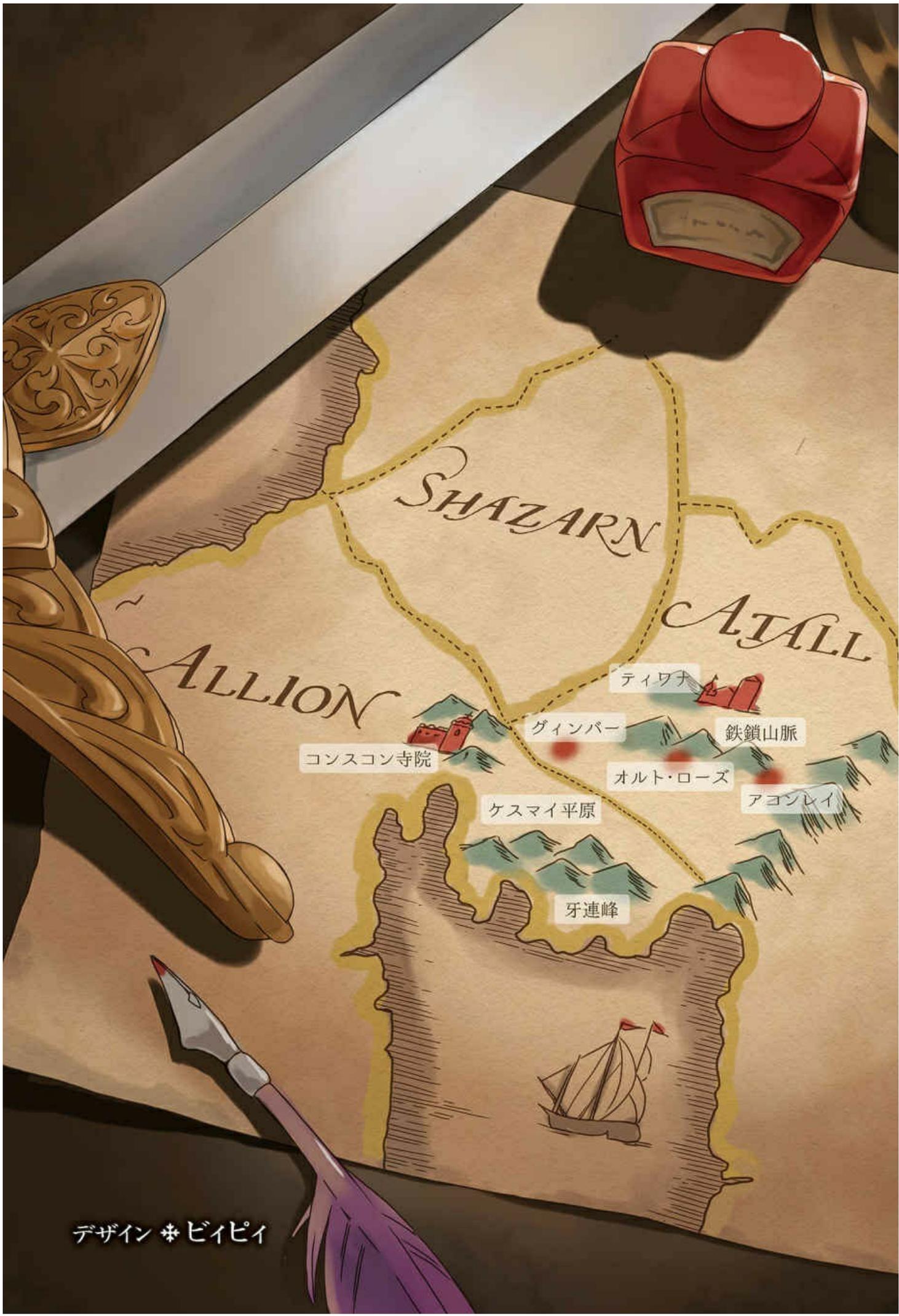


「手前もあほだが、  
それ以上って意味だよ。  
あのレオ・アツティールって  
男はな！」

「自由になる兵力はただか三三だ。  
それでなにができるものか」

✦ アトール公国第二公子 ✦  
レオ・アツティール

✦ 老練な賊兵の頭領 ✦  
ランス・マズポッター



デザイン \* ビイピイ

# Chapter 1: The Duellists

## Part 1

*By Tei Tahra's guidance, Kuon the fugitive has returned to the mountains.*

No sooner had that rumour flown round the village than another one swiftly started to spread.

*Kuon wants to overturn the Chief's decision, so he's going to fight a duel with Warrior Raga.*

The normally quiet atmosphere within the mountains was as noisy as though they had suddenly been attacked by an entire enemy division.

Whenever anyone maintained their opposition to a decision from the chief, that person had no choice but to fight Warrior Raga in a duel, and win. Said otherwise, Raga was duty-bound to accept duels, but it wasn't something that happened very often. Most of the tribe lived their entire life in the mountains where they had been born, but even then, they might see it at most once or twice in their entire lifetime.

Moreover, his opponent was Kuon.

The 'unwanted child' whose contaminated blood had not received Tei Tahra's divine protection, the one who had ensnared then murdered Datta Wei, even though Datta had helped look after him – in other words, a 'betrayal' who was possessed by evil spirits, and a fugitive who had fled from the mountain before those spirits could be cleansed.

“Why is Kuon fighting Raga instead of being thrown to the fire?”

People were understandably puzzled. Nothing but death awaited a 'betrayed'. Those who were inhabited by evil spirits were usually killed by the youths who had only just reached adulthood, during their coming-of-age ceremony, and their corpse was burned in the sacred flames lit by the priestesses and shamans.

Such were the customs, lifestyle and laws of the people who lived in these mountains, which others did not approach.

“According to Mistress Mist, Tei Tahra's divine voice hasn't passed judgement on Kuon yet.”

“And also, Kuon seems to have brought a woman from a country called Atall with him. That woman asked the chief to lend them our military strength.”

“That's ridiculous. We don't belong to Atall here.”

“That woman also said something else: apparently, if we don't lend him our strength, the prince of Atall will attack and annihilate us.”

“We'll take him on and beat him back!” The youths shouted and raised their fists to the sky. Here, on this mountain, women were included among said 'youths'. Warlike cries flew throughout the village, coming from men who were preparing to go hunting, and women who were tanning beast hides with smoke. Some of the more quick-tempered youths even held a sword or a gun in the fists they raised overhead.

“That woman who doesn't know the awe and terror of Divine Tei Tahra should just burn along with Kuon!”

“Of course the chief didn't give in to the threats from Atall. And of course, Warrior Raga, who was also there, roared the same thing as everyone here: 'we'll take him on and beat him back'. But at that moment, the one who spoke in objection was Kuon.”

At this point in time, Kuon was being seen as heinous sinner, but since he had not yet received Tei Tahra's judgement, he was not yet a criminal. Furthermore, he had undergone the coming-of-age ceremony. Since he was guilty of no crime, for all that he was called an 'unwanted child', and for all that he had left the mountain without permission for a year, he was still an adult of the tribe,

and he naturally had all the rights that went with it.

Kuon had made use of those rights to directly oppose the chief's will. "I challenge Warrior Raga so that I can prove before Divine Tei Tahra that I am right," he had insisted. People were astounded and incredulous. There were not a few of them who burst out laughing.

"A man living on borrowed time, waiting for Divine Tei Tahra to hand down His judgement, wants to prove to our mountain god that he's right?"

"That accursed 'unwanted spawn'? That 'betrayed'?"

"The lady priestesses don't need to wait to hear Lord Tei Tahra's voice. That bastard will be using his own body to show this mountain what justice is. It'll be proven the instant Raga's sword sends Kuon's head flying."

Throughout all of that day, the entire village was occupied with the topic of the duel between Raga and Kuon. People were not only getting worked up by insulting Kuon; it had already been about twenty years since Warrior Raga had taken part in a fight over village policy. Although the outcome was absolutely obvious, the contest provided the people there with a certain form of entertainment.

"How is Kuon going to be killed? Is he going to be felled in a single blow, or are his nerves going to be ground down while Raga takes his time chopping his limbs off one by one? How long will Kuon last? Will their swords even clash once? No, they say that the beast eyes painted on Raga's mask hold the power to make evil spirits falter. That guy definitely won't be able to even move..." Sarah intoned expressionlessly, in exactly the same voice as a priest transmitting a message from a god.

"...Is what they're saying, Mr Officer in Prince Leo Attiel's Personal Guards," she addressed Kuon, who was on the other side of the iron bars, his back leaning against the stone wall. He didn't seem like he was going to answer, however. Ever since he had informed Chief Suo and Priestess Mist that he would duel Raga, Sarah had treated him with the coldest of attitudes.

"Even though, thanks to my superb negotiation skills, it looked like I was the

verge of getting a concession out of Suo. I would even have been able to have you released. But in spite of that, you went and said 'I'm staying here. I won't run away.' Hmph, well, how splendidly manly of you. And, what do you intend to accomplish with this duel? Savages from the wilderness, who won't even listen to reason, really seem to like fighting to see who's right," Sarah declared, her eyebrows drawn tightly together.

However, when she glanced towards Kuon, whose face was hidden behind one raised knee, her cheeks puffed out.

"What is it? Why are you laughing?"

"The Cross Faith also has duels," Kuon snorted. "Apparently, the style changes a bit depending on the country or city, but when things can't be settled with a trial, or when you want to avoid the time and trouble of going to trial, you can solve things by having a duel between the people concerned, or their representatives."

"Th... Well, hum..."

"I heard about it from Camus. Seems he's also done it. I had to listen for almost an hour while he explained, complete with gestures, about how his spear had righted 'injustice' and proven his innocence."

"That *bastard*," Sarah openly cursed her brother. Then immediately continued, "That's one thing, and I don't want to talk about it. Don't try to sidestep the issue."

Kuon was left speechless by how high-handed she was being. It was as though she might be able to change the direction the wind was blowing through sheer force of will.

"There was no other choice. Even if your 'superb negotiation skills' had gotten us both out of the mountains, what then? Were we supposed to just happily go back to the prince? Without a single soldier following us?"

"That's..."

"If I win, I can change Suo's decision. In other words, we can help the prince by getting reinforcements. It's not like I ever thought that getting them to help would be easy. I was ready for at least this much."

“Liar. You were about to run away. It's only because of the way things unfolded that it ended up like this,” Sarah made another bitter comment.

However, she changed her tone immediately afterwards, probably believing that there was no point continuing in that vein.

“That guy... That Raga, is he strong?”

“I told you before, right? The strongest man in the tribe is the one who becomes Raga.”

“So you're saying he's stronger than you?”

When Sarah asked him that, biting her thumb with irritation, Kuon for some reason looked dumbstruck for a moment. After thinking about it, he replied,

“I'm stronger.”

At his answer, Sarah once again retorted “Liar,” without a second's delay.

“Didn't you only just say that the strongest becomes Raga? If he's stronger than anyone, then that means he's stronger than you, right!”

“You can't take part in the fight to choose Raga until you're an adult. So I never took part until now, and the current Raga got that position while I was away from the mountain. In other words, Raga was decided while I was gone. If I'd been here, Raga would be me.”

Kuon met Sarah's tempestuous emotions with a dispassionate answer. The young nun still had her mouth open wide, as though she were about to say something, but all that came out of it was the sound of her breathing, and before long, she let her slender shoulders dropped. Instead of calling him an idiot, she asked, in a small voice,

“...So when will the duel be?”

“Didn't you hear? Suo said it, you know. It will start tomorrow at sunset.”

“T-Tomorrow,” Sarah's breath caught in her throat, then she gasped. “You're in no state for that. It's been three days since you were locked in here, right? I've heard that I was unconscious for about that long. Are you moving at all? If you just stay still, your muscles will become stiff and you won't be able to move them. And what about meals? You haven't been getting any, have you? I'm

more or less a guest, so if I ask, I can probably get them to share some with you. Hang on, I'll go and fetch..."

As soon as she decided that, Sarah started to set off and seemed about to leave the cleft in the rock. Kuon had no time to stop her, yet Sarah herself suddenly paused when her hand was already on the edge of the entranceway.

"That won't be necessary."

A new voice could be heard from the other side of the opening. It was Aqua, with a wooden tray in hand. Grilled fish and several types of nuts were arranged on top of it, and there was also a bowl filled with mashed corn.

"This is from Chief Suo," said Aqua, silently gesturing to Sarah to 'get out' as 'she' walked past her. Sarah stood aside.

Aqua slid the tray through the gap between the iron bars and the ground's surface. Kuon's gaze shifted in turn from the tray to Aqua. Seeing the 'girl's' slender face again, it seemed to have matured a little since he had left the village. Aqua stared expressionlessly back at him, but before long, 'her' shoulders started to jerk in a way that showed 'she' was uncomfortable.

"Aren't you going to eat?" 'Her' voice was low, but it was sharp and firm. "It might be your last meal."

"I'll eat. More importantly, Aqua, you were taking part in the ashinaga hunt, so I guess that means you've 'become a man', huh?"

"Yeah."

"Too bad for Diu. He wanted to marry you."

"Is that right," Aqua answered indifferently.

Pulling the tray towards him, Kuon seemed about to ask something else, but Aqua abruptly swung 'her' slender frame around, and started to leave without another word. In a complete reversal from earlier, however, this time, Sarah was the one standing in the way, and Aqua had no choice but to stop.

"Move, Outsider."

"Forget it. I was intending to kick that Diu person flying as soon as I got here. Where is he?"

“Diu? *You're* going to 'kick him flying'? Aqua chuckled softly after repeating Sarah's words.

The novice nun felt as though she was being laughed at as a completely ignorant outsider, and her face flushed crimson.

“Yes, that's exactly right. And I'm not 'you': I'm Sarah, the best woman warrior of Conscon Temple, who is going to beat up Diu, the puniest of your tribe.”

“Why? You've never met him, right?”

“I've heard about him. He set a trap for Kuon. The one who killed Datta Wei wasn't Kuon, and that Diu person...”

“Stop it, Sarah!” Kuon shouted angrily from the other side of the iron bars, but Sarah shook her head.

“I'm not saying it for you. I'm still furious.”

“Idiot. Camus said that your god teaches that even if someone hits you on the side of the face, you should turn the other cheek without hitting back.”

“How did he have the nerve to say that? That stupid spear maniac! You're stupid too, and so is Big Brother, and Lord Leo, and every single one of you men, all of you, all of you are stupid!”

Sarah was bent slightly forward in rage as she vented her fury, and Aqua passed by the side of her with unconcerned steps.

“Ah, hold on... this conversation isn't over...” Sarah made as if to stop 'her'.

“If you want to beat up Diu, you should just leave it to Kuon tomorrow,” Aqua said coldly.

“What? What do you mean?”

“Don't you get it? At the ceremony held half a year ago, the new vessel which Warrior Raga's soul chose to reside in was the one who used to be Diu Wei.”

The pine torches at the entrance of the cleft threw light on Aqua, and half 'her' body was illuminated red.

## Part 2

The setting for the fight was a shallow ravine near the summit of the great mountain.

The ceremonial combats to choose a new Raga were held in the same place. In other words, this was where, not so very long ago, Diu Wei had competed for and earned the right to house Warrior Raga's soul.

Kuon was let out of the cliff-face prison a little before sunset.

Red curtains had been hung at both ends of the floor of the ravine. As one of the contestants waiting to duel, Kuon was led behind one of them. Even now, his hands and feet were bound in chains. Soldiers, who were more like lookouts than guards, had followed behind him, but after he was pushed behind the curtain, there was no longer anyone around him.

For a while, time simply passed.

Kuon dropped down to the ground on his backside. Having come this far, he naturally had no intention of running away. He felt the presence of people gathered on the other side of the curtain. The light of the sun gradually grew weaker, and was replaced with deep shadows in the area cut off by the draperies.

At that point, Aqua came in, accompanying an elderly priestess clad entirely in scarlet robes.

As soon as the greetings were over, the priestess started drawing a pattern over Kuon's skin with red dye. It was meant to call the Spirits of battle into his body, and normally, it was a pattern that only the head of a unit was allowed to receive when going to war. Two exceptions were made, however, and the braves who dared contend to become Raga, as well as the warriors who challenged Raga, were also allowed to wear it.

A few minutes later, Kuon's skin was covered in a pattern of red stripes. The priestess placed a finger at the centre of the large circle that was drawn on his chest, and said, "All will be according to Lord Tei Tahra's guidance," before disappearing back to the other side of the curtain.

After the priestess had left, Aqua, who had been watching motionlessly from start to end, silently crouched down next to Kuon, and took a key to unlock the chains at his hand and feet. Kuon swung his legs, which suddenly felt light again. "Why did you come back?" Aqua asked him in a whisper.

Kuon answered while gazing at the dirt-stained tip of his toes,

"It was Lord Tei Tahra's guidance."

"Liar. You don't have the mountain god's guidance," 'she' retorted flatly. 'Her' callousness reminded him of Sarah. Speaking of which, the two of them were the same age.

"Diu Wei was strong," Aqua continued, as though speaking to 'herself'.

"I know."

"No, you don't know. After you left, Diu became stronger. It was almost frightening how he continued practising day and night, as though he was possessed by the Spirits of battle and he didn't know how to release them. Even though everyone thought that after Datta's death, Diu would succeed him as the next 'Wei', he even left that to Aro, his senior brother in the unit, and continued improving his skills all by himself. The ceremonial battle to decide Raga was amazing. Whether it was the warriors with more experience than Diu, or those with a better physique than him, nobody could even touch him."

Kuon didn't answer. He remembered how Sarah had asked him the previous evening, "Is Raga stronger than you, Kuon?" At the time, he had truly felt astounded.

Of course Raga was strong. It was a simple fact, something that even babies knew, as obvious for those born in the great mountains as saying that things dropped from a height would fall. Yet when Sarah asked him that question point-blank, Kuon realised that he had completely forgotten that well-known truth.

It wasn't because he had been looking down on Raga. As soon as he had faced the masked warrior at the prison, he had sensed that the current Raga was Diu. And Diu was a man who had always been one step ahead of Kuon, not only in age, but also in terms of skill with sword or bow. If they were to fight one-to-one, it would be difficult for Kuon to win without a large amount of luck on his side.

The rules of duel were clear: victory would only be decided when one of them either died, or accepted defeat. But the people from their community believed that Kuon was steeped in sin – that his flesh housed evil spirits. Even if Kuon were to admit defeat, Raga held the duty of expelling evil spirits, so it was unthinkable that he would stay his sword.

In other words, it meant that Kuon had a very high chance of dying in this fight.

Yet when he had declared that he would face off against Raga, he had felt neither fear nor anxiety. Still, when he had explained to Sarah that *Diu became Raga when I wasn't around, so he isn't the strongest. The strongest is me*, those were not his true feelings.

Nor was he labouring under the naïve assumption that *I didn't kill Datta. I'm innocent. Lord Tei Tahra grants victory to the righteous, so there's no way I can lose.*

Aqua, who was strapping shoulder pads and a belt on the still-seated Kuon, also seemed to find it strange.

“Aren't you scared?”

'She' then changed 'her' question, and spoke in a voice just as quiet as before,

“You deliberately came back knowing that you would be killed, and now, you're definitely going to die. I'm also a 'man'. I'm not afraid of losing my life in battle. When I die, my body and bones will be burned, but my soul will ride on the back of Valgo the wind-wolf, he who serves Lord Tei Tahra, and will turn into a spirit. It's something to be proud of. But you, from the moment you left the mountain – from the moment you even thought of leaving the mountain – you lost Lord Tei Tahra's protection. The corpse that housed evil spirits is burned in the sacred fire, but although the soul is saved, it can no longer follow

the path to becoming a spirit. That means it loses the path to achieve eternity. Do you understand? That's basically the same as never having been born. I would hate it. Everything that you'd done up until then, the fact that you'd fought for the mountain, your family – it would be as if all those things never existed. I couldn't bear it!”

Blood rose to Aqua's face during 'her' long and vehement speech, and, even though it was only a little, it showed traces of how 'she' had looked in 'her' girlhood, back on that day when they were young and she rebuked Kuon without rhyme or reason.

*It is scary*, Kuon mentally agreed. But there was something that he found even scarier.

There was a loud booming noise, and the curtain that surrounded them shook. It was the sound of a drum, and it meant that battle was approaching. A second slower after the drum, there was a loud roar as the men of the tribe cheered enthusiastically.

Aqua stood, as though 'she' had suddenly come back to 'her' senses.

“Stand, Kuon. I need to make the last of the 'preparations'.”

Kuon moved to obey the order, but then suddenly stopped.

“What is it?”

“My legs have gone to sleep. Lend me a hand.”

“How pathetic, and you're saying you're going to fight Raga?” Aqua shook 'her' head as though 'she' found him utterly deplorable. 'She' stretched out 'her' hand, caught Kuon's wrist, and helped him up.

While Aqua completed the 'preparation', Kuon stared fixedly at the wrist that 'she' had seized only just a few moments ago.

A large crowd of men were gathered at the top of the slightly elevated cliffs that formed the shallow ravine.

Of those there that night, the most conspicuous were the heads of units, adorned in their battle markings. The warriors who represented the mountains

were closely monitoring the fight, and this served to guarantee that justice would be served by the outcome of the fight, whatever that outcome might be.

If, after this, someone were to appear who opposed the policy that was decided this night, who expressed dissatisfaction and deliberately refused to obey, that person would probably be expelled from the unit on the authority of its leader. And there were those among them who, out of shame that such a person could have come from their household, would resign from the position of leader of their own accord. The warriors' patterns that were painted on them testified to that level of resolve.

Aside from them, an unbroken line of men could be seen from between the unit leaders. Apart from the priestesses, only men who had reached adulthood were allowed to witness the fight.

An exception had been made for the 'outsider', Sarah, and she could be seen in the area where the priestesses had taken up their positions, just next to Mist, the very oldest of them.

Most of the men were holding pine torches aloft. Their light shone down on the ravine as the figures of the contestants appeared from either side of it. One was a warrior in a beast mask, the fangs of which framed both sides of his head.

“Raga.”

“Raga.”

“Raga!”

Every time he took a step forward, the loud cheers of the tribe's men thundered and reverberated through the ravine. The men wore enraptured, entranced expressions, and their voices had a worshipping ring to them.

Naturally, all of them knew that the face beneath the mask belonged to Diu Wei. And among the warriors, Diu was still young. For all that he had earned the position of Raga through genuine ability, it would hardly be surprising if, among the vastly more experienced warriors, there were some who still doubted Diu's actual skill, or who took him lightly.

Yet not a shred of that was in evidence among any of those who now held up torches or weapons. Even the heads of units in the prime of their life, even

those who – if their children had slipped up – might have grandchildren that were close to Diu's age, turned fervent gazes towards him.

But no, this wasn't 'Diu'. Strictly speaking, there was no face beneath Raga's mask.

When he won his position as Raga, and once he had received the rites from the priestesses, Diu unmistakably became Raga, the warrior told of in the legends. Even if the body which was now moving forward had once belonged to Diu, it was now the dwelling in which Raga's soul resided. Which meant that the man known as Diu Wei currently did not exist.

And that was why, among those gathered there – and even among the highly-skilled warriors who secretly believed that “If I had taken part in the battle ceremony, I'd have beaten down a brat like Diu Wei,” – absolutely none of them looked down on Raga. They could not even begin to doubt that he might win.

On the other hand, when Kuon walked towards the centre from the side opposite Raga, jeers hailed down incessantly from the young men.

“You accursed unwanted spawn!”

“Know your place! Not only did you oppose the chief, but you even challenged Raga?”

“He's as shameless as his mother was!”

Sarah bit her lips as she watched, and her brows drew together for a moment when the two of them finally arrived at the centre of the ravine.

Both contestants were similarly stripped naked down to their waists, and wore a shoulder pad on their left shoulder. Both similarly grasped a single, unsheathed long sword. There was, however, one single point of difference between the two men: Kuon was holding his sword in his left hand.

Kuon was right-handed, but it was clear from the start that he would not be transferring the weapon to his dominant hand.

He couldn't.

And the reason for that was because his right arm was pulled behind his back, and bound against his torso with rope.

“Those are the 'shackles' that Suo has imposed on Kuon.”

Perhaps noticing Sarah's shock and disbelief, Mist, the head priestess, explained while maintaining her eyes fixed straight ahead, even though her eyelids drooped so low that it was unclear whether she could even see anything. Any challenger who contested a decision by the chief and who fought Raga would, without exception, be handicapped by 'shackles' that were chosen at the chief's own discretion.

Kuon had mentioned it when he had once talked about his past: the head of the tribe guided his people according to the council he received from the priestesses, who conveyed Tei Tahra's words to him. Opposing the chief was virtually the same as claiming that “the priestesses misheard the Divine Voice.” Which was why that person had to prove themselves beyond any shadow of doubt – so clearly that anyone could see.

Since the dispute concerned the will of the mountain god, Tei Tahra was certain to grant victory to whoever was right, and so, the challenger had to be able to win no matter what handicap he was placed under. There were some who had been made to challenge Raga empty-handed, while he carried a long-handled spear. There were others who had even been thrown into the ring with their eyes covered with a blindfold.

“Has there ever been anyone so far who's won against Raga?” Sarah asked in a trembling voice. She held no sense of hope about the answer.

And, just as expected, Mist shook her head.

“As far as I know, this ritual has always ended with Raga's victory, and no one has ever overturned any of the chief's policies.”

Sarah turned back to where Kuon and Raga were facing each other and, looking at them again, the difference in build between them was obvious. Raga's physique was by no means the most impressive within the tribe, but compared to his burly frame – and even though Kuon had grown taller since Sarah had first met him – Kuon was like a young and flimsy sapling. Forced into a fight where he was at a disadvantage even at the best of times, his dominant arm was now immobilised.

Sarah wanted to scream in protest against what was going on. This was

completely stupid. She wanted to break through the crowd and into the ravine at once, grab Kuon by the arm, and drag him back to Atall, even if it was against his will.

But her legs wouldn't move, and her voice wouldn't come out. She realised that it was too late to turn back. If she forcibly broke up this fight, the only fate that awaited Kuon was being thrown to the flames. And so all Sarah could do now was to pray for his victory. A victory which he did not have one in a million chances of obtaining.

Chief Suo stood between the two fighters who were silently facing one another. Riding a palanquin carried on the shoulders of warriors, Mist also headed to the same place. This fight was a way of seeking Tei Tahra's will, but the official verdict on the outcome would come from Suo and Mist.

Mist looked up at the heavens overhead. At the same moment, she lifted the sleeve of her faded robes, and raised a bony arm to the night sky.

“I feel them. Of Lord Tei Tahra's one thousand eyes concealed within the mountains, three pairs now turn overhead. One pair watches Warrior Raga, one pair watches Kuon, and, from high in the heavens, the last pair sees nothing but the truth in this place. You who are not born of the energy of earth, trees and wind must fight. You who are not gods and who question the truth have no choice but to weigh your one, insignificant life in the scales. And then fight... fight... fight!”

The warriors who carried spears or swords struck their weapons against the ground. At first it was quiet and slow, and, since no one was giving orders, the noise was chaotic and disjointed.

As the seconds passed, however, a pattern emerged from the series of uncoordinated sounds. As others followed or were made to follow it, the intensity and speed of the pounding sounds soon swelled until they envelopped the ravine, and reverberated so loudly that they seemed to be challenging the night sky and making the whole mountain shake.

The chief headed up from the ravine while Mist was again transported by palanquin back to Sarah's side.

First, Raga ran the tip of his long sword across the surface of the ground, then

put himself in a fighting stance. Kuon raised the blade that he held in his left hand by a fraction.

Having arrived at the top of the cliff, Suo raised his arm, and the noise that had engulfed the entire surroundings abruptly stopped. It was so sudden that a loud ringing sound continued to echo in Sarah's ears.

As it disappeared, Suo shouted,

“Begin!”

And at the same moment, blades flashed, reflecting the light of the flames.

## Part 3

Raga was the first to move at the signal. Just like the mask that concealed his face, he sprang at Kuon with movements like a beast leaping at its prey's throat.

He was fast.

Sarah almost screamed. There was still that difference in build between them: it was to the point where if Kuon took a single blow, the match would probably be decided.

As Raga's long sword hummed, Kuon leaped back. Sarah had no time to sigh in relief: for a while, both sides started moving hectically within the narrow ravine, their feet never stopping.

Whenever Raga tried to close in on him, Kuon put distance between them. Yet Raga wasn't just going to let him escape however he pleased. Would it be to the right, or to the left? Just when it looked like his pursuit was slowing down, he would swing his sword. And his footwork never faltered.

If Camus, Sarah's combat-loving brother, had been there, would he have made comments along the line of: *'His hips and waist are steady, and his centre is unwavering. He must have trained diligently'*? Sarah was a layman in terms of fighting, and his movements had a strength and ferocity that made her gasp.

Against an ordinary opponent, Raga would not have swung his sword five times before either the other's head fell, or his chest was pierced through. And in fact –

“It's over, huh?”

The warriors standing near Sarah gave the impression of having already seen how the contest would end.

“Once the physically inferior one gets run ragged, there's no more chance of victory for him.”

“Kuon should have charged from the start. I don't think he'd have been able to land a blow on Raga even then, but at least he'd have shown a little pride as a man of the tribe.”

“We're talking about unwanted spawn – even if he was once recognised as a warrior of Tei Tahra, there's no point having sympathy.”

And certainly, Raga was the only one attacking, while Kuon simply ran away. It was no wonder that everyone considered the match already settled.

Yet Raga had already swung his sword more than ten times since Suo had given the signal. But he still hadn't caught Kuon. Gradually, the crowd's aside comments and mocking jeers started to fade away.

Kuon was dodging skilfully. He side-stepped left or right even as he faced Raga head-on. Even when the blade was closing in on him, he wasn't the least perturbed and just nimbly bent his head to avoid a swipe aimed at an angle, or jumped lightly back and let the blow pass by him, just a step away. Every time it happened, the circle of men following the contest all let out “ooh”s and “ah”s that might have been expressions either of disappointment or of admiration.

Although Sarah, who held her breath as she watched the fight, didn't make a sound, a corner of her mind was remembering the first time she met Kuon.

At Conscon Temple, he had gotten into a fight with men who were probably mountain bandits. He had faced about five or six opponents, but he smoothly and continuously passed by the fists they swung and the legs they kicked at him, sometimes even looking as though he was about to cling to their large frames. If the sword that Raga swung held all the ferocity of a wild beast, then Kuon's limbs were like supple plants entangling the predator.

The experienced tribesmen could not help but recognise that fact. Still, once it had continued on for nearly five minutes, the crowd who was watching tensely could no longer hide its irritation.

“Just how long are you planning to run away for!” Unable to bear it any longer, a man on the opposite side of the ravine from Sarah shouted out.

“Don't you dare defile the arena that the mountain god is watching over!” By Sarah's side, one of the young men who had been carrying Mist's palanquin

cried out angrily.

One after another, more and more of the men started hurling abuse at Kuon.

*That's just telling Kuon to die!* Sarah wanted to furiously shout back at them.

However, at that point in time, there was a faint, almost imperceptible glimmer of emotion within Kuon's eyes as he continued to carefully observe his opponent. It wasn't anger at being scorned and mocked. Rather, it was the light that came from having found a chance at victory.

Kuon had been waiting for 'this'.

From the very first, he had not believed he had any chance of winning through a direct confrontation. If he had lunged at Raga, who had been ready for everything, his blows would simply have been repelled, and the only thing that would have awaited Kuon at that point was 'death'.

And so, his only hope had been to systematically evade every strike. Yet even so, Raga was the man who had emerged victorious after defeating who knew how many seasoned fighters. When their movements had intersected, Kuon never once saw a single opening in his opponent.

However, now, a change appeared in Raga's way of moving.

Even if he had been crowned with the name of the legendary warrior spoken of in myth, Raga – or rather, Diu Wei, the one beneath the mask – was still young.

And because he was young, he was under heavy mental pressure. That of being Warrior Raga: in other words, that of being stronger than anyone else in the tribe. And, as Raga, he had to continuously prove that strength.

Moreover, his opponent was Kuon: someone who was smaller than him, who was a traitor who had broken the laws of the village, and whose dominant arm was blocked. It was completely obvious that Warrior Raga would win against that kind of opponent. There was no way it could be a difficult fight. He needed to settle it effortlessly, in one, single strike.

Up until then, Kuon had not been able to sense whether the current Raga felt 'the heavy pressure of being Raga' weighing on his shoulders, but when the

crowd began to voice their irritation, the change he had been eagerly waiting for had finally appeared.

Seen from the outside, it only looked like Raga had become even fiercer, as his speed and strength had increased. But Kuon saw the impatience beneath it. The leeway, based on instinct, that Raga had previously had, and which had allowed him to steadily drive his prey into a corner, had now vanished from his movements. In other words, now that he was intent on raining blows down on Kuon, the flexibility had disappeared from the way he moved.

When Kuon realised that, he brought his feet – which had been moving incessantly – to a halt, and started to crouch. The muscles of his tempered calves bulged. In the next moment, he broke into a run towards Raga.

In the same instant, the men who had been howling angrily started shouting with excitement. Sarah covered her eyes. As far as she and the crowd could see, Kuon had been unable to endure the booing, and was just charging recklessly.



Yet even as Kuon seemed to be offering his own neck to Raga's sturdy sword, he suddenly vanished.

Or at least, that was how it looked to most of those watching, including Raga himself.

While sprinting forward, Kuon had bent down until he was almost skimming the ground. He felt a gust of wind above his head. Raga had swung his sword. The very next second, Kuon's strong knees and thighs exerted a strength twice as great as his own weight, and he sprang upwards.

For the first time, the blade clasped in his hand traced a semi-circle in the air as he attacked. The tip struck Raga's mask. Raga staggered backwards, and Kuon deliberately rolled to the side, almost as though he was falling over.

The crowd raised a noise that was close to a scream.

Kuon immediately stood up as he was rolling. Raga's steps were unsteady.

Which meant that he was still alive.

The next one to attack was Raga, but having to brace himself meant that his strike wasn't so vigorous, and Kuon's blow seemed to have half negated his strength. The mask cracked, and the top half started to crumble.

If Raga's mask had not been there, and if Kuon's right hand had been free... then the contest would already have been decided. However, this was a fight in which speculation had been meaningless from the start: Tei Tahra would grant victory to the one who was in the right.

Kuon drew up from behind towards the opponent he had failed to kill. Raga started to look behind him, but his movements were terribly slow, probably because his consciousness was still hazy.

“Raga!”

A huge number of the men all shouted simultaneously, but it was to no avail, and Kuon's sword swung in attack. It seemed as though the fight would be settled this time for sure, but Kuon was aiming for Raga's sword.

The blade dropped from Raga's limp arm, and Raga himself pitched forward from the impact. The tip of Kuon's blade instantly pressed against his throat.

*Ah!* – who could even tell whose voice had just escaped them?

The two fighters, who had been moving without pause up until then, now stood still, both panting heavily. The cloud of dust they had kicked up during their fight was still swirling slightly at their feet.

*It's Kuon's win* – thought Sarah, but, next to her, Mist muttered quietly:

“How foolish.”

In order to win, a contestant had to either kill his opponent, or else get them to concede defeat. Kuon silently urged Raga to choose the first option, but there was no way that the strongest warrior in the tribe could accept that kind of outcome.

If Raga lost, it could only be through his death.

In that moment, Kuon saw pale flames flash in the eyes that glared at him from behind the cracked and crumbling mask. Just as Raga's burly arms seemed about to stretch out towards him, he instead caught the blade at his throat in his bare hands. That unexpected move caused Kuon's posture to falter, and in that same instant, Raga sprang up, kicking Kuon in the stomach as he did so.

Kuon staggered, and Raga wrenched the sword from his hand. Within a split second, Kuon had rolled to the ground and swept away the sword that Raga had dropped earlier.

The two steel swords collided. Sparks scattered a second, then a third time.

The contest had returned to the start – or so it might seem, but Raga's way of moving had clearly suffered. Yet even if that was the after-effect of the blow he had taken to the head, from the other side of the mask, he was now concentrating on raining down powerful strikes. Which meant that Kuon had also lost his advantage, which had been in the flexibility of his movements.

More than anything, this meant that unlike earlier, the two of them were in close range from one another. Kuon could no longer rely on his footwork to escape from Raga, and was forced to use the sword to defend himself. Now that things had come to that point, the difference in their build was crucial; forced into a contest of brute strength, Kuon was at an overwhelming disadvantage. Every time he stopped a blow, his centre of gravity shook. His

waist bent, his shoulders heaved, and his steps were becoming unsteady.

The tip of the blade grazed the top of Kuon's shoulders, and blood flew. If Raga had been just half a step closer, that blow would have taken Kuon's head.

“Oooh!”

“Get him, Raga!”

“Cut down that evil spirit.”

The men once again started striking their swords and spears against the ground.

Sarah felt a sort of vertigo, as though her brains were being shaken to the core. In the light of the pine torches, the shadows of the two warriors were so close that they overlapped with one another. Steel gleamed in the space between them. Was there even that space? The men roared as their sweat flew. Their weapons beating against the ground played a murderous and oppressive rhythm.

For someone from the civilised world, it was like a scene from a world of twilight. It resembled a painting daubed in primary colours, one that could release you from the shackles of reason with just a single look.

Even though the feeling of warm blood had receded from her entire body, leaving only coldness, there was a single thin line, drawn from the top of her head down to her crotch, which was so hot that it seemed her blood was actually boiling. Unable to endure the cold and heat, Sarah wanted to crouch down where she was. She wanted to turn her eyes away from Kuon, who seemed about to be bisected by Raga's sword at any moment now.

But Sarah suddenly opened her eyes wide. Shaking off the chilling cold, she was conscious only of the heat of her blood and, as though that heat was urging her on, she raised a cry that was completely unbecoming of a nun.

“*Damn it, Kuon!* Are you just going to die here for nothing? Kuon! If you win, I'll give myself to you. Sarah Pushelko would never sell her body, even if the lord of a country said he wanted it and offered me my weight in gold, and then the same again in jewels. I've given my body to God, and it doesn't come that cheap. But Kuon, I set the value of your victory higher. My body was supposed

to ascend to Heaven as untainted as my soul, but I'll let you hold me if your arms are covered in the blood of your defeated enemy!"

Did he hear that shout? Kuon desperately kept away from Raga, who was hurling blows straight at him. Each one of them was heavy and sharp. Even if he had been able to use his dominant hand, it was by no means sure that he would have been able to win.

Raga was still cutting down the distance between them. He was not about to make the same mistake twice. He struck at Kuon's shoulders, aimed to entangle his feet and destroy his stance, determined not to allow him a single chance to counter-attack.

It was terrifying. Kuon felt as though his entrails were frozen with fear, knowing that he was on the brink of having his head cut off or one of his limbs severed.

But that was only for now. He had felt the same kind of fear when he had decided to fight Raga. But he had a will of iron: his determination was unshakable, and he would survive and win at all cost, to personally save Lord Leo from danger... – saying that would be a lie.

If Kuon had left the mountain without fighting Raga – perhaps thanks to a deal with Suo brought about by Sarah's self-proclaimed 'superb negotiation skills' – he would certainly have been tormented by the same nightmare for the rest of eternity.

Day and night, by his pillow, at his feet, on either side of him, the spirit of the fisherman he had pierced with a sword at his coming-of-age ceremony would appear before him, thrusting blades into Kuon's body from all directions, then searing him in hellfire hotter than flames, even though they wouldn't leave a single burn mark on him.

That was the stagnant *sludge* that was binding Kuon. The days he had spent in the mountains where he had been born and raised, the beliefs, the customs, the people, the voices chanting incantations, the blood that had been spilled – all of them were fetters that bound his limbs and heart.

He needed to sever them.

That didn't mean discarding his past, but he had to settle things with his own hands, so that the past would stay in the past, and would not cast its shadow over the future.

Kuon gazed at Raga, whose face was now close to his. More than half the mask had already peeled off and fallen away. Diu's eyes blazed with light.

Raga's sword crashed head-on and hard against the blade Kuon held. The shock of the impact ran like lightning from Kuon's left wrist to his shoulder, and he dropped his sword.

The crowd's excitement swelled to its peak. The fierce surge of heat that blew up from the ground seemed like it could knock down the stars hanging in the night sky.

Yet that terrifying rush of heat vanished in an instant.

It happened just after Raga had taken the half-a-step needed to land the finishing blow.

Kuon once more vanished from his sight.

It was a tactic that overturned the difference in physique. By making it look like he was throwing everything into defending himself with his sword, Kuon had drawn Raga's eyes to the upper part of his body. And then, timing the loss of his sword for a point where escape was no longer possible, he had instantly slipped between Raga's legs. Kuon grabbed on to Raga's ankle as he rolled, and ended up behind him. And he didn't give him the chance to even look back.

Kuon flung a rock the size of a fist, which he had picked up as he rolled, into the back of Raga's head.

It was a terribly primitive end to a duel between swordsmen of outstanding skill.

Raga toppled forward without making a sound.

The men who had been leaning forward on all sides of the ravine, their fists raised and their mouths wide open, all suddenly froze.

Afterwards, only silence remained.

## Part 4

Within the sanctuary of Tei Tahra, 'time', which had moved steadily and unflinching forward ever since the days of the distant past right up until the present, suddenly seemed to grind to a halt.

That was how great the shock of Warrior Raga's defeat was to the mountain people.

However... time could not stop. That was, after all, no more than an illusion. The one who shattered that moment that held them all spellbound was Sarah, the outsider to the mountains.

"You did it!"

As she shouted with joy, Mist, who was next to her, called out to the village chief who was at the top of the cliff.

"Suo."

Whereupon, Suo, repeatedly blinking his eyes in astonishment, raised his arm.

"The contest has been decided," he announced in sonorous voice.

In that moment, a violent tremor seemed to jolt the 'time' which clung to the ravine's surroundings, and they were suddenly enveloped in noise and commotion the like of which had never yet been seen there. Almost none of those present were able to wrap their heads around what they had just seen, and around how the fight had ended.

And that was why some of them started to speculate:

"Did Kuon use the wiles of evil spirits?"

Others, however, objected, still half dumb with amazement.

"No, if he'd done that, there's no way Raga would have been defeated. Since he's a being who devours evil spirits."

While the winner, Kuon, crouched down, breathing raggedly, several shaman, along with some of the guards who protected the priestesses, moved towards the loser, Raga.

He was only unconscious for a few minutes. The soldiers were carrying him away to receive medical treatment, but he shook them off and got down to stand on his own two feet.

“Kill me.”

Raga – the one who had once been Diu Wei – spoke with a hate-filled glare directed at Kuon.

“Raga cannot be defeated as long as he still lives. Kill me, Kuon. If you don't, then I haven't lost yet. Come me at me again. I'll even free both your arms. Well fight until one of us dies. Well, come on!”

Raga continued to howl, but since Suo had already spoken, the match had already been decided. Although he was staggering and swaying, he would have continued to move towards Kuon, except that the heads of unit, who had been there to monitor the fight, blocked his way and removed him from the ravine.

Meanwhile, Suo repeatedly hurled his voice – “Quiet, quiet!” – at the crowd which was still making a commotion. But the shock was so great that he was not having much success. However, the elder priestess, Mist, who had appeared next to him at some point, spoke:

“Warrior Raga has lost.”

Although her voice was by no means loud, it held enough pressure to make everyone there swallow their breath and stop moving. As the crowd looked towards her, Priestess Mist spread out her arms on either side of her, like a withered tree.

“The warrior who should never have lost, has been defeated. You all know what that means. God has handed down His verdict. He has granted victory to the side in the right. That it is to say that, yes, our Lord, Divine Tei Tahra, desired Kuon's victory. Or, more accurately, rather than Kuon's victory, what He desired was that Kuon would overturn the chief's decision.”

Thereupon, Chief Suo knelt at her feet.

“In light of this verdict, I acknowledge that I misunderstood the voice of God that the priestesses relayed to me. Although I have been granted the title of 'chief', I am, after all, no more than a insignificant existence, brought to life by Tei Tahra's divine protection. How about you all?”

“We too,” one of the heads of unit struck his sword into the ground. “We too are those who exist within the mountain god, Tei Tahra's divine protection.”

As the heads knelt one after another, the crowd too, amazed and bewildered, dropped to their knees and offered prayers to Tei Tahra.

Each had their own thoughts and feelings – including the heads and the priestesses – but for those of the tribe living in the great mountains, these were easily swallowed up by the deity, the spells, and the innumerable customs rooted in their religious beliefs. At the climax of the duel, they had encouraged Raga and booed angrily at Kuon, but it was a fact that their god had granted his judgement.

They all of them fell silent.

Amidst them, Kuon remained crouching on the ground. For a while, he couldn't even move, and didn't feel like doing anything except breathing.

How much time went by?

By the time he realised it, the row of torches had left from around the ravine, and the human figures had also vanished. Kuon was taken to a house, and was given treatment by a shaman. Close to his ear, Sarah never stopped scolding him, but he barely registered it. At most, all he heard were things like, “you... a guy like you,” or “honestly... honestly...” and nothing else. Yet sometimes, she sniffled and sobbed, and her strained voice made him feel strangely embarrassed.

Eventually, both Sarah and the shaman left, and Mist appeared in their place.

“All has unfolded according to God's guidance.” After praising the winner with those words, she then asked, “...But, what about that? Kuon, your victory was certainly in accordance with God's will, but leaving Raga alive was not. That looked like something you decided on for yourself. Why was that?”

“Well...” said Kuon, gazing down at the bowl at his feet. There were still some

faint traces of mashed up medicinal plants inside it.

There was one question which had always remained with him. When he had been shut away in that prison in the rock, just after Datta Wei had died, and just before the priestesses were going to ask the god's voice to judge Kuon, somebody had saved him. For a long time, he hadn't been able to figure out who that could have been, but then he had wondered if it hadn't been Aqua.

He had no proof. It was just that, among those of his age, she was pretty much the only one he had ever spoken to outside of during fights. Yet when he thought of that girl, with whom he had only had the slightest of connections, actually breaking the rules of the mountain to save him, he couldn't help but reject the idea. For the people of the tribe, the rules were absolute. If you didn't uphold them, you couldn't hope to live. And this wasn't something that they gritted their teeth and endured; for those who were going to live their lives in the mountains, this was as natural as the air they breathed.

Those who, just a short while earlier, had hurled jeers at Kuon, but who had, in the end, devoutly accepted the results of the match, were also kith and kin, in whom the customs and the way of life of the mountains were rooted just as firmly as they were in Kuon. It was because of that, because of a longing for home that made it hard to part from it, or perhaps because of an obsessive love that prevented parting, that he had set out to return to this land.

Under normal circumstances, it should be absolutely impossible for someone to help another escape when they had been locked in the rocky prison, and were awaiting God's judgement. And yet, among Kuon's acquaintances, there was already someone who had broken the rules of the great mountains.

That person had spoken lies to lay a trap for a man from the same household, and because of that, the head of the family had lost his life. Yet far from acknowledging his own duplicity, he had spun more lies and had pushed the blame onto the one he had tried to ensnare earlier.

Needless to say, it was Diu Wei.

Kuon had been trapped, blamed, and locked away in the rocky prison. That night, having lost his freedom, he had struggled, screamed, pleaded, then, finally, wept.

Then how about Diu? How had he spent that night? Had been satisfied, now that the 'unwanted child' he had always hated had finally been brought down? While Kuon was crying and screaming, did Diu lie in his own bed, gloating?

No.

Kuon knew. At this point in time, he understood it so well, it hurt.

Diu was anything but impious. Just like Kuon and the others in this land, he was a warrior living within Tei Tahra's divine protection. He spoke words of joy and celebration when Tei Tahra granted them a good hunt, and if an enemy invaded, he would fight with courage and to the death, offering his soul to their god. That was the kind of man he was. And because of that...

Diu Wei must have been in a similar state to Kuon. Although he lay down, he could not sleep. He had done something that meant he could no longer face Tei Tahra. On top of that, because of it, he had caused the death of his own father. He must have been in pain. He must have been caught in sorrow and regrets. And also... again like Kuon, he must have been afraid. And that was why, just before night turned to dawn, he might have helped Kuon escape.

He had laid the blame of his own crimes on Kuon, so perhaps, by releasing him, he had hoped to lighten the guilt and terror weighing on his heart.

Freeing Kuon was an act that also broke the rules. In order to save himself, Diu had broken another taboo.

*After you left, it was almost frightening how Diu continued practising day and night, as though he was possessed by the Spirits of battle – Aqua had said.*

He had probably had no choice but to do so.

He had no choice but to throw himself entirely into something that would help shake off the ever-present fear that held him in its coils. And he had no choice but to prove that he was someone who would offer his very blood and flesh to Tei Tahra. That was why he had been so desperate to earn the position as Raga. Just like how, even after he had left them, Kuon had yearned to fulfil the prophesy that he would one day “bring gold to the mountains.”

...All of this was nothing more than Kuon's own speculation.

But when he thought about it that way, his feelings of hatred and blame towards Diu had already vanished from within him. In their place, he felt a sort of sympathy, a certain feeling of closeness. There was someone else who tasted the same sense of alienation and fear that Kuon had experienced for so long.

“I had to prove it.” When Kuon answered Mist, it was not with his real thoughts. “I had to show everyone that unlike Raga, my determination went beyond fighting to the death. Otherwise, even if I'd killed him, I probably couldn't have convinced everyone, deep down.”

“Oh, it looks like you've started thinking about some complicated things,” Mist slurped some wheat porridge through a wooden tube that hung at her waist. She held it out to Kuon.

While holding up his hand to refuse it, Kuon said,

“Granny Mist, there's something I want to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Why did you bring Sarah to the prison?”

“Wasn't that topic already discussed *in* the prison?”

“You heard the story from Sarah, and because it got you interested, you decided to go together with her. But Granny, even though you said that, Atall doesn't have anything to do with these mountains. And yet...”

“Kuon, we are small beings caught in the embrace of great plans. God is beside us, but His voice does not whisper to us about every little thing. I do not base my every thought on the voice of our Lord, the mountain god. I have my own eyes, my own ears, and my own head to think.”

Kuon had no idea what that meant, or if that even answered his question in the first place. Seeing his sullen expression as he stayed silent, Mist cackled shrilly with laughter.

“And here I only just praised you a minute ago, but that's all you've got? Kuon, I'll reveal just a bit of the answer to you. Not all of us have clouded eyes. Take me in particular: there are things that I see simply because the light barely reaches these eyes of mine.”

Did that mean that Mist had things she divined for herself? Kuon stared at the wooden tube at her waist. If she offered it to him again, he intended to accept it, but it remained hanging on her belt the entire time.

After that, time passed in the blink of an eye.

First of all, the day after the duel, another judgement was performed over whether Kuon had 'led Datta Wei into a trap.'

The result was his complete acquittal. No doubt, in the confusion of the battlefield, Diu Wei had misunderstood what had happened.

Although from Kuon's point of view, this was the correct and obvious ruling, if he looked at things from a slightly wiser standpoint, he definitely believed that if he had waited for a judgement immediately after Datta's death – if he had not fled from the mountains – his fate would have been to end up condemned to burn at the stake.

Here was the true meaning of Mist's words. The voice of God was not omnipotent. The divine voice, which should have been able to quieten and to lead the people, was sometimes controlled by the will of the people.

Afterwards, in the village, the men hurried about making preparations for going into battle, while the women had their hands full getting provisions ready.

About five hundred of the men would be leaving.

This was more than half the active soldiers from the units. On average, there were about fifty soldiers to a household in the mountains, although a household like the Wei included about two hundred warriors. But even if they were called that, most of the men in the settlement were engaged in work as hunters or fishermen, and those who specialised exclusively in warfare were only Raga, and the special guards who protected the priesthood.

Which meant that nearly half of the male working force would be leaving, but in these mountains, it had always been normal for the elderly who had retired from the forefront, and the women who kept the homes, to pick up bows and guns whenever intruders broke into their sacred mountain land.

Besides which, the heads of unit did not all join the reinforcements. Instead, most of them actually stayed in the village, having selected those who ranked next after them to act as the leaders of their platoons. The heads would need to draw up plans for hunting and fishing in the village, which was about to become short-handed, and that would be a burden far greater than heading into battle.

One after another, the men had put their names forward in order to make up the five hundred. This was, after all, a holy fight, sanctioned by Tei Tahra's divine will.

Achievements earned in this battle would surely be equal to that of defending the great mountains against foreign enemies, or perhaps the glory achieved would be even greater. It wasn't as though the mountains were continuously under attack, and the young men who had not yet had an opportunity to offer their blood and flesh to Tei Tahra were especially eager to volunteer, and among those whose application was rejected, there were many who wept tears of bitter regret.

The problem was horses.

There were horses within the great mountains, but not that many. If they gathered all the ones from the village at the foot of the mountains, they would have no more than two hundred. Yet crossing the Kesmai Plains without horses would take several times more days than Kuon and Sarah had needed. There was no way of knowing what the current situation was for Lord Leo, but from the point it had been at when they had left, it was obvious that they could not afford to leisurely take their time.

Which was why Kuon had the horses which had already been gathered be brought together, and decided to lead an advance party of two hundred riders. The remaining three hundred men would travel on foot. Sarah offered to guide them.

Apart from the meetings at which this plan was proposed, Kuon at first barely spoke to anyone in the village of his birth. To start with, there was no one for him to get closer to.

There were still some, even now, who looked at him with hostility, or who loathed him for being 'unwanted spawn' with mixed and foreign blood, but

Kuon now held the position of one who had proven Tei Tahra's judgement with his own body. As I have mentioned repeatedly, the voice of God was all that was righteous on the mountain, and so the ill will and animosity towards Kuon had already considerably softened. Simply put, they were probably puzzled as to how best to approach him now.

Within all that, it was the village's children who were the first to draw up to him.

They simply felt admiration for someone strong, and when Kuon defeated Raga, their interest in him was unparalleled. On the first day, they watched his every move from a distance, but on the next day, they shyly came up to him with the swords and spears that were used during training.

“Can you teach us to fight?” they begged him.

While Kuon was wondering what to do, Aqua Holo, who just happened to be passing by, called out to him teasingly, “Why don't you do it? Weren't you good at training the children from the Wei?”

“I'm busy.”

“Oh, really? After the meeting yesterday, you seemed to be completely free though.”

With the children as a point of contact, their parents and older brothers – not their actual family members, but their elders within the same unit – also shortened the distance with Kuon and, on the third day, the senior brothers of the Wei, with whom he had once stood shoulder-to-shoulder, invited him to go hunting. Since a large amount of provisions needed to be prepared, a large number of households were currently heading out to bring down prey.

Aqua, who had earlier made fun of Kuon, was also one of the hunters.

'She' would also be joining the fighting as a member of the Holo. From Kuon had heard, nowadays, 'her' skill at archery was inferior to none of the men in the village. Which was only to be expected, since 'she' had been chosen to join the ashinaga hunt.

“That guy is already an excellent hunter. It'll be 'his' first time in battle, but given that it's 'him', I wouldn't be surprised even if 'he' took three enemy heads

with 'his' bow.”

On the one hand, there were voices which sung 'her' praises.

“Is 'her' heart and soul already that of a man? What a shame.”

On the other, there was also a scene in which a husband murmured absentmindedly as he gazed at Aqua's firm waist, only to shut his mouth after receiving a terrifying glare from his wife.

Since the person 'herself' had decided to live as a man, since the priestesses had recognised this, and given that 'she' also joined in with hunting and combat, within the great mountains, Aqua was no longer a 'woman'. Having 'her' own family was of course out of the question, but 'she' could not have relations with a man either. These too were the 'rules'. If, for example, Aqua tempted a man with 'her' womanly features, an order might be given to 'her' from the priestesses or the chief to cut off 'her' breasts.

“What a waste.”

It wasn't only men who held that thought; Sarah also shared it.

“Even though she's such a beauty. If she showed herself in a town, she could lead any rich man or noble by the nose. But in spite of that, to have to cut off her breasts...”

“Not right this second. And anyway, looking at it, it doesn't seem like it's going to come up for a while... Oww!”

Kuon, who had been casting repeated glances at Aqua's figure in the distance, had his foot firmly trod on by Sarah.

“What was that for!”

“A man was watching a 'man' with strange eyes.”

As the two of them embarked on one of their usual quarrels, the people of the tribe watched them curiously for a while. Apart from in his childhood, it was a new sight for them to see Kuon with his face flushed beet-red, and his emotions laid bare.

The day of departure finally arrived.

Early in the morning, the young priestesses performed a dance in prayer for victory. The elder priestess, Mist, placed portions of armour in the fire and observed the cracks that formed.

“A good omen,” she announced.

When the armoured warriors, with their faces daubed bright red from their war patterns, heard this, their excitement rose in crescendo.

When Kuon was saddling his horse, Mist and one of the shamans approached from behind him.

“Take this,” the shaman held out a small bottle. The liquid that shook within it was the colour of dark dye dissolved in honey.

The shaman explained that it was horned snake poison in which a decoction of several medicinal herbs had been added. It was poisonous to humans but, at the same time, it was also used to neutralise the poison of the ashinagas that lived on the outskirts of the great mountains. It was this medicine which had saved Sarah's life when she fell unconscious after being attacked by an ashinaga.

By rights, only a shaman could handle those kinds of poisons and medicine. Since even carrying it around was said to be inadvisable, even the ashinaga hunters like Aqua's group had not had any. Kuon had no idea why he was being made an exception.

“It is tribute to the warrior who defeated Raga,” the shaman, half of whose face was covered with a cloth, spoke calmly. “We cannot leave the great mountains. You should use this if you are attacked on the way by ashinaga. Although there is no guarantee that it will work perfectly.”

Since Mist nodded at him to “take it,” Kuon decided to accept it with gratitude.

When everyone had finally finished with their preparations,

“This fight had been decided by our lord, the mountain god. Do not be concerned with your lives; the souls of those who fought bravely will be called to God's side.”

Most of the men who now had Mist's voice at their back, and who had been raised in the cradle of the mountains, would be leaving them for the first time in their lives. According to the plan, five hundred soldiers would leave the mountains at the same time, but the two hundred on horseback would go north across the Kesmai Plains without waiting for the for those on foot.

Kuon descended the mountains while bathed in the light of the early morning sun, and urged his horse towards the entrance to the sun-baked Kesmai Plains.

Yet a mere five days after leaving the mountains, his group was caught in an unexpected ambush.

# Chapter 2: Those who do, those who do not, and those who cannot take action

## Part 1

During that time, Leo Attiel had remained in Guinbar. This, of course, was because he was wary of Darren Actica's movements. While staying at Savan's stronghold, Leo had repeatedly sent out scouts to the area around Darren's castle, Olt Rose. So far, even though the head of House Actica had gathered soldiers, there was no information that he had transferred them out of his keep.

A band of marauders, however, were being relentlessly active within Guinbar's territory, and Darren appeared to be the one behind that. To defend against them, Savan had sent soldiers to various points throughout his fief, and there were now only a thousand who were still stationed within Guinbar Castle. Moreover, although they had hurriedly hired about seven hundred mercenaries, the increase in numbers was not solely a good thing as, to start with, Guinbar did not currently have the financial assets to be able to properly feed several hundred soldiers.

Since they had to be cautious of what moves Darren would make, they had not recently been able to hold markets outside the castle walls. Given that this was the busiest season for the wool trade, that was a very hard blow. The merchants who had speculatively put up the funds for the trade fairs risked going bankrupt.

With every passing day, Guinbar was being slowly strangled and driven to the brink.

Leo suggested to Savan that they should build a fort to the east of the territory, in an area that was comparatively close to Olt Rose – since it was within the same country of Atall, there were no keeps or fortresses built at the borders between domains – and where a river would form a natural moat. Five hundred of the mercenaries were then transferred to this hurried construction.

All that Leo could do at the moment was go back and forth between the castle and the fort, checking the situation in each one. Despite the sense of impending crisis, he was bored. Since there was very little he could actually do, he was struck with an idea – *Should I take a few people to Olt Rose to go see the look on Darren's face?* That thought made him cheer up at once.

Immediately afterwards, though, he realised that – *It's not realistic*, and became even gloomier than before.

If the thought had occurred to him in conversation with someone else, it would still have been bearable. If Percy had been there to laugh and say something like, “Your Highness, you really are still a child,” his feelings would have settled down thanks to not being alone.

But currently, there was no one of Leo's age for him to talk with. He had entrusted his Personal Guards to Percy and Camus, and sent them to Conscon Temple. Kuon and Sarah, on the other hand, had suddenly vanished from Guinbar.

He was all alone.

He had gone back to the time when he stood by himself in a corner during the banquet, while men and women in gorgeous clothing laughed cheerfully.

Of course, even when saying that he was alone, Leo was currently surrounded by guards that he had gathered from the villages and personally appointed, and they adored him because of it. But they were not advisers.

Speaking of which, among the Personal Guards, there had been a red-haired boy called Rhoda. Even compared to the other soldiers, his sense of veneration towards Leo had been conspicuously strong: the attitude with which he had served Leo was that of someone who seemed to believe that he would be blinded if he gazed directly upon Leo's majesty. Although Leo had been more embarrassed than pleased by it, he valued Rhoda's skills and diligent

personality, and so he had appointed him as a close guard.

However, more than half a year ago, during the fight against Hayden, Leo had been severely short-staffed, and had no choice but to station the soldiers hired from the villages in all sorts of different places. Rhoda had also been pulled up from his usual unit, and his whereabouts were currently unknown.

*Did he lose his life on the battlefield, or did he earn a certain amount of glory, and go home with it to his native village?* Leo suddenly wondered about the red-headed guard. But even then, only casually, and only once.

So what else did he think about?

Nothing. He didn't think about anything.

Or at any rate, it was the same as.

When he had nothing in particular to do and was all alone, Leo loitered around his room, contemplating this and that. But along the way, those thoughts turned to resentful bitterness towards Darren, who was just running after his own interests, without paying any attention to the wider trends of the time. Before long, Leo's father, the sovereign-prince, also became a target for his resentment.

Leo had met the king of Allion. He had also encountered Allion's crafty general, Hawking, and Dytiann's self-professed 'king', Mordin. All of them seemed to have blades in their hearts. And those kinds of people, who could move thousands or tens of thousands of troops with just a single word, were keeping a close watch on Atall from both east and west.

*And even so, a tiny country like Atall is being torn apart by tiny internal skirmishes, isn't it? And I'm having trouble with those trivial skirmishes, aren't I?*

At the end of the day, what irritated him the most was neither Darren nor Magrid, but his own powerlessness. And since he spent every day in that state, it was essentially the same as not thinking about anything at all.

When he got tired of walking around alone, Leo would sit down on his bed. At those times, he had the illusion that it was like he was sitting in another position, looking at his own exhausted face. That was something he was used to, as well.

*You're a mess, Lord Leo – he felt like jeering at himself with some of the words he had picked up from commoners – You defeated Hayden and established the Personal Guards. And just when you were getting happy about things going your way, it turns this is the best you can do. The King of Allion? Mordin? Did you seriously think you could compete with them as an equal? You're way better suited to having a hard time fighting small fry like Darren.*

“Shut up.”

*You haven't changed at all. You haven't achieved anything. To start with, you only put on airs without any resolve behind it.*

“I have resolve. I killed enemies with my own hands. I led allies to their deaths.”

*That's just child's play. Are you ready to kill a thousand allies to save ten thousand of the people? Or conversely, are you willing to abandon those ten thousand to their deaths in order to save a thousand allies that you absolutely need if you want to win?*

“I told you to shut up.”

*You want to change things? Then raise the wind. To raise that kind of wind, you need a huge fire. Fuel it by burning your own hair first. Then, before it burns out, stoke it by burning your own clothes. Then, one by one, offer it the lives of each of the soldiers who protect you. Your acquaintances... your family... your friends... thrown them in, in your order of preference. If you do, you might just be able to raise a gentle breeze.*

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Leo screamed, and fell backwards onto the bed.

Those days continued on, until one particular one.

The direction of the wind changed.

Oh no, it wasn't a large-scale event that showed immediate results. It was no more than a 'gentle breeze'.

Around about noon, there was a commotion at a watchtower built on the outside of Guinbar: a group of about three hundred was apparently approaching. The soldiers immediately put themselves on the alert but, upon

closer inspection, it became clear that the group advancing towards them was flying the flag of the Cross Faith. Upon receiving the news, Leo went racing from the castle to personally greet them.

“Camus... Why are you here?”

It was a reasonable question. The one leading the group and holding the flag was Camus, the warrior monk from Conscon Temple. The young man whose clerical robes covered a muscle-bound frame was currently supposed to be assisting Neil, the temple's bishop. Besides, he had only just gone over there with the Personal Guards that Leo had entrusted him with.

“As per your orders, I had an air carrier departure point prepared at the temple, and set up an airship squadron, but, being worried about you, my lord, I have come rushing back.”

“I'm not a child!” The days of accumulated irritation made Leo flare up unintentionally. “And for a start, didn't I tell you not to move the Personal Guards? What will you do if my father hears of this? I'd only just sent them to the temple so that he wouldn't be able to come up with some pretext or another, and remove them from me.”

“If I may humbly say,” Camus spoke up to explain. – The three hundred he was heading were not from the Personal Guards. Instead, they were all warrior monks.

“Since they are monks from the temple, which is an allied power to Atall, Lord Magrid has no authority to interfere with them. Oh, please don't look down on them for being no more than three hundred. Every one of them is the same as me: a valiant warrior who has offered his body and soul to God, and who cares not about risking his life.”

Leo gaped, half stunned. Then, he burst out laughing. While clapping Camus on the shoulders, he felt something hot, like tears, welling up within him. The loneliness he had experienced in those past days had been so very heavy and deep that even he found it strange.

About half a month ago, at Conscon Temple, while Leo had been sinking

deeper and deeper into depression all by himself, both Percy and Camus had been experiencing the same thing at the temple. Leo had only just been defeated after attempting to invade Darren's territory and his reputation had plummeted around the outskirts of the capital, whereas Darren Actica's influence seemed to have inversely increased.

What move would he make? And how about Sovereign-Prince Magrid and the other vassal-lords? No, even as they stayed here at the temple, their ears filled with the prayers of monks and nuns, who knew if Darren wasn't moving his troops to attack Guinbar? At those thoughts, their youthful blood simply could not settle down.

Just as the prince had ordered them to, the two of them had prepared a space for an air carrier departure point, had travelled to an even further country to buy airships, and had trained the young soldiers. At the same time, in an effort to try and erase at least a little of his own worry, Percy Leegan wrote a letter to one of the vassal-lords.

Specifically, to Gimlé Gloucester.

He was an aristocratic vassal-lord whose domain was in the southeast of the Principality of Atall, and he would one day become Percy's father-in-law, since Percy was engaged to Gimlé's daughter, Liana Gloucester. The two men had not seen each other, however, since the banquet held in Hayden's honour. To be more honest, the truth was that they did not get on very well, but right now, Percy needed him as ally even if it meant ignoring his personal feelings.

He wrote to ask him to help Lord Leo. The world misunderstood him, believing that the prince had been lured by Savan into invading Darren's territory, despite not having any personal ill-will towards Darren. Percy wrote down the facts about how Darren had used armed force because he coveted Savan's stone quarry, and emphasised the point that the prince's actions were all done with the future of the country in mind.

Since he was the father of his fiancée, Percy had some understanding of Gimlé's personality. Although he could be pig-headed, Percy saw him as someone who was certainly not deaf to reason, and compared to Darren – who was a concentrated mass of self-interest – or people like Bernard and Tokamakk

– who preferred to sit on the fence – Gimlé had at least a little bit of the backbone that should be expected from an Ataltese noble.

When he looked over the words he had written, Percy blushed. His words had been too vehement. It was exactly like the exaggerated language of a young child passionately telling the grown-ups that those nasty other boys had stolen his playground. Percy calmed himself down, and revised the contents.

And so, the letter he sent to Gimlé's territory was one that he had written and rewritten over and over again, but no matter how long he waited, he did not receive a reply. Percy passed beyond disappointment, and was seized with anger. In that sense, he was a lot like Leo was at the same moment. Even though he wanted to yell at him about how he, Lord Gimlé, also liked sitting on the fence after all, the brunt of Percy's anger was turned towards himself for having gone running to his fiancée's father.

While he spent his days like that, unable to calm down, a man who was in the same situation as him, and who was far less patient than Percy, took action. That man was Camus.

“I'm going to gather volunteers from among the warrior monks, and head back to Lord Leo,” he had declared.

That alone was surprising enough, but when he learned that more than two hundred young men had already volunteered, Percy was left completely amazed.

Leo Attiel was the saviour who had rescued Conscon Temple from ruin, and the hero who had defeated Allion. So naturally, once they heard that he was in trouble, there were many people who were ready to pick up their spears and announce that: “This time, it's our turn to help him.” But even so, this was really fast.

On top of that, Camus had decreed that: “This isn't enough yet,” and was going to also gather men from the Personal Guards, which was completely illogical. Wasn't he assembling warrior monks because he couldn't move the Guards? When Percy pointed this out, Camus shook his head.

“All of the soldiers gathered have received God's baptism. Since they've become novices, they're now warrior monks of Conscon Temple. Not Personal

Guards.”

He said it so off-handily that Percy's mouth hung open.

*And this is the man who was pulling such a sour face when the prince talked about getting baptised back then... Going on about how the prince hadn't actually been won over by the divine teachings, and how he was only using the appearance of a believer in the Cross Faith for his own ends... Aren't you doing the exact same thing this time around!*

Reading Percy's expression, Camus puffed out his brawny chest.

“These men have volunteered to go help Lord Leo even at the risk of their own lives. And the prince has accepted God's teachings, and is helping spread them throughout Atall. Since they're anxious about saving a lord who is doing so much for the Cross Faith, these men are qualified to count among the faithful,” he declared.

Since his words were that smooth, and given that this was Camus, there was absolutely no doubt that he had been inwardly conflicted. Which was why he had thought up this excuse, with which he was trying to convince not only others, but also himself.

Camus prepared to set off once a full three hundred had been assembled. Besides the reinforcement in terms of soldiers, they had also dismantled one of the airships used for training, and would carry it with them. One of the Personal Guards who had been appointed as a “warrior monk” had shown the makings of a skilled pilot during the training drills.

“It's only one aircraft, but the prince will definitely be happy when he sees the results of work with his own eyes,” Camus had said.

Up until just a few days earlier, he had been as gloomy as Percy was, and there had been a permanent crease between his eyebrows. Yet now that he was planning to leave the temple, his expression was bright and he seemed to be walking on air. Camus had always been a man who got livelier when he had something to do as opposed to just staying somewhere silent and still, but when he saw him in such high spirits, Percy for some reason felt extremely unhappy, and instinctively started to detain him.

“Camus, wait. I wasn't the only one left in charge of the Personal Guards: His Highness gave you the same order.”

“I'm leaving that to you.”

“And the training for the airship unit?”

“That too.”

“Don't just say whatever you feel like. If you go and take three hundred soldiers at your own whim, all you'll get from the prince is criticism.”

“Then, are you telling me to just stay here quietly? I can't do it. Rather than sit and wait for ruin, I chose to walk out on the battlefield myself.”

“Those are bold words, Camus. But you're not saying them because you're strong, but because you're weak,” Percy unintentionally hardened his tone.

“What are you...?” Camus opened his eyes wide as Percy continued to verbally lash out:

“Isn't that right? The orders we received from the prince were to secretly establish an air force squadron and train it into something usable, yet you're saying that obeying them is 'sitting waiting for ruin'. That proves that you don't understand the prince's thoughts. You simply can't even stand your own uneasiness. You're only taking action to satisfy yourself, not for anyone else's sake. How is that not weakness? Your physical strength and your words are both very fine, but apart from that, you're nothing but a coward.”

Camus blinked, then every muscle in his body heaved.

*Ah, that's...* Percy suddenly came back to his senses.

Although he had undeniably meant what he said, he had chosen the wrong time and place to say it – and the wrong person to say it to. He was aware that he had been too emotional, and so he braced himself, steadying his neck and gritting his teeth, expecting a punch to come flying his way. After taking a deep breath, however, Camus relaxed his own tensed-up frame.

“You're probably right,” he said. “But everyone has their strong points and their weaknesses. You're better qualified to carry out the prince's orders this time. I can only do what I can to help support him. So then...”

Camus left the temple with the three hundred men he had already assembled.

Percy sighed as he watched them disappear from sight. He had harshly lectured Camus like an adult telling off a child, but in the end, it was Camus who had taken the more mature attitude.

*I'm jealous of how he can be so upfront in everything he does.*

At that point, someone came up to stand next to Percy.

It was Bishop Neil.

The man who now managed the temple in replacement of Bishop Rogress was still quite young.

“Has Camus left?”

The bishop craned his neck as he stood beside Percy, but Camus really had moved fast. He and his men had already passed through the main gate, and they could no longer be seen.

“Did you authorise Camus' actions, Bishop?”

“The prince is an irreplaceable man for our temple. I have no reason to prevent someone from going to help him. All will be in accordance with God's will.”

“...”

Percy wasn't particularly interested, but he felt that it would be rude to leave almost without saying anything, so he gave his thanks for allowing the soldiers to stay at the temple. It was supposed to be nothing more than idle small talk, but Neil then said something unexpected.

“I don't mind in the slightest. However, Sir Percy... During your stay at the temple, you might hear a deeply unpleasant rumour involving the people of Atall.”

“A rumour?” Percy drew his brows together.

“Aye,” Bishop Neil gave a nod. “A rumour that Bishop Rogress did not commit suicide, but that he was killed by someone.”

Percy responded with a simple: “Oh”. His face was wiped clear of any expression. “It's certainly not the kind of rumour that you can simply ignore, but... well, I don't see how it has any direct connection to those of us from Atall.”

“There is more to that rumour,” Neil's honest-looking face was equally expressionless. “During the battle, the bishop remained in the Inner Sanctum since there was a high chance that spies from Allion had slipped into the temple, the bishop's life was in danger, which is why Atall's brave soldiers closely guarded the sanctum. Not even a puppy could have gone in or out.”

“Indeed.”

“In other words, only the Ataltese soldiers could approach the Inner Sanctum. And so, for those who say that the bishop did not kill himself, but died at another's hands, the logical conclusion is that those hands belonged to someone from Atall. That's the kind of plausible-sounding rumour which is currently being whispered around. It's utterly deplorable. Even though things have finally settled down in this land, and just when peace has returned, there are fools going around killing time by spreading this nonsense. I've heard there are even some impious monks who are joining in. I intend to severely rebuke them, so please do not take it to heart.”

“I understand.”

As Percy smiled cheerfully, Bishop Neil's blue eyes gazed at him intently.

## Part 2

The wind had changed direction – and Camus' arrival was not the only proof of that.

Around about that time, Sovereign-Prince Magrid of Atall sent messengers to both Leo and Darren. The reason behind it was to investigate the circumstances which had led Lord Leo to invade Dharam, Darren's territory.

The envoy who came to see Leo was none other than Stark Barsley. Officially, this man who served Leo's father – and who had served *his* father before him – was there to “hear Leo's side of the story,” but, in reality, the sovereign-prince had asked him to keep an eye on his son for a while. The idea was, essentially, to make sure that Leo didn't do anything he shouldn't again.

Stark had readily agreed to the request. The way he saw it, Leo was – *interesting*. He had, of course, been surprised when Leo had invaded Dharam through force of arms, and he could see why Magrid, Leo's father and sovereign, saw his son as dangerous. But at the same time, Stark had a certain presentiment:

*Lord Leo is young. And he fully embodies both the best and the worst points of youth. If there could be someone by his side who was able to hold back those worst points and encourage the best ones, the prince might well become someone whose name will go down in history.*

Even so, his feelings were, at most, that Leo was 'interesting'. He did not feel any urge for that 'someone' who would guide Leo to be him. Stark was content to remain detached from the world, and had left behind him his youth, in which he would have gone running to the scene of any excitement.

Meanwhile, Leo, the one receiving the envoy, did not believe the official reason given for Stark being sent over to him. His father talked about 'investigating the circumstances,' but the sovereign-prince couldn't care less

about the truth, and while he would be fair and impartial by giving both parties a chance to explain themselves, that fairness would only extend to the hearing. The most likely outcome would be that, after a short while, he would give a light punishment to both Leo and Darren.

*I won't let it end like that* – Leo was determined about that, however, and Darren probably thought the same way. Leo intended instead to make use of this opportunity. With the sovereign-prince ostensibly taking action to arbitrate the dispute, not even Darren would be able to move troops while the envoys were present.

Leo and Savan met together and decided that, first of all, they would open a market five days after Stark's arrival.

The place chosen for it was the church, which was to the east of Guinbar Castle, at a distance of two days' ride along the old highway. This was the base for the Cross Faith that Leo was having Savan build. Although the road leading to it was known as the 'old highway', it had been repaired and maintained to allow the movement of people and goods which had been steadily increasing ever since the construction of the church had begun. Buildings that served both as relay inns and barracks for the highway guards had been built at several points along the road.

Nowadays, it was every bit as busy as the main roads. Thanks to that, the market there would be able to attract every kind of business, and allow the fief to replenish its dwindling funds.

During that time, Leo would be away from Guinbar. He intended to take action while Darren's movements were blocked. The future certainly didn't suddenly seem bright, but at least this was far better than constantly turning around in circles.

“I will definitely return with help at hand,” Leo promised when Savan Roux came to see him off, then rode away.

Hurrying along the Old Highway soon brought him within sight of the church.

When the building work had first begun, there had only been lodgings for the stonemasons and other skilled craftsmen, the labourers and the various other people who actually took part in the work. Now, however, swarms of

merchants and prostitutes had descended on the area, intent on snatching away even only a small portion of the workers' daily wages, and there were any number of buildings where you could eat or drink, or where women beckoned to the men to join them.

When people came from the outside, inns would be built; where people gathered in large numbers, soldiers would make the rounds; and where there was a certain degree of public security, people would start settling in the area to plough fields. Cases of towns and villages appearing in that way were not rare back in those days, and Conscon Temple was another example of it.

At this point, the settlement around Guinbar Church had grown into a village that was not a small one. Since night had already fallen, Leo went straight to the monastery where he would be staying, which was attached to the chapel. However, people having realised that: "The prince is here," they streamed out into the street and gathered by the church, carrying products from the shops, produce from the fields, or casks of wine. There were even some who killed what very little livestock they had for Leo's sake.

Since such a large crowd had come out, Lord Leo personally appeared before them to respond to their warm reception. Bishop Bosc, the representative of Guinbar Church and a central figure in the 'Church Council of Atall', which was currently being established, threw open the garden of the monastery, and allowed the crowd inside.

Fires were hastily lit to cook the ingredients that people had brought, then the food was carried to the tables that the monks had hurriedly set up. It spontaneously turned into a small banquet. The liquor served was only watered down wine, but the smile never left the face of even a single one of those gathered there, while the monks and nuns peered restlessly through the monastery windows, before retreating from sight.

The prince's reputation had been hugely damaged by the invasion of Dharam, but he could boast of being tremendously trusted and popular throughout all of Savan's domains, and especially in the area surrounding the church, which was being built on his own suggestion.

Faced with recent events, the accepted explanation in the territory was that:

“The lord prince went to punish Darren, that cur, for trying to attack Lord Savan.” And because of it, there were many voices that were sympathetic towards him, and which talked about looking forward to what he would do next.

At the end of the feast, a woman who was still young led her daughter by the hand towards Leo. The child was perhaps six or seven years old. Bosc beckoned the woman, who quietly approached Leo.

“I'm sorry, Lord Prince. Even though she was already tucked up in bed, when she heard that you were here, this child begged to come and see you, even just for a little while.”

The woman was apparently from one of the neighbouring villages. When Darren had sent out marauders to snatch away the nearby quarry, her hot-blooded husband had gotten into a fight with them, and had been killed somewhere in secret. For a while, she had shut herself away in her parents' house, but when the church had started being built on Leo's suggestion, she had found comfort in the teachings of the Cross Faith, and had moved to this area with her daughter.

When the little girl with a face full of freckles walked up to Leo, she straightened her back as much as she could. She tried to say hello, but ended up mumbling and being unable to speak clearly. Just as she looked like she was about to burst into tears because of it, Leo gently patted her shoulder and gave her a smile. The child's face changed completely, going from being close to tears to beaming with joy, and the people around them also smiled at the scene.

Leo intended to leave early the next morning. After yesterday's commotion, he was afraid that if he went out when the sun was already high in the sky, it would draw a crowd again.

The people who were out and about early all stopped whatever work they were doing, and watched Leo's group ride off along the road. “Prince!” When some of them unthinkingly shouted out loud, Leo raised a finger to his smiling lips, as though to tell them to hush, and it was as though those people now shared a secret with him; they blushed with pride and bowed as he went past.

The armoured group rode on unimpeded but, when they had almost reached the edge of the settlement, Leo himself suddenly chose to dismount. The mother and daughter from the previous evening were standing discreetly by a fence. The mother bowed her head, “we aren't worthy,” written all over her face.

“We only intended to watch you leave from a distance without bothering you...”

Despite what her mother said, the daughter seemed to have decided from the very start to have an audience with the prince and, while her mother had not yet finished giving her greetings, the little girl drew up to Leo so quickly that Camus, acting as guard, caught his breath. She held up something that she was holding in her arms.

It was a doll. Although, with that said, it was really no more than rough pieces of cloth sewn together into a shape that was just barely recognisable as human. It probably wasn't something which had been brought, but rather something that the girl had made herself. On its chest, there was a decoration that seemed to be in the shape of a cross, so it looked like this had been modelled on Lord Leo Attiel himself. Threads were coming loose all over it, and the limbs looked like they would come off if it was treated roughly, so Leo handled it very carefully as he lifted it to line it up against his own face.



When he set off again, it was to the sight of the little girl's face, smiling fit to burst.

His group's destination was the main castle belonging to Bernard, one of the vassal-lords. Dharam, the land that Darren governed, lay in the middle of their way, so after leaving the church, and so as not to attract attention, the troop of three hundred split into several parties which entered Bernard's domain one after another, even though it meant slowing down their progress.

Leo, Camus and a few others made a detour of several days, avoiding the highway, so as to cross through the south of Dharam, after which, they joined up with a large group in one of the towns in Bernard's territory. A party of about twenty, however, deliberately crossed straight into the Dharam district, and remained there. They were disguised as merchants, and their role was to gather information while trading in the towns and villages.

Lord Leo had a difficult time travelling, but Stark Barsley, who was supposed to be visiting Guinbar to 'investigate the circumstances', had a carriage prepared for himself and was carried along the highway in grand style, following after Leo.

Since he wasn't particularly trying to hide his visit to Bernard, Leo didn't really mind but, at the same time, he had no idea what this retired, former-retainer was actually thinking. Still, given that Stark didn't look like he planned to make any special fuss or get in his way, the prince let him follow along.

He had sent a letter to Bernard beforehand, and the vassal-lord put on a show of receiving him. At that banquet, back then, he himself had invited the prince, after all.

His wife and daughter both belonged to the Cross Faith, and they rivalled the mother and daughter that Leo had met at the church in that, ever since first meeting him, they had treated him as though he was an envoy of God. Their cheeks flushed, they did everything they could to give him the warmest of welcomes.

Bernard didn't feel the slightest ill-will or dislike towards the prince, but there was no denying that right then and there, he saw him as a pest. He probably also had an inkling about what Leo's business with him was.

“Please don't be so stiff, Bernard,” the prince decided to tread carefully, and started by trying to mollify Bernard's feelings by laughing off his fears. “No matter what, I won't give you any high-handed orders like 'lend me some soldiers'. Even I'm not planning on immediately marching off to attack Olt Rose again.”

When the two of them were alone, he changed his tone.

“Darren is definitely scheming to attack Guinbar soon. Father probably won't be able to stop him.”

“Is that so?” Bernard's words were, of course, far more cautious than Leo's.

The prince nodded firmly.

“If you want proof, Darren is recruiting soldiers within his territory. Actually, he's been gathering weapons for a while now. If I hadn't moved in to attack Olt Rose back then...”

...‘I would have been killed instead’ was what Leo had been about to say, but he forced himself to hold it back. There had been plenty of arguments about what the truth of this matter, and Leo was aware that they had left him looking in the wrong, so what he wanted to avoid at all cost was making it seem like he had acted out on his emotions at the time.

“...Darren would have set Guinbar Castle alight. What I did has only helped postpone things.”

“It's perfectly normal for Lord Darren to be gathering soldiers,” Bernard's expression remained unyielding. “After all, Your Highness, you have only just invaded his lands. On top of that, and from what I hear, his second son, Lord Dingo, was seriously wounded. Although you no longer have the Personal Guards close at hand, it's highly possible that next time, it might be Lord Savan's soldiers which advance on Dharam... or at any rate, Lord Darren will use that kind of explanation to justify reinforcing his military strength.”

Bernard was not a coward, but it was clear that he had no wish to take part in a fight that would be of no benefit to him. If Leo had been the eldest son, promised to become the next sovereign-prince, then Bernard's attitude might have been a little different, but Leo was the second-born, and there were

rumours that the current ruler, Magrid, was not best pleased with his enthusiasm for taking action.

In short, there was no advantage to joining up with this prince.

Leo saw Allion and Dytiann as two huge, slavering beasts, and believed that the only way to defend against them was to unite the entire country. The others, however, had never shared his sense of looming crisis; since life had always been relatively peaceful up until then, their vague image of the future was based on their unfounded belief that tomorrow would surely be just as tranquil as today.

He desperately wanted to denounce them in ringing words – not just Bernard, but all of the vassal-lords and other nobles. But it would be utterly stupid to make an enemy here when he had originally come looking for an ally. Leo struggled to suppress his emotions.

“I said a while back that I wasn't going to ask you to lend me any soldiers. However, I would just like you to prepare and gather them in your castle town. When Darren starts his military manoeuvres, have them raise their flags and threaten Olt Rose from the rear. That's all – you don't need to fight. I won't bring the battle to your territory. So please, Bernard...”

In the end, his words turned to pleading.

“If it's just that...” Bernard replied with obvious reluctance. “Still, I don't have enough regular soldiers – since I've only just sent them to you, my lord, for the Personal Guards. I'll give my retainers the order to call up levies in the villages. But naturally, that means that I can't say how long it will take to gather them up.”

As I mentioned earlier, when Lord Leo heard that the sovereign-prince had despatched an envoy to Darren, he anticipated that the vassal-lord would not be able to take action, and so made his own moves. He opened a market in Guinbar. He took his time to cross Dharam, then took it again to try and persuade Bernard.

Yet Leo was to regret all of it.

Darren Actica used the envoy who had been sent to him to set his own plans in motion.

## Part 3

It was night and pouring with rain when a courier arrived, riding fast, at Bernard's castle. It was one of the warrior monks that Leo had left in Dharam. Dripping wet from head to toe, he cried out,

“Lord Actica is attacking Guinbar!”

Bernard immediately sent the news to Leo, who had already retired to his room. Leo leapt to his feet, closely followed by Camus.

“It must be some kind of mistake.” As Leo left his room, he was praying: *Please let it be a mistake.*

To start with, Darren shouldn't be able to take action now. In any event, Leo decided to get the details from the warrior monk. And as he listened, he felt aghast.

At the outset, Darren had gone to meet the sovereign-prince's envoy not in the town by Olt Rose, but in a village near the castle. It so happened that on that day, there was a holiday which was celebrated in that area, in honour of the resurrection of the goddess of the harvest.

Since it was not related to the main faith of the Principality of Atall, Darren did not allow the festival to be celebrated in the main castle town but, beyond that, he did not try to take away the people's enjoyment of it. In fact, he had the habit of going with his retainers, all of them dressed up as farmers, huntsmen or former knights, and travelling around the villages to enjoy the festivities himself.

That day, he took the envoy and several retainers to one of the villages. And there, they were attacked. A group on warhorses suddenly appeared, setting the houses on fire with the torches they held in hand.

With helmets on their heads, they lunged out at the fleeing populace with

their swords, spears and bows, amassing piles of corpses all around them.

Soldiers soon dealt with extinguishing the fires in the village but, by then, some two hundred lives had already been lost.

“What is this?” Darren bit his lip, his face just as ashen as the envoy's. “This is definitely Savan's doing. He's had his soul stolen by the Cross Faith, and can't bear the existence of any other god. If you add to that his despicable, single-minded hatred of House Actica, then of course he ended up resorting to this kind of violence.”

Darren brought the quivering envoy to his own carriage, and ordered the coachman to “protect him on the way to Olt Rose.”

“W-What about you, Lord Actica?” asked the envoy, and Darren flapped the overly-large cape he wore as a disguise.

“Savan is building a church, and acts as though he alone in all Atall is under divine protection. But know this well: the god he worships – that he alone reveres – is an evil god. Repulsive, cunning and strong. But as long as he lives on this earth, this isn't a problem about gods. This is an issue involving we living, breathing humans. Even if he worships an evil being, and even if receives dark powers from it, we will take our blades in our hands to resist against it, and use them to pierce through his own flesh. I'll make Savan realise that!” he declared.

— Or so the story went.

“What a joke,” Leo spat out after listening to the warrior monk's report. He bit back his voice as much as he could, but he could not entirely hide his emotions, and his cheeks were shaking from them. “Was that bastard so desperate to attack Guinbar that he had to torch the very people he was supposed to protect? And he dared do it in front of the very messenger sent by the sovereign-prince!”

It was probably as Leo had guessed. Darren had made use of the envoys presence, and had his own subordinates attack the area that he had taken him to visit. And in order to make that attack seem real, he had sacrificed the people of his fief. “That bastard...” Camus' hand trembled with rage as he grasped the crucifix at his chest. “An 'evil god'? He's one to speak. Your Highness, that *creature* is an enemy to anyone of the faith... to the people of

Atall... to all of humanity!”

The reports didn't stop there. Messengers came flying to Leo's side one after another. Every time a new piece of information became known, yet another messenger was sent from Dharam, up until the final report, which arrived in the early morning.

Leo had passed beyond anger, and had now gone as far as to feel fear. He heard that when Darren had first set out, right after the village had been attacked, he had only taken with him the few troops stationed at Olt Rose. If you added the soldiers who served as his guards, they did not amount to more than three hundred men. Yet the closer they got to Guinbar, the more their numbers swelled, until finally they grew into a force of more than two thousand.

Cavalrymen, infantrymen, bowmen, riflemen... the balance was flawless. It was obvious that Darren had prepared his troops beforehand, and had allotted them to areas throughout his domains. When Leo had first learned that Darren was on the move, he had given orders to have fast horses saddled and was going to set off immediately for Guinbar, but the situation had changed far faster than he had expected, and had escalated into something huge.

This was the day when the market would open by the church. Darren would probably attack it as a first step.

Savan would have no way to predict the event, and so his soldiers would be too late when they set out. Or perhaps, since it was obvious that any soldiers he sent out would be pushed back, he might make the conscious choice of abandoning the church. If he did, Leo would not be able to blame him; Savan Roux had a duty to protect the greater number of people in his fief.

Yet Leo Attiel could not remain rational. He had the impression that everything had turned black, and that the darkness was striking him from all sides. He almost fell to his knees.

“Camus... the horses,” Leo gave the order almost unconsciously. His raspy voice sounded like it was being squeeze out from a crack in his throat. “What are you doing? Hurry with the horses. We're going to Guinbar at once!”

“You cannot, Prince.”

Although Camus was about to hurriedly agree, he was stopped by both Stark, who had come flying out of bed that night when he heard the news, and Bernard, who had been watching the whole thing unfold.

“What do you mean, I can't?” Leo demanded loudly while shaking off their hands. “Oh, righ; Bernard, how about your soldiers? Have you gathered plenty? Then, they could go together to Guinbar with... no, we don't need to go that far. First is Dharam. We'll do what he did and torch the villages there. Once he knows that his lands are being burned, he'll be forced to go back. Do it right now!”

“Prince, you cannot,” Stark's voice was every bit as loud as Leo's own.

Leo glared at Stark and Bernard as though he was looking at Darren himself.

“They what are you saying I should do!” He screamed, sounding as if he was about to stamp his foot at any moment. “Haven't things ended up exactly as I said they would? Isn't that right, Bernard? Why couldn't you react sooner to what I said would happen? It's not too late yet! But even so, you won't make a single move, either of you! If you're not going to do anything, at least don't get in the way. Yes, yes, I know; I wouldn't do anything like setting Dharam on fire. I would never become a man like Darren. We're going to Guinbar!”

“I am telling you that you cannot, Prince,” Stark would not back down either. “If what you said is true, Prince, then Darren has already plotted to have you killed before now. What if his soldiers find you along the way? And even if you somehow manage to make it to Guinbar, what will you when you get there?”

“Camus, what are you doing? Horses. Also, armour and...”

“Leo!” Stark's furious voice crashed down on him.

Leo was startled into remaining paralysed. He looked as defenceless as a young child who had been unfairly scolded by his father.

“Did you say 'we'? Certainly, if Your Highness gives a direct order, then, just like Camus over there, there will be many who will gladly go, even though they know they are heading to their deaths. Because they have entrusted their lives to you. Which also means that, yes, of course, you can choose to toss their lives into a waste bin. And that is what you are doing right now.”

“...”

“You look like you want to say: 'But I'm going too.' That too is something you cannot do. If you say that you will go no matter what, then the retainers cannot stay behind. That is true for me, and also for Bernard. And Darren would kill us too. Your Highness, your position as Lord Leo Attiel now means that you will never again be left to act alone. You cannot be left to die alone. That is the fate you received from the gods on the day you were born and received the name 'Attiel', and it is one that you can never escape from.”

Stark's words pierced through Leo's flesh. As he reeled from them, his back hit the wall, and he slowly slid until he was sitting on the ground.

He understood that his actions – no, that his very existence as 'Leo Attiel' – carried the weight of responsibility. Back when he had fought Hayden, so many of the militiamen had given up their lives to form a wall a wall for him, and to allow him to escape alone. Even now, he could not forget that scene.

“Yeah... yes, you're right, Stark. That's right. Your words are true. But then... what can I do? What should I do?”

“Although Your Highness was always warning us, we did not heed your words, and allowed this situation to develop. It is a disgrace for us too,” Stark suddenly crouched down. “Please grant us the opportunity to redeem ourselves, and allow us to take care of this. We will send messengers to Tiwana. I myself will also leave for the capital at once. I will explain the situation to the sovereign-prince, and tell him that we must stop Darren, even if it means assembling an army.”

*Too late...* Leo spoke to himself in a small voice, his back still against the wall.

Stark called someone at once and started to write the letter that he and Bernard would be jointly signing, yet while that was going on, Leo could only stare up at the ceiling that was still dark and dimly-lit.

*Not in time...* By the time the sovereign-prince took action, all of Guinbar would already have fallen in flames.

The church... the marketplace. It would be bustling with people doing business. In the tents and at the tables, vendors and buyers would be laughing

boisterously, and bargaining hard behind the smiles. Leo had heard from the merchants' guards that when the haggling got too fierce, vendors would break out alcohol to try and ease negotiations. There would also be food carts lined up along the market. He could picture the sight of children, pestering their parents for freshly baked pies and sweets.

Leo took the doll out from his trouser pocket, where he had left it. The simple buttons that had been used for the eyes and nose were already coming off. Would that mother and daughter also be at the market? The little girl had been tongue-tied in front of Leo, but to get her mother to buy her sweets, would she do her very best to bring out all the words and persuasion she could manage, bargaining hard in her own way? – “I'll help you a whole lot. I'll go and draw water from the river even in winter. I'll do the laundry and the cleaning. So please...” – She would definitely be cajoling her mother like that.

They would be attacked. They would be surrounded by flames. Scores of people would die at the market which had been set up on Leo's orders. The church would also be destroyed. “Burn down the evil god's dwelling!” – an image of Darren on horseback flashed through his mind.

Pain struck Leo like a blow. The blood vessels in his temples pounded, and his head throbbed. He felt sick to the stomach.

Where was Darren now? Had he already arrived at Guinbar's market? Or not yet? Or was he already standing next to a pile of corpses, made up of men and women, young and old?

“Damn it,” Leo cried.

Camus, who had been left with nothing to do, turned around, startled and with his face flushing red.

“Shit!”

Leo punched his fist into the wall. And repeated that action again and again.

Darren Actica had pretended to be attacked. That was how he would defend himself to the sovereign-prince. Leo remembered how he himself had pleaded his cause in the same way, resisting Darren with everything he had.

Then what would Sovereign-Prince Magrid say?

It was already decided, anyway.

“I will investigate, so neither of you are to take any kind of action.”

And after that, he wouldn't do anything. The vassal-lords would fall in line with Darren and Magrid.

No doubt about it.

And then, all of them together, would blame everything on Leo. He's dangerous, he'll bring the fires of war to the country... no, one day, he'll destroy the country himself – they would all agree...

“Damn it!” Leo felt like he was going mad.

Bernard's wife, who had gotten up and heard of the situation, was worried about the prince and tried to get him to have breakfast, but Leo wouldn't go with her.

“Leave me alone!” Having even raised his voice against Bernard's wife and child, Leo buried his head in his knees, and sank entirely into his own thoughts.

He couldn't just stay here doing nothing. He couldn't bear it. At the very least...

*Right, should I write to Savan and urge him to surrender? Fighting Darren now is hopeless. No – Darren wants to prove above all else that he is more powerful than the House of the sovereign-princes. Then, how about if I go to Darren's camp myself and surrender?*

Earlier, Stark had said that Leo might be killed if he was found by Darren's soldiers, but that was only because he was an obstacle to the head of House Actica. If he made it clear that he was personally going right up to Darren's encampment, then he would instead transform into a proof of Darren's power – basically, his existence would have some worth in Darren's eyes.

Leo hated himself for being able to think, almost calmly, about what would happen after the church's surroundings were torched. But even though he was disgusted with himself, he also believed that this was better than not doing anything. Time passed, and noon was already approaching. Yet the sky was still carrying traces of yesterday's rain and was covered in dark clouds, which cast

their gloom over the entire area.

Leo sluggishly started to get to his feet. Defeat had cast a dark shadow over his face, and his still childish features seemed to have aged all at once. Camus watched him with concern, and was about to call out to him but, right then, the door leading into the room burst open, and a wind swept in. In the next second, a soldier almost came racing in, almost tumbling in his haste.

*Again? Leo thought hazily. Is this more bad news?*

Every possible disaster had already happened. Nothing could surprise him now. Nothing could make him despair any further.

Yet even though he had made up his mind to that, when the soldier rushed to kneel before him, the news he brought was utterly unexpected.

# Chapter 3: Wolf and Fox

## Part 1

It was just as Leo had imagined.

By early evening, the area around the church had become a hunting ground for demons.

Just as the prince had advised, a market had been set up, and business had been thriving when Darren's soldiers suddenly attacked. He sent out three hundred of his troops but, in practice, only about a hundred led the attack, while the remaining men stayed on standby on the Old Highway. There was nobody at the market who would be able to put up a fight against them, so a hundred was more than enough. The assailants set fire throughout the market place for no reason at all, trampled the fleeing populace beneath their horses' hooves, struck young and old alike with bludgeons and mallets, and then sliced through their necks with blades.

Black smoke rose from all over, and as it swirled upwards, it seemed to drag with it the unending chorus of screams and cries. Some of the merchants had hired mercenaries as guards before coming, but that was only to deter thieves and bandits from attacking them on the road, and no one had ever imagined this kind of situation.

In the end, the people at the marketplace were unable to put a resistance or fight back, and they were slaughtered one-sidedly. When the excitable soldiers noticed a good-looking woman, they hoisted her onto their shoulders, cut off her feet to stop her from moving, and had their men tie her up. If their lover or husband gave themselves over to fury, or if their children tearfully tried to

oppose the soldiers, the number of victims only increased.

“This way, everyone, hurry!”

Bishop Bosc opened the doors of the church, and frantically shouted for people to come and take refuge inside, personally going out again and again to lead them in. Even though it was still in the middle of construction, the church was the only solid building in the area. People flooded into it, driven forward by terror.

The mother's expression was also deformed by fear as she hurried to the church, leading her young daughter by the hand, but a fat merchant rushing up from behind pushed her out of the way, and both mother and child tumbled to the ground.

“Hurry!”

Even so, the mother quickly struggled to her feet, and lifted up her daughter. The child was sobbing convulsively as her mother pulled her along by the hand and they started running again, but an attacker on horseback drew up behind them.

The spear in his hand was wet with blood, and his clean-shaven face had relaxed into a slovenly expression. He was drunk on the joy of massacre.

“D'you want to ran over there? Ookay, I'll let you run. But you have to have my horse follow you.” The man with the clean-shaven face deliberately avoided catching up with the mother and daughter, and laughed loudly as he stayed just behind them. “Running is useless, anyway. The building to the evil god will be burned down soon enough. You can curse Leo's name when you go to hell, since he built that thing and called death down on you all.”

Tired of playing tag, the soldier raised his spear. Its tip was aimed at the mother; he would stab it through her back then ride his horse to trample over the child where she fell.

But he never had the opportunity to carry out that plan. An arrow pierced his elbow, crushing the bone and slicing through his tendons. His blood and his screams gushed up simultaneously

A horse swiftly came up to him. For a second, he thought it was an ally. After

all, there couldn't have been anyone on horseback other than his allies.

Yet the man on that horse was a stranger. No... rather than a man, he was more like a boy. And that boy swung a sword down towards him. Out of reflex, the clean-shaven soldier raised his wounded arm above his face, but the blade smoothly changed trajectory and, in a sideways sweep, sliced through clean-shaven's throat. The mother and daughter gazed up at the rain of blood coming from overhead.

“Go, hurry!” the boy yelled as his sword repelled the bludgeon that another soldier swang at him, before striking a blow in return and smashing his enemy's crude helmet.

That boy's name was Kuon.

It wasn't just him: an entire group had burst in like a sudden gust of wind onto a scene in which there had been nothing but blood and screams. They had dispersed into every direction, fiercely striking at Darren's soldiers from under the cover of their allies' arrows. They had no banner, and wore no visible insignia.

“W-Who are you!?” even though Darren's soldiers screamed in confusion, this new group had neither the duty nor the obligation to introduce themselves. Bellowing their war cries, they toppled the demons who were smeared in the blood of the people, slicing them down, and piercing them through with arrows.

Kuon halted his horse to protect the mother and daughter as they fled, and to run his eye around his surroundings for a moment, and the archer who had shot through clean-shaven's arm a moment ago rode up beside him. It was Aqua. And it was, of course, the mountain warriors who had thwarted what was supposed to be a one-sided slaughter led by Darren's men.

But they weren't alone, and, just a moment earlier, men from a different tribe had surged into the church's surroundings in response to Kuon's order.

Kuon turned back once to check that the mother and daughter had disappeared into the church at Bosc's urging, then exchanged a look with Aqua.

“Right,” they spurred their horses on to their next prey.

– To explain how Kuon came to be there, we need to wind back time a little.

About five days after he had left the mountains with reinforcements from his clan, they ran into an unexpected ambush in the north of the Kesmai Plains.

This wasn't because of a lack of vigilance on Kuon's part. Although most of the Kesmai Plains was barren land with only the reddish-brown forms of sandstone cliffs as far as the eye could see, there was a narrow river running through it, flowing towards the mouth of the Zedora in the east, and its banks were dotted with patches of green grasslands. Since these meadows were suitable for pasture, the horse-riding tribes frequently pitched their tents in them. The violent temper of the Kesmai nomads was also well-known, so Kuon was going to keep as far away from these small steppes as he could, so as to avoid any unnecessary fights.

Yet, ahead of them, in the shadow of a rocky hill that looked like a man-made fortress, they spotted a group of about ten horsemen.

*Enemies?* the mountain tribe was immediately on frenzied alert, but Kuon had noticed the white flag that the group was flying. These were nomads from the Halia tribe.

Kuon gave the order to pull up behind the riders. The dry wind blew between the two groups. Since one of the other riders had dismounted and seemed to be about to approach them, Kuon also jumped down from his horse. The man from the Halia tribe looked astonished as he approached him. When Kuon had killed Bahāt, a man whose violence had been causing endless trouble for Hāles – the head of the tribe – this young man had been one of those who had gone with Hāles to help provide cover with his bow for Kuon and Sarah. Kuon recognised that scar on his cheek.

Kuon and the young man from the Halia tribe came to a halt between their two groups.

“Kuon, it really is you.”

The man lowered his voice since, even within the tribe, no one except those who had taken part in it knew that Kuon had cooperated with Hāles to kill Bahāt. He continued,

“Our people have been really worried: the tribe which has always stayed in the southern mountains suddenly started flocking in droves to these lands,” he said.

Someone had seen Kuon's group heading north, and had raced hurriedly to inform their tribe about it. Normally, the nomads were divided into a number of clans which travelled around the grasslands that were scattered throughout the plains. And although the Kesmai Plains were vast, its meadows were scarce, so there were plenty of times when groups clashed with one another over territory rights. Yet when they heard the news that: “The mountains are moving,” they all hastily got in touch with their fellow tribesmen.

There was no time for family quarrels when an unexpected threat was drawing near. If one of the many powers scattered throughout the plains had allied itself with the 'mountains' to destroy the power balance in Kesmai, then they might need to work together to crush that plan as quickly as possible. Following that, Hāles, the young head of the Halia, decided that the first thing to do was to try and approach the 'mountains'.

But although he understood the situation, Kuon could not afford to stop here. It was lucky that the one chosen as an envoy was a young man who shared Chief Hāles' secret. Kuon was easily able to explain to him both his reason for crossing the Kesmai Plains and heading towards the 'mountains', as well as why he was now once more travelling across the plains, this time with the mountain people in tow.

“We just want to go through Kesmai. Unless someone tries to stop us, we absolutely won't do anything to interfere here.”

“I'll report to the Chief. I think you already know this, but don't go near the meadows. Our clan is one thing, but there are plenty of guys with short fuses in the other ones too.”

The nomad riders left, and Kuon and his group once more started heading north. During the next few days, although the figures of other horsemen – who were probably monitoring them – could occasionally be glimpsed in the distance, the mountain people were able to advance without meeting any obstacles.

It was on a day when the wind was blowing somewhat strongly that they received an answer from the head of the Halia. A party of about thirty riders appeared, their white robes fluttering in the brownish, sand-laden wind.

The one acting as their envoy was the young man with the scarred cheek.

“Our chief, Lord Hāles, has mediated with the other tribes, and has informed all of them that this move from the 'mountains' isn't going to harm the plains,” he explained to Kuon.

Chief Hāles had also added that: “I owe a great debt to Master Kuon and Lady Sarah,” and, as such, he had sent them reinforcements: “By Faihan, the fang of the Wolf God, Roh Gas, which continued to fight even after it had been broken off, I pray that Master Kuon will make free use of the thirty that I send him.”

Naturally, Kuon was surprised.

“Hang on. You don't need to go that far. Bahāt was... er, no, I mean, when I did *that*, it was for my own sake, not yours.”

“Don't worry,” the young man's dark, suntanned face broke out into a smile. “The Halia tribe isn't afraid, first, to fight, and second, to die in combat. By Faihan, the fang of Roh Gas which came to life, I hope that you won't hold back when using us.”

That really wasn't what Kuon had meant, but since they couldn't afford to waste any time, he decided to swallow his surprise and add these new companions to the group.

“I'm called Zan Chiredeau,” the young man introduced himself.

And so, Kuon continued his way across the plain, while gaining some unplanned allies. Their trip was uneventful... Or would have been, if not for the fact that they were attacked by wolves one night.

It was often said that: “the wolves of the Kesmai Plains know the taste of human flesh.” There were stories about how, when they attacked the camps set up by merchant caravans from the north, they would leap to attack humans, even though these held flame torches in their hands, rather than the horses who were tied to one place.

The mountain people were all thrown into a frenzy, but Zan and the other nomads knew what to do: “There aren't many of them, so we can drive them away with jūma smoke,” they said and, from their saddlebags, they produced bundles of dried grass that they then set alight. The smoke had a unique smell that wolves hated.

The young nomads, Zan included, brandished the lit bundles of grass while chanting prayers to the wolf god. The beasts growled and snuffled almost sadly, but before long, they hung their heads and turned tail one after another.

After which, the group was fortunately able to leave the Kesmai Plains without meeting any more packs of wolves or swarms of ashinaga.

Taking the same route as when heading towards the mountain, Kuon led the way across the Pass of the Wailing Tresses and then to the highway. There, he chose about ten riders, and hurried ahead with them to Guinbar.

He was fretting that Darren's forces might start marching at any moment but, at the time, the situation was still perfectly peaceful. It was so anticlimactic that Kuon felt let down. And on top of that, when he asked Savan, he learned that Leo was away from the castle.

For a while, Kuon hesitated about what to do. He had the option of waiting at Guinbar, but this was his first time leading troops of several hundred men. He couldn't just decide at his own discretion where they would be lodged, and where they would live. If he had discussed things with Savan, he would certainly have been able to sort that out, but Leo was Kuon's direct superior, the equivalent of a unit leader in the mountains, and so it wasn't to Savan that he was going to entrust his fate..

“In that case, I'll head to Bernard's territory too,” he decided, and immediately got back on his horse. It hadn't even been an hour since he had first passed through the gates of Guinbar Castle.

*What a restless child,* thought Savan, but turned his mind to practical things:

“If you go straight along the highway, you'll arrive in Darren's territory. I'll send some soldiers to guide you.”

Thus, after joining up with his main force of riders again, Kuon rode fast to the

east of Guinbar and arrived at the start of the Old Highway before sunset. There, he made an encounter that was completely outside of his predictions; he met with the advance unit that Darren had sent out.

Darren Actica had left Dharam with a force of two thousand, from which he had detached a unit of five hundred, and had them advance as the vanguard. Since three hundred of those were to attack the church, the remaining two hundred were moving forward along the Old Highway to attack the guard posts and take control of the relay stations. Among them, twenty riders were travelling ahead to the west, scouting out where to set up a blockade along the old road. These were the ones who ran into Kuon.

Naturally, Darren's men were startled by this group of riders that had suddenly appeared out of the blue. Judging from their appearances, they guessed that they were probably bandits who had established their base nearby.

“Who are you bastards?” they arrogantly called out to them. “Get out of the way. We've got several hundred soldiers behind us, so don't look down on our numbers,” they said. “You trot along quietly. We don't have time to deal with you lot,” they sneered from horseback and held up their weapons threateningly.

Kuon scrunched his eyes into a squint. Among the mountain tribe, his eyesight was known to be especially good, and even in the dusky light of sunset, he spotted the crest on their armour. It was the emblem that had also been on the enemy banners back when he had fought at Olt Rose – the crest of the Actica family. And in fact, the leader of the scouting party was a man with family ties to House Actica.

Kuon threw out his chest with deliberate provocation.

“Who are these 'insolent curs'?” he shouted back an expression that he had picked up somewhere. “I serve Lord Leo, and I'm on urgent business. You guys are the ones who need to give way.”

“What!”

“Did he say the prince?”

Their opponents were visibly shaken. Which was perfectly understandable: they were supposed to be leading a surprise attack, so it was unthinkable that the prince was already moving into action.

Just then, someone brought their horse up alongside Kuon's. It was Aqua. 'She' – 'he', I should say – was wearing full armour, and tossed a glare at the opposing side before asking: “Are they enemies?”

Energy was almost radiating from that helmeted profile. The message was clear: either they had enemies to be defeated, or they were just wasting their time by stopping here like this. Kuon found it kind of amusing.

At the same time, he also came to a decision: there was no point arguing back and forth here. No matter what their opponents said or did from now on, the response was already clear. Namely –

“They're enemies. Get 'em.”

Kuon kicked his horse's flanks. By the time he had pulled the sword from at his waist, Aqua's bow was already taking aim.

“R-Retreat!”

“Head back to the station. Before we're attacked by the prince's troops!”

Their opponents all simultaneously started turning their horses around. Kuon had already made his mind up about this, too. The man who was the slowest to turn back fell from his horse, his throat pierced by Aqua's arrow. Kuon's horse galloped past him in the next instant, and the rest of the group of riders also sped forward to the echo of their horses' hooves.

For a little while, it turned into a chase, but their numbers were fundamentally different. And the people of the Halia tribe could ride across the plains all day without problem. With that kind of rider, the horses were also well-trained: even though their opponents' horses were panting wildly, the nomads' steeds chased after them with complete unconcern.

Kuon had half of the twenty men killed, and the remaining half tied up and interrogated. From what they said, there were less than two hundred soldiers occupying the relay station up ahead.

So Darren Actica had already made his move, after all.

The Halia tribesmen had some experience when it came to dealing and trading with urban settlements, including those in Atall, so Kuon entrusted them with a message from him, and sent them to Guinbar Castle. After sending them off, he took the lead of the group of riders, and they boldly rode along the Old Highway.

They arrived at the relay station around midnight, where they saw torches had been lit. These were not nightlights for travellers, but fires allowing the occupying military unit to keep a watch on their surroundings. When they noticed Kuon's group approaching, the soldiers on guard came racing over. They probably thought that the scouting party had returned, but Aqua, who was next to Kuon, already had a bow drawn tight and, using the torches as signpost, pierced a soldier's windpipe with an arrow.

A second went by. Kuon was reminded of the time he had pissed on an ants' nest, back when he was very young. After a moment, countless numbers of them had come scurrying out of their den. The only difference was that this time, it was humans, not ants.

Only about half of them were armed, and the rest of them looked like they had been roused from their beds. It would have been better for them if they had taken shields, but most of them had just grabbed a single weapon. The mountain people aimed their many arrows at the 'ants'. Almost all of them had better night-vision than those raised in cities, and the men of the tribe normally spent their days shooting down birds and beasts. Darren's soldiers, who had not even been wearing armour, fell crashing to the ground.

Seeing that the time was right, Kuon carved his way through the front. Here again, it was a one-sided fight. The soldiers on Darren's side realised their complete disadvantage, and were going to double back along the Old Highway, but Kuon had sent men from the Halia tribe in that direction beforehand, and they were waiting there in ambush.

Screams, shrieks, and cries of pain rose into the night along the road, but they didn't last long. The entire fight didn't even last half an hour.

Despite achieving victory for now, Kuon and his group had no time to rest.

They left only a few soldiers to guard the relay station, and immediately headed east along the Old Highway. Yet neither the mountain men nor the nomads showed any sign of fatigue. On the contrary; their eyes gleamed, hungry for blood. Aqua, who had killed humans for the first time, was in the same state.

“Is that it? Are these Atall's soldiers? They're way slower and more cowardly than the beasts in the mountains.” Kuon shook his head at those words.

“Things won't go this easy forever.”

The heads of unit among the soldiers who were following him backed him up.

“Stay focused! Heed the words of the warrior who even defeated Raga!” they shouted, and cries of agreement rose up from within the troops.

It was late afternoon of the following day when Guinbar Church came into sight. The surprise attack from Darren's soldiers had begun, and there were already many victims. Kuon realised that they were late, but not yet too late.

“Let's go,” Kuon gave his order from horseback. “Everyone, attack!”

This was no place for detailed tactics. The mountain warriors were used to acting with their households – in other words, with their units – and the nomads also knew how to hunt and how to attack. Aqua's first arrow, which pierced clean-shaven's arm, signalled the start of their assault. And Darren's side was about to be crushed for the third time in a very short span by the same group.

## Part 2

Riding at the centre of his main force, Darren Actica doubted his ears when he heard the report from the unit sent to attack the church.

“That's absurd! Impossible!”

How many times had Darren used the words 'absurd' and 'impossible' since he and Leo had started opposing one another?

It was obvious that both Savan Roux and Leo Attiel had grown careless after the sovereign-prince had dispatched envoys. Leo had left Guinbar, and Savan had opened a market near the church. It was the perfect opportunity; Darren's troops were at the ready, and he made the most of the envoy who had been sent to him to fabricate an excuse, and to give them the signal to march on Guinbar.

And now, his plan to first burn down the market place and destroy the church while simultaneously advancing on Guinbar had been foiled.

*They did suspect something? No, there aren't enough of them for an ambush. Leo shouldn't have any troops he can move, and even if Savan desperately scrapes up as many men as he can, we should have at least twice, or even three times their numbers. So what's the scale of this force? And its line-up? Endless worries assailed him.*

The only thing that was certain, was that the unexpected had occurred. He no needed time to reorganise himself.

“It looks like when they attacked us on the day of the festival, they had also predicted how we would react. As expected of Leo and Savan, those cunning bastards.”

He deliberately avoided showing how shaken he was, and retreated for the time being to a village on the very edge of his domains.

The same report reached Leo a little bit later than it had Darren, at just about the time when Leo was thinking off going to the enemy's camp to make them stop their attack.

Since the information was based on what had leaked out from Darren's camp and from the village where they had taken up position, the identity and exact scale of the friendly reinforcements which had suddenly appeared was unknown. It was clear from the report, however, that the forces which driven had Darren back were neither from Atall, nor from any of the surrounding countries, and Leo had an immediate intuition of who it might be.

*Is it Kuon?*

It was as though the clouds covering the sky had parted, and the sun was shining brightly through. At with it, Leo stood up and set to work with so much energy, it was hard to believe that up until then, he had been sitting hugging his knees. He had messengers come and go incessantly until he had gathered all possible information.

It looked like it really was Kuon who had arrived with reinforcements. However, he was remaining by the church, without setting off to meet up with Leo. Darren's sphere of influence extended to the east of him. *Perfect*, thought Leo. At the same time as he sent a direct messenger to Kuon, he also ordered Bernard to assemble his battle flags.

“What do you intend to do?”

“You just need to collect the flags together. You don't need to do anything else afterwards, so don't get in my way at least.”

Bernard was half astonished, half exasperated by Leo's attitude and manner of speaking. When Stark had been coercing him, Leo had looked sulky then, just as his emotions seemed about to erupt, he had sat hugging his knees, as depressed as though the world were ending. And now, here he was, as cool and calm as a military commander.

*He's just like a little child*, he thought. At the same, he felt a certain admiration: *But right now, there's a sharpness to him that could cut anyone who*

*touched him.*

Stark Barsley had already left the castle. However, even though he was preceded by a messenger on a swift horse, it would still take some time before the sovereign-prince was informed of what was going on. Not so long ago, Leo had been impatient for that, but now, he thought the exact opposite: he needed to settle things before his father interceded.

*This time...* Leo's face still had lingering traces of childishness, but the expression he wore tightened.

For the next few days, he went around the villages in the western part of Bernard's territory – which meant the ones which were nearest to Dharam – gathering young men. In the past, people had said that he was 'headhunting' in the outskirts of Guinbar, but this time, Leo had no intention of taking these men as soldiers.

He travelled to the domain's border, and there set up camp in the ruins of an old temple. The building had existed before Atall had even been a country, and only hermits or recluses went anywhere near it nowadays, but Leo had provisions and men transported there.

The people he had gathered were set to work digging up the surroundings all day long. They piled up earth close to the temple, and managed to complete an improvised moat and defensive wall.

Inside the camp, Leo flew the flags that Bernard had collected for him. He also chose several men from among the warrior monks, and sent them to villages in the Dharam area. Dressed in their priestly robes, they went around all over, spreading rumours while pretending to zealously be preaching their faith.

“Bernard seems to have joined forces with Lord Leo.”

“If Lord Actica invades Guinbar, the prince will certainly attack from the rear with the forces that Bernard has lent him.”

“When that happens, the villages will definitely suffer. You need to keep a close watch on that camp, so that when the prince sets out, you can evacuate as quickly as possible.”

Those rumours spread through the villages like wildfire. Naturally, Darren,

who was waiting for a chance to lead a new invasion, could not afford to ignore them.

Right after his first attempt had been blocked, he had ordered the marauders, who were lying in wait throughout Guinbar's territory, to start increasing their activities. As a result, Savan had suddenly found his hands were tied. He had sent five hundred soldiers to the Old Highway, where the fake bandits had taken up position, but it looked like that was the limit in terms of troops that he could afford to move around, and since then, there had been no obvious movement from Guinbar.

*Good. With this, I still have a chance at victory.* Darren licked his lips with satisfaction, but still, the information that Bernard might attack from behind was extremely problematic.

Having said that, Darren could not afford to waste too much time. Just like Leo, he felt that he needed to finish things before the sovereign-prince could intervene. Events were currently uncertain and unsettled, which was exactly why he had to force them into moving towards his goal. Because once his movements were brought to a halt, it would take a lot of time and effort to get the situation to change again.

I may have said this before but Leo and Darren were surprisingly alike in that shared belief.

“Summon Lance Mazpotter,” Darren ordered.

He had never personally met him. And as for the messenger that Lance had once sent him, the man's attitude had been so overbearingly arrogant that Darren hadn't been able to stomach him.

*It's easy to tell what kind of person his leader Lance is,* he had thought at the time. Darren was proud of being the most influential of all Atall's vassal-lords, and Lance was definitely not someone he wanted to meet firsthand.

Still – He's a man I can use. There was no denying that. In all honesty, with his skill, it wouldn't have been in the least bit surprising if he had been in command of a thousand, or even ten thousand, soldiers for some country somewhere. But perhaps the man called Lance found pleasure in leading a band of marauders, and when, after the battle at Olt Rose, Darren had hinted that he wouldn't mind

officially hiring him, Lance had sent someone to decline the offer.

*What a fool. The day I defeat Leo and take Guinbar, I'll just appoint him to something in my new territory.*

Lance didn't have any aspirations. He wasn't capable of having them; at the end of the day, he was a man well-suited to living like a stray dog. Darren found him hard to understand, but at least he served his purpose.

Anyway, having heard that Lance had arrived, Darren had him allowed into his pavilion. And was instantly left feeling bewildered. The one who appeared was a tall man with an eye patch over his left eye; it was that self-same insolent messenger.

No matter how much he might dislike the other party, Darren had intended to welcome him warmly – feeding the dog a bone, so to speak – but now...

“Where's Lance?” his voice was unintentionally laced with fury. “I'm not talking to the likes of you. Go get your leader.”

“What funny things you say,” said the man with the eye patch. But he was not smiling. “By the way, I don't think I ever introduced myself, Lord Actica. *I'm* Lance Mazpotter. I've lived for nearly forty years, but I've never been called by any other name, and in my unit, there's no one else by the name of Lance, either.”

“What?” Darren's mouth dropped open.

The one in front of him did not seem to be either lying or joking. Then it must be the truth. This man, in light armour and with his long hair bunched up behind his head, really was Lance. Which meant that previously, when Leo's army had been in position right in front of Olt Rose Castle, the leader of the unit had snuck in alone to meet with Darren.

Lord Actica wiped the sweat that was oozing from his brow.

“I see... in that case, I apologise. I would never have imagined that you were Sir Lance in person, and...”

“Drop it,” Lance was as haughty as ever. “And? What do you want?”

Darren felt fury well up within him, but he somehow managed to swallow it

back down, and talked about the encampment within the ruined temple in Bernard's territory.

“I'm not saying that it needs to fall right this second. I just want you to cause enough trouble at the camp that they won't be able to interfere when we take Guinbar.”

“I see. It's certainly the perfect mission for us,” Lance nodded, looking completely unruffled.

His forte lay in making use of horses, and he had once played Leo's forces for fools by repeatedly charging at them then withdrawing. It would be child's play to confine the enemy within a small area.

Darren didn't like the man, but he appreciated that he caught on fast. Feeling generous, he saw him off at the end with a gracious smile and a few parting words:

“They say that Leo is there. That damned whelp fancies himself a hero, so he probably resents you for having defeated him, Sir Lance. If he heads out, I won't mind even if you kill him.”

Lance nodded for appearances' sake, but, in a low voice, he murmured: “I wonder.”

Lance Mazpotter.

He was said to hail from Atall, but no details were known about where his birthplace was specifically, what his father's occupation had been, or when it was that he had left the principality.

When he was in his twenties, his fame had started to grow in the northern coastal countries as a bandit and pirate captain. After a number of feats impressive enough to be widely retold, he had suddenly started commanding a navy ship for Tallnia, one of said coastal countries. He spent about two years in the very navy which had been his natural enemy during his pirate days. His life was relatively well-established: adored by the sailors of Tallnia and with countless rumours floating around about his affairs with court ladies, Lance had achieved a certain pinnacle of success. Yet, and again very abruptly, he then

fled Tallnia, leaving behind words to the effect that "I got tired of the sea".

According to one opinion, he had escaped because his life was being targeted due women-related problems.

He returned to Atall as he was nearing the end of his twenties, and became a mercenary along with several companions who had followed him since his days as a pirate. As there was, however, practically no work to be found in Atall, he got tired of touring around it as a hired soldier, and immediately started in the marauding trade.

These marauders were, so to speak, employed by rural domain lords – or, better said, they received their tacit consent to actions such as forcing merchants and travellers at the borders of the domain to employ them as escorts, or arbitrarily setting up barriers and collecting high tolls from them, since they also acted as domain guards. Their functions also included occasionally heading off to another territory or country at the request of the local ruler, and there attacking villages and ports, snatching cattle and crops, or setting fire to houses and ships. Since nothing they did could be ascribed to any country or military, and as they could be thrown away whenever one wanted, they were very convenient for Atall and its surrounding countries.

The marauder business seemed to strangely suit Lance's nature. He who had quickly tired of both piracy and being in the navy moved all over Atall plying this trade. He would be hired one day by a domain lord to set fire to another fief's fields, then the very next day, having been employed by the farming families in that land, he would crush the domain lord's troops while the latter was still planning his next and final move. Right after being rewarded by merchants whom he had escorted to a safe destination, he would receive a request from poverty-stricken nearby villages and would then plunder the merchants' goods, and split them equally with the villagers.

It had nothing to do with beliefs. He accepted whichever requests he pleased. Nor was he particularly interested in money. Nonetheless, once Lance Mazpotter accepted a request, he would never abandon it halfway. And he always carried it through successfully. It was only ever the day after he had completed a request that he would switch over to the other side. Those were, so to speak, his 'aesthetics'.

For the past ten years or so, Lance had been fond of horses, had loved war, and had shared his bed with women and drink. However –

“I just kinda..”

– He had reached the point of wondering if he was tiring of this, too. Of late, he had not come across either a battle or a woman that set his blood aflame.

Having said that, he was not thinking of officially entering any country's employ at this late hour. When Darren had made his offer, Lance had likewise turned it down. It would be wrong to say that he was now feeling pessimistic enough to be 'looking for a place to die'.

Since it was only on the level of "not all that fun," Lance accepted that there was no other choice but to put up with it.

“Ride, plunder, kill and set fire until the day you can no longer move and are abandoned where you fall by your companions and your horses? Well, wouldn't that be a fitting death for Lance Mazpotter?” half in self-derision, he had recently been contemplating that thought.

After Lance left Darren's pavilion, and without having spoken a word of those thoughts of his, he started that very day to gather up his companions, who were usually scattered all over the place, in order to faithfully carry out the request he had received.

Three days later, he had collected seven hundred men and had arrived at his destination.

Leo, on the opposing side from him, had brought all three hundred of his warrior monks to the temple ruins where, in the dead of night, they were attacked by Lance's troops. Speaking purely about the outcome, it was a perfectly obvious one: Leo suffered a crushing defeat.

Their guns fired through holes in the fences and walls, but, in the darkness, they hit nothing. The enemy, on the other hand, seemed to be laughing at their defencelessness, and easily broke through each important position, until they had even crossed over the dry moat which had been dug out with so much effort.

Just when it looked like they were converging to attack in one direction, they suddenly appeared from the side as well. There were several different moments when soldiers carrying ladders managed to scramble up and breach the walls, but Camus and the warrior monks were all battle-hardened, and they beat them back energetically. Perhaps Lance suspected that they would follow up by attacking his unit, since he quickly pulled back, waiting for the exact moment when Leo's side would be catching its breath to attack again.

They did not have enough soldiers to launch a counter-attack from their camp. Once their walls were breached, Leo and his men had no choice but to immediately pull back. They set the temple ruins on fire, and escaped to the east.

At around about the same time –

“Push forward without looking back.” – Darren and his force of two thousand once again started marching on Guinbar. It looked as though the few measures that Leo had taken were completely in vain, yet he set up camp a few kilometres east of the temple ruins, and once more raised his flag. Lance started to chase after them, but this was, after all, Bernard's territory, and Lance would not unconcernedly penetrate further into it. He sent out scouts in various directions, and took the time to check whether there weren't any soldiers poised to strike at his riders.

Leo, for his part, did not remain idle during that time. In this second camp, he handed out spears to the young men he had recruited from the villages, and had them line up in formation. From atop his horse, he once more took up position at the centre of the encampment. Then, as a provocation to Lance's side, he rode down the hill by himself, and deliberately let them catch sight of him.

A part of Lance's unit was lured out, but Camus and other warrior monks, who were concealed in the forest by the side of the hill, were waiting for them with guns in hand.

There was a volley of gunfire and men and horses fell to their side, struck down by lead bullets.

“Bastards!” the cavalry unit was about to charge into the forest, but Camus

and his group swiftly retreated. Following an escape route which had been prepared beforehand, the monks released a second, then a third salvo of shots even as they increased the distance between them and the cavalry unit, which was held back by having to make its way through the trees.

“Don't chase them too far!” Lance's orders were as quick as ever.

Darren looked down on Leo as a “brat who thinks he's a hero,” but Lance did not underestimate the opponent whose soldiers he had clashed against. Quite the opposite: “There aren't many in Atall who can wage war like him”, was how he saw it.

While still on horseback, he wet his finger.

“The wind's in the right direction. Set fire to the forest.”

His order was meant to deprive Camus' ambushing troops of anywhere to hide. But by that time, Camus and his men had already crossed the forest and left by the north, where they met up with Leo and the others.

To prevent horses from breaking through, a ring of abattis had been set up at the foot of the hill where Leo had established his camp, but a number of men from Lance's unit dismounted and went running to uproot the wooden spikes. While half of the unit was occupied at that, the other half provided covering fire with bows and guns.

Of course, Leo's side aimed similar weapons back at them, but when about a third of the fence and already been pulled up, Leo came a decision:

“We're retreating.”

They fled further east at a speed which left Lance's unit dumbfounded. Here too, the conclusion was obvious –

Right from the start, Leo had never intended to face Lance Mazpotter directly.

## Part 3

“I won't lose this time!” – facing an opponent who had once defeated him, it was only natural for a young man's feelings to flare up. Unfortunately, however, that was not Leo's case. Or rather, no, he did have those feelings, it was just that...

“At best, I only have three hundred soldiers that I can freely command” – he also had that other 'viewpoint'.

Even though he had gone to pieces when he had heard that Darren's forces were advancing on Guinbar, he could also observe himself with surprising detachment. And when he received the information that Lance Mazpotter was moving to attack the temple ruins, his first thought was: “Good.”

They would run.

Leo easily abandoned both the first, then the second of his encampments. Still, he used various tricks so that his intentions wouldn't be seen through too quickly; one such was when he had shown himself to lure the enemy.

Setting up camp to draw out the enemy, then escaping as soon as he saw a chance to do so... It's easy enough to talk about, but a war of retreat was, of course, always accompanied by considerable danger. At the first glimpse of an opportunity, the horse-riding unit would effortlessly crush Leo's troops, which were so few in number. Yet Leo repeated the manoeuvre.

In a situation in which bullets would fly at him as soon as he stopped, or where his head might be smashed open at any moment, he kept his gaze on what was happening in all directions and gathered detailed information from the messengers sent by each platoon, and with that, made his decisions.

The airship that Camus had brought from Mount Conscon was invaluable in this. Leo did not send this precious weapon directly out to fight, but only occasionally despatched it into the sky to have an idea of how the battle was

progressing. On one occasion, Leo himself had gone up, clinging to the pilot's back and with his face hidden under a helmet. From high above them, he could see the full picture of how his allies and enemies were moving.

After they had been chased from their second camp, Leo set up yet another one.

“We're just being lured away, huh,” Lance Mazpotter said in disgust after stopping his horse.

When he had first received Darren's order to 'cause chaos in the camp in Bernard's territory,' Lance's honest opinion was that: “This man is a fool”. Although it was certainly a tactic that Lance excelled at, if they were going to use the same method anyway, then they should be the ones spurring their horses towards Guinbar Castle.

“Darren should have assembled his men and horses at Olt Rose, and continued threatening the prince from there. If he had, the prince wouldn't have been able to move, and Darren wouldn't have ended up on the battlefield for no reason. And as for us, we wouldn't have had to waste our time like this, and we could have struck a blow that would have been enough of a threat against Savan.”

Darren was not used to war after all. He loathed Savan, and what he wanted above all else was to watch his enemy's castle burn, and to take his head with his own sword, so he wasn't interested in whether his method for doing so was inefficient.

Lance marched forward, feeling nothing but exasperation towards Darren, but the situation had developed into one that made him exclaim: “So there was actually someone who's even more of a fool than Darren!”

His lieutenant, who had halted his own horse beside Lance's, looked at him.

“You don't mean me, do you?” he asked. “You can't mean me. I was just following orders. Who knew that the wind would change direction as we were halfway through setting fire to the forest? And to make things worse, my beautiful beard even got singed...”

“Yeah, you're a fool too, but in a different sense. The man I was talking about

was Leo Attiel!”

He had seen through the prince's intentions: all he was doing was luring them away. That was it. Judging from Leo's battle formation, he didn't have the military strength to withstand a siege after inviting it on himself. Which meant that the prince wouldn't be getting help from Bernard either.

Yet despite that, Leo publicised the idea that Bernard had allied with him, and he deliberately set up camp in a conspicuous location. Because Lance had been wary of Bernard – who had never had the slightest intention of making a move – he had taken far too long to attack Leo's base. It really had been a complete waste of time. And on top of that, he had lost a portion of his men. Thinking about it infuriated him.

Up until then, he had thought of Leo as: “an opponent who is capable in warfare”. But now, that hasty evaluation seemed absurd. Rather than being capable, Lord Leo's way of waging war was unconventional. Even now, when he had already seen through him, Lance found it hard to believe that Leo had used himself as bait to lure him in.

“In battle, it's checkmate once the 'king' is taken. Even if you have the upper hand, even if your formation is bound to win, it's all over once the 'leader' is taken. Having the 'leader' become a decoy is such a foolish idea.”

Darren didn't know much about war, but the prince's behaviour was like that of a child. And Lance could feel his blood boil with anger from having been tricked by that childishness. He turned his horse around. His men hurriedly imitated him, but he drove his horse on alone, without waiting for them.

“Ha,” a feeling separate from his fury welled up inside him. “I've lost this fight, huh?”

Just like the prince, he was a man who could always see what lay ahead with calm detachment.

Another reason why Leo had set up camp in such a conspicuous location was to forcefully grab the attention of Darren's army, and so make it easier to send messengers to where Kuon had taken up position, west of the Dharam region.

Since Darren was marching hurriedly, he had neither the time nor the number of soldiers to widen his surveillance net.

At first, Kuon had established his camp near the church, but following Leo's instructions, which had been brought to him by messenger, he had travelled north along the Old Highway, and had taken up position at a point where it intersected with the current highway.

By that time, they had been joined by the troop composed of the rest of the tribesmen, who had all of them – except for Sarah, their guide – travelled on foot. Adding them all together, however, they were only a little over a thousand; no more than half of Darren's forces.

When he received the report from his scouts, Darren believed that this must be the total number of troops that Savan could dispatch. Although there was the possibility that more soldiers might come to support them from behind, these would have to be taken from the castle's defence.

“What a brave bunch, to come and face us out on these plains. It looks like they've become overconfident after pushing back our advance unit,” he said to raise the morale of his troops.

For all that Lance considered him to be someone who did not understand war, Darren was still vigilant. He frequently sent out scouts while his troops advanced. Thanks to this, it was clear that no matter how you looked at it, there was nowhere where the enemy could conceal troops in ambush close to Darren's battle formation, and there was no sign that further troops would join Savan's side.

I'm repeating myself, but time was precious for Darren; he needed to have things settled before the sovereign-prince interfered. So he increased the speed of their march.

A platoon from Savan's side came out to meet them to fight a defensive battle, but when they saw the enemy in the distance, they were forced to retreat. Darren's army advanced ever more arrogantly.

An unexpected attack was staged by night, but Darren had not been negligent. They would arrive at the enemy camp on the next day, so there was sure to be a large-scale battle, and they were increasingly at the ready.

The camp that Darren was fast approaching was, of course, Kuon's headquarters. Tactically speaking, the position there was completely useless, yet Darren was marching towards it. Which meant, of course, that he had been lured there.

On Leo's instructions, Kuon had gathered locals who were familiar with the area, and listened to their advice. He was able to infer which route the enemy would follow, and had its surroundings investigated in depth. And although Darren was not negligent, he did not notice: as he and his men steadily advanced, the enemy soldiers that they were supposed to have left behind them as they passed, or that they had driven away from their flanks, had circled around them and were now lurking in hiding.

The mountain tribe had always been good at battles that involved drawing the enemy to them. They knew how to retreat in unison, and how to kill in unison.

That night, the forest which should have been sleeping quietly was alive; villagers rushed out in a frenzy and saw clouds of dust billowing upwards from beyond the hills which should have been echoing with nothing but the cries of beasts .

Darren's various units were attacked from all sides. Seizing the opportunity, the five hundred soldiers that Savan had sent in reinforcement also made their move, lead by Kuon. It was exactly as though a pack of beasts which had been hiding in the night's shadows had opened their maws wide, and leaped out from all directions.

Leo had been the one to suggest this multi-directional attack, but he had gotten the idea from Lance Mazpotter's tactics, which made skilful use of the terrain. In fact, it was fortunate for Kuon and his group that Lance's unit was not present.

Communication between Darren's various platoons was cut off, and they were routed and forced to flee while barely understanding what had happened. The only ones that Kuon's group did not allow to escape was the central command – in other words, Darren's own unit – whose position they had inferred beforehand.

Kuon smashed into the headquarters with enough force to carve out an escape route all by himself, cutting down the spear-wielding defenders to make his way to Darren Actica. Even the commanding officers with strong ties to House Actica had already fled, and, rather than throw away their own lives, the hired mercenaries surrendered one after another.

Around the time the world was dyed in the colours of dawn, Darren had finally been chased down to a deserted house in a village that showed no other sign of human life. He flicked the sleeves of the filthy clothes which had been abandoned in the building.

“You've got it wrong: I'm a villager from here. I don't know Darren. Go away, go somewhere else,” he screamed, but Kuon's men dragged him out.

When Kuon himself dismounted and walked towards him, Darren changed his attitude and snorted.

“I am Darren Actica. You foul messengers from hell! Tie me up with ropes, bind me with chains, do whatever you like. But don't think that you've won because of this. The gods – not that evil deity that Leo believes in, but the gods who watch from above all that humans do – see everything. Justice is on one side. And which side that is will soon be made clear in Tiwana Palace,” Darren shouted, his face covered in mud and hay.

He still had Oswell Taholin to back him, and he was sure that most of the vassal-lords would stand by him.

“When that time comes, you lowlifes will regret it. Leo is destined to end on the gallows sooner or later. And every last one of you, his followers, will burn at the stake! But it's alright, it's not too late yet. Join my side and...”

Darren continued to cry out, but Kuon drew the sword at his waist without saying a word, cut down the distance between them in an instant, and pierced Darren through the heart.

In that too, he was carrying out Lord Leo's instructions.

Darren Actica was dead.

# Chapter 4: Endings and Beginnings

## Part 1

Most of Darren's army was made up of hired mercenaries. Although that single word, 'mercenaries', actually covered a wide range of situations and realities, in this particular case, there was a very simple connection: when the money ended, so did the relationship. They had lost the guarantee of being paid when their employer, Darren Actica, had fallen, and now all that remained was to save their own life by escaping.

Olt Rose, Darren's castle, was emptied in the blink of an eye. Savan sent out more soldiers who met up with Kuon's unit, and together, they occupied the castle while clearing up any groups of enemy soldiers who showed any signs of still wanting to resist. Soon after, and once he had paid and dismissed the youths hired from the villages, Leo Attiel entered Olt Rose with Camus and the other warrior monks.

"Is that Lord Leo?"

The people of the castle town peered up at him with fear or curiosity as he rode by.

"What the... he still looks like a child."

"So he's the one who defeated Lord Darren?"

There were, of course, no cheers or acclamations, but since the town around the castle had fortunately suffered no damage, it didn't look like its populace felt any deep-seated hatred for Leo. This was due to another of Leo's instructions to Kuon and Savan: he had strictly forbidden the victorious troops

from breaking into town houses after the castle had fallen and seizing women and goods, or from randomly capturing and imprisoning anyone they didn't like the look of in the name of 'hunting for survivors'.

Having said that, Darren Actica had not been particularly cruel towards his people – the story behind the massacre on the day of the festival was not yet known – and so, naturally, there were many who lamented and grieved over his death. It was obvious, however, that they would prioritise their own safety and that of their family, so there was practically no one who openly displayed hostility towards the prince's soldiers.

Riding alongside Leo as they paraded down the streets, Camus felt shivers across the back of his neck for some reason. He had experienced victory before. When he was in Conscon, there had been more times than he could count when he had used the spearmanship of which he was so proud to send bands of ruffians packing. There had also been a number of victories since he started following Leo, including the one against Hayden. But the 'taste' of this victory felt different from the others. Or perhaps the fights that he had experienced up until then had finally allowed him to distinguish the 'taste' of battles?

Camus could not conceal his excitement.

“At one point, I really thought it might be impossible. We were forced to withdraw from Olt Rose, this very same castle, and seemed about to be invaded by Darren in return. The prince was in despair as well. I thought the fires of war were going to snatch away things I care for again.”

“But so what? We won. We drove back that pack of fiends, and the prince can stride into this city that was once a den of evil with a crucifix hanging across his chest.”

Thinking about it, Leo's actions had set everything in motion. For better or for worse, there was nothing half-hearted about how he carried out what he did – nor did he simply think about taking action, like others would – and he forced the situation to move even if it meant kicking through it and crushing it.

This was the decisive difference between Leo and Bishop Rogress, or Abbott Tom who had taken care of Camus in the past. Although he loved and revered both of them even now, there was no denying that they fell short of his idea of

what holy men should be. In that sense, Lord Leo could be seen as a certain embodiment of Camus' ideals. There was no end to his exaltation.

“Even now, His Highness isn't particularly ardent about the faith, but if I stay by his side and take the time to reach his mind and instil the teachings in him, then, one day, His Highness Lord Leo will certainly become an envoy in God's employ in this world.”

“Oh,” that's “it.”

That “was God's plan in bringing the prince and me together. Both Abbot Tom and Bishop Rogress disappeared as I travelled along my path. But it's different this time. This time, it's the other way around, and I'm part of the path that Lord Leo is travelling. If an arrow comes flying from his destination, I will serve as his shield; if the road becomes impassable, my body will serve as a bridge; if there is no more light along the way, I will take the lead and venture into the darkness... that is the mission that I've received from God.”

Camus was so delighted with the idea that he rode along in ecstasy. This must be what it meant to feel as if his body and mind were dissolving. This was what laymen experienced when they slept with a fine woman or drank good wine. Those were states that had little connection to Camus but, for the first time, he felt like he could understand them. The pleasure was causing him to lose his balance, and, at one point, he was in danger of falling off his horse.

While the young warrior monk's heart was writhing with new sensations, Leo Attiel's expression never brightened. When he had been travelling along the way to Olt Rose, he had met with a messenger sent by Savan. According to his report, there had been a little under three hundred casualties at the marketplace. Fortunately, the church was unharmed, and Savan's messenger had also been carrying a letter from Bishop Bosc. It explained that most of those who had perished had – except for those whose families had claimed their remains – been buried in the churchyard. The messenger had also said that Savan was doing everything he could to compensate the merchants for their lost goods.

Still, damage had been kept to a minimum thanks to Kuon having rushed over. That was a profound relief for Leo, and he felt like he wanted to hug Kuon the

moment he met him again. His feeling of happiness that there had not been more lives lost in vain was even greater than his sense of accomplishment at having won.

However... taken another way, it meant that if Kuon had arrived late, or if he had been unable to bring back reinforcements in the first place, then the marketplace would have fallen, and there would now be far more than three hundred corpses, none of them with graves.

Kuon had not brought reinforcements on Leo's orders. Which was why Leo, seeing no hope for victory, had for a time been ready to accept defeat. It was that realisation that clouded the prince's expression. The drawbridge at Olt Rose had just been lowered, and Leo raised his downcast eyes, gazing up at the castle as though he was glaring at it.

Leo's actions after entering Olt Rose Castle would be known for generations to come.

First, as soon as he got in and saw Kuon again, his expression brightened all at once, he rushed over to him and, just as he pictured earlier, hugged him with all his strength.

Kuon was utterly at a loss and Camus, who was watching from nearby, smiled at the sight. Still, his expression changed when he heard the story of how Kuon had brought his reinforcements. He had not previously known that Sarah had also gone along. Before he could berate his sister, however, Leo clasped her hand with words of gratitude.

Leo also gave endless thanks and compliments to the warriors from the mountain tribe when Kuon introduced him to them.

"He's completely different from what I'd imagined," the mountain warrior Aqua whispered to Kuon, looking as confused as he did, after receiving the prince's effusive greetings and thanks.

The mountain warriors were worried about leaving their home for too long, and Leo looked disappointed upon hearing that more than half of them had already left.

“I wanted to meet all of them. Those of you who are left, please do me the honour of staying in Atall for as long as you can. I will make sure that we can talk at length,” he said, and it was a long time before he let go of the warriors' hands.

Afterwards, when Leo caught a glimpse of what was at Kuon's waist, he raised an eyebrow.

“Oh my, that girl is quite a philanderer.”

“Huh?”

“It looks like you're the hero now.”

A small ragdoll was dangling from Kuon's belt. Her craftsmanship must have improved in that short amount of time, as it seemed better made than the one Leo had received.

In the end, Kuon remained bewildered from start to finish.

The problem was what came afterwards.

The actions Leo took next seemed like those of a different person from the one who was happily frisking about upon seeing his friends again.

Most of Darren's servants and retainers were confined within the castle. Among them was Darren's second son, Dingo Actica, who had been given a private room on the instructions of the castle doctor, on the grounds that he was seriously wounded. Yet Leo had Dingo dragged from that room.

This was a person whose bones were broken in more than ten different places, who had fragments of cannon shell embedded in his flesh, and whose skin was covered in burns.

“This is outrageously cruel!” cried the doctor and those who served the House of Actica as they tried to stop what was happening, but Leo had his soldiers mercilessly push them back. Those who still tried to resist found themselves threatened by gleaming swords.

Leo used Dingo Actica as a hostage.

If Dingo lived long enough, he could ensure the direct continuation of the Actica House. The long-serving steward of the Actica family, as well as a village

head with a family connection to Darren and the younger brother of Darren's father – a man who lived in retirement in the castle town – all begged Leo for mercy in tears. He took all three of them with him to Tiwana.

By that time, the sovereign-prince had already heard Stark's report. In the face of a direct appeal from Stark, even the sovereign-prince had roused himself, and was in the middle of assembling troops to block Darren's invasion when a courier riding a swift horse arrived from Leo.

“What is it now?” The sovereign-prince looked sour. When it came to Leo, his second son, he felt as though he was caught in a whirlwind of bad premonitions whenever he simply heard his name.

And sure enough, the information that had been brought to the court sent everyone simultaneously into an uproar. Not only had he prevented Darren's invasion of Guinbar, but during the fight, Darren himself had been struck down by an 'unfortunate' stray arrow and had passed away.

“That boy, he's done it again...” thought Magrid, but since he had heard from Stark – on whom Magrid's own father had once relied – about Darren's deceit, he could not condemn Leo outright.

Moreover, Leo brought the three men who were so deeply connected to the Actica family to explain the circumstances in the presence of their ruler. Since Dingo was being held hostage, they had no choice but to do what Leo wanted, and tell everything. They revealed the truth about the plot Darren had put in motion because he coveted Savan's stone quarry, about the attempted assassination against Lord Leo when he visited the resort area, and also about how Darren had killed his own people to give himself justification to attack Savan's territory.

There was also the added support of Stark and Bernard's testimonies, so neither the sovereign-prince nor those of the vassal-lords who disliked Leo's way of doing things had any choice but to acknowledge both Darren's villainy, and that Leo had acted with justice on his side to protect Guinbar.

Actually, it would be more accurate to say that Stark strongly encouraged Magrid to publicly acknowledge Leo's accomplishments.

Back when Magrid had asked him to take Leo under his wing, Stark had taken

the detached attitude of one who had all but retired from the world. Yet now, he threw himself into protecting and covering the prince: exhausting his words in persuading the sovereign-prince; and sending out letters to the vassal-lords and retainers who were still in shock over Darren's defeat. Stark himself found it almost amusing: "To think I still had this much energy and stamina left inside me..."

The sovereign-prince dispatched people to reorganise things in the Dharam region and, after investigation, he decided to entrust the territory to a long-serving family of retainers who were currently without lands of their own.

Darren had planned to turn his blades against the princely house, and it was Leo who had successfully suppressed him, so that territory should have been given to him had he asked for it, but Leo himself had never had any intention of requesting that as a reward. After all, there was still something he needed to do before becoming the lord of his own castle.

## Part 2

The large living room on the ground floor of Guinbar Castle was one that Leo and the others were very familiar with. They were in the middle of dinner. Leo and Florrie were arranged at the head of the table, while Camus, Sarah and Percy sat facing each other along it.

It was over a month since the fall of Olt Rose.

Sarah was the only one providing a topic at that dinner table, which came from the fact that Percy was curious about how they had brought the warriors from the mountains.

Leo and Camus had both more or less heard about it from Kuon, but since he was a poor speaker, about all they had gotten out of him was: "I went back to my native village, and got help after beating the strongest guy there in a duel."

After the battle, Lord Leo had no time to rest. He had taken part in the induction ceremony for the new lord of Olt Rose, then he had gone to Tiwana for the triennial ceremony commemorating the founding of the country, after which, since Bernard had finally caved in to his wife and was going to build a church of the Cross Faith in his territory, he had sat in on the discussions for that with Bishop Bosc. When it looked like he could finally take it easy for a few days, he summoned his group of familiar faces to Guinbar.

Incidentally, Kuon was running late, which was why Sarah was holding the floor unchallenged at the dinner party.

Kuon's way of telling it was far too simple, but Sarah tended to exaggerate too much so as to make the story more dramatic. As the light from the chandelier made the tableware and wine cups glow golden, she spun her tale to the accompaniment of sweeping gestures, sometimes leaning so far back that it looked like she was about to stand up on her chair. She told of how she had laid

a trap for the savage nomads, using nothing but her own wits, or of how she had fought against the ferocious, man-eating armoured spider which had come scuttling out of a corner of the wilderness.

In response, her older brother interposed comments each and every time along the lines of: “How reckless,” or “You could have died ten, no, a hundred times over while crossing the Kesmai Plains. I hope you haven't neglected to offer prayers of thanks.”

Percy could understand his feelings. “Reckless” didn't even begin to express how stupid it had been for two people alone – and a boy and girl of marriageable age, at that – to attempt to cross the Kesmai Plains. Even though his little sister was safe and right in front of him, hearing about the two's adventure was probably enough to make Camus' blood run cold.

Finally, the story reached the point where Kuon was about to fight a duel with Raga, the strongest warrior of the tribe. At some point, Lord Leo, Florrie, Percy, and even Camus, who had been constantly grumbling complaints up until then, had all stopped eating, and the hands holding their cutlery had gone still.

Naturally, Sarah noticed the change in her audience. To draw out the moment, she held out her empty drinking cup to the serving girl, and asked for water, which she then deliberately took her time sipping it.

“A-And then?” asked Florrie, unable to endure the 'pause' that Sarah had set up. “What happened then? Sir Kuon is surely very strong, but his opponent was the strongest in the entire tribe, wasn't he?”

“Very much so,” Sarah drew her brows together as she nodded, “he was a man as big as a bear, with biceps so huge that several men could swing from them and his arms wouldn't even budge. They say that when he laughs, children are blown away from the wind pressure.”

“Oh my,” Florrie put a hand in front of her open mouth.

“And that's not all, my lady. In that tribe, the custom is that those who fight Raga have to have their dominant hand immobilised. Just before the duel, an elderly priestess, whose back was so bent it looked like her chin might touch the ground, stepped forward. That old woman touched Kuon's right arm with one bony finger, and chanted some strange spell then, from her fingertip,

something like a black snake appeared, and coiled itself twice, then three times around his arm. Before I knew it, his right arm was fixed against his body without being able to move even the tiniest bit, and Kuon had to pick up his sword with his left hand, which he isn't used to using.”

“Oh my,” Florrie exclaimed again. Her knife and fork were lying discarded on the dining table.

The audience was starting to become restless. Sarah drained the rest of her water, then set the cup down upon the table with a firm clink. Just as she drawing her breath to begin describing the entire fight scene in single go...

“Sorry for being late, Prince.”

Kuon turned up from the other side of the door.

“Oh,” Leo personally stood up in welcome. Kuon wasn't alone, and had four other people following behind him.

Kuon pointed them out to Leo.

“I've brought three representatives from the tribe, and one representative from those who serve Hāles Halia,” he introduced them.

Leo shook hands with each of them in turn.

“Oh, so these are...” Camus and Percy also got up and stepped forward to meet them.

*What the...* Sarah, meanwhile, was annoyed. She had taken great pains to 'prepare' and then, just when that was about to show its effect, the person being talked about had come and thrown cold water all over it. Now she would have to set the mood all over again... while she was thinking that, her eyes came to rest on one of the people who had appeared from behind Kuon.

Feeling like she recognised them, she peered hard at the person, and saw that it was one of the warriors from the mountain tribe: Aqua.

The reason why Sarah had been slow to realise this was because Aqua's appearance was completely different from what it had been in the mountains. Instead of a simple tunic that was no more than a piece of cloth with a hole for the head, 'she' now wore a sleeveless leather vest and trousers fastened with a

belt, and looked like an Ataltese lady with a taste for riding horses in the park around her mansion. Aqua's build had always been slim and, combined with 'her' slender, dignified face, 'she' projected an atmosphere like that of a 'cross-dressing beauty' from a story. 'She' looked unexpectedly sophisticated, and also unexpectedly seductive.

Sarah had heard that the mountain tribesmen had already left, but it looked like Aqua had yet to return to the 'great mountains'. They had received a promise that "If you help us, then we will send you whatever rewards your hearts desire." Sarah had not had any authority to speak on Leo's behalf, but he, of course, did not go back on that promise, and he had given them cartloads of gifts. Rather than jewellery made of gold and silver, the tribesmen had shown far more interest in Ataltese-made weapons and horse-riding equipment. Sarah had also learned that on top of that, Leo had provided a horse to each and every one of them.

Had they come to see the prince today to give him their farewells? Not that it mattered. Sarah was frantically trying to rebuild the story in her head. Where should she start from when she began telling it again? Since Kuon was actually here now, he might interrupt her and take the tale in weird directions, so...

While puzzling over that conundrum, Sarah didn't hear what Leo and the others were talking about, so she was startled when she realised that the conversation had taken an unexpected turn.

First of all, it seemed that twenty of the reinforcements sent by the tribal leader Hāles Halia as a proof of his gratitude and friendship towards Kuon would not be returning to their nomadic life. Instead, they, Zan Chiredeau included, would be joining the Personal Guards. Naturally, this was Hāles' wish, and not something they had just decided on their own. He probably judged that it would be no bad thing to establish a friendly relationship with Atall's Lord Leo. It would make it easier to trade with the urban areas.

Meanwhile, and although from Atall's point of view they only did a negligible amount of trade with the nomads, there was nothing to lose in being able to pursue it without having to worry about the threat of mountain bandits or of other savage tribes. Moreover, it could be useful in a variety of situations to have an allied power beyond the national border.

And then, there was Aqua. That tribal warrior would also be joining the Personal Guards instead of returning to the great mountains.

“I received some words from Mistress Mist, the head priestess, when we sent a messenger to Chief Suo.”

So the tribe had given its permission.

“Really, it's reassuring to know that we'll have another warrior from the same tribe as Kuon,” Leo said, accepting the news in a friendly, easygoing manner.

The one who objected was Sarah. Without a second thought, she threw away the continuance of her tale which she had taken such pains to mentally construct.

“H-Hold on a second. No, I mean, please wait a moment, Your Highness.” She raced over to where everyone was, pulling up the hem of her novice robes to do so. “Aqua is going to join the Personal Guards? Is that really alright, Prince?”

“Is there a problem?” Leo looked surprised. “Aqua showed tremendous skill in archery during Darren's invasion. Savan's soldiers were all full of praise. There's no better horseback archer in Guinbar, or even in the whole country.”

“But... but... Aqua is a 'woman'!” Sarah exclaimed loudly, facing someone who was slow to understand. “She's good with a bow? Then my marksmanship with a gun is just as good. And I fought on the battlefield just like Aqua.”

“What? I haven't heard about that! Honestly, do you think that you can just do anything when your brother can't see you? What is this? One who serves God should be ready to called to Him at any moment, but...”

“Shut up, Big Brother!”

Camus unintentionally fell silent at Sarah's sharp response. His little sister's show of force was unusually impressive. Sarah turned to towards the prince, her eyes and voice still filled with that same forcefulness.

“Then please add me to the Personal Guards, Prince. Up until now, being a woman, I would have refused to join, but if Aqua is joining, then it's a different story. I'm sure you know of my skill with a gun. I have full confidence that I can accomplish just as much in battle as Aqua can... no, that I can do better than

any man!”

“Wait,” this time, it was Aqua who had intervened in a calm voice. 'He' drew the fire of Sarah's anger in place of the prince, who had been recoiling from it.

“What is it?”

“You've been repeating 'woman', 'woman' for a while now, but I'm not a woman. Certainly, I was one when I was born, but it's different now. By Tei Tahra's guidance, I've been reborn as a 'man'. But up until now, I didn't have any opportunity to fight, so I didn't know if my soul was worthy of being that of a warrior who will be called to Divine Tei Tahra's side after death. But here, I can fight. That's why I intend to polish my skill until I've become a fully-fledged warrior, before returning to the mountains where the spirits await. If the prince refuses on the grounds that he doesn't need a man like me, then that's one thing; but we don't need a woman like you interfering.”

“What are you talking about? It doesn't matter what you think, or what kind of oath you've taken. What matters is how the people around you see you.”

“”The people around me are...”

“Yes, yes – the men from the same tribe as you will accept the words of your god or of the priestesses, but we aren't in the 'great mountains' here. Tei Tahra's voice has absolutely nothing to do with the men of Atall. They'll just see you according to how you look.”

“What do you mean, 'see me according to how I look',” Aqua started to look angry, and took a step in Sarah's direction. “Are you saying that I'm not worthy of being a 'man' who serves Lord Leo? In that case, bring me a 'man' who is. I'll pierce every last inch of him with arrows and...”

“And what I'm saying is that proving your strength doesn't mean a thing. It's the same as for me. By 'see you according to how you look', I mean that as far as men are concerned, neither you nor I are either comrades or soldiers. If you're even a bit pretty and sexy, they get all confused and horny just from looking at you, they feel like they're on to something really good if you just call out to them, and they think that they just need to give a little bit more of a push for you to fall into bed with them, because they'll think that you're 'just a woman'. That's what I mean. And at that point, your skill won't have anything

to do with anything. Because simply because you've got breasts and no 'arrow' between your legs, men will always look at you with ravenous eyes.”

“S-Sarah, that's enough. Even if it's still only probationary, you're a servant of God and you can't...” Camus, whose face had been getting redder and redder, finally cut in to stop her. However –

“In that case, I'll just cut off these breasts. I don't need milk to give to a child, anyway. You should do the same.”

Aqua was becoming overwrought and looked like 'he' was about to take out the hatchet hanging at 'his' waist.

“Right, I'll do just that!” Sarah cried, and lunged at the sword that Kuon was wearing.

Camus, Percy and Kuon hurriedly stopped them.

“Do not touch a nun's body, you scoundrels!” Sarah could be heard shouting shrilly.

“You only act like a 'woman' when it's convenient!” Camus' angry voice joined in.

The men found themselves being hit and beaten back by the 'women', and Florrie was too flustered to know what to do. What was supposed to be a peaceful evening meal had all of a sudden turned as noisy as a brawl.

But, well, that kind of scene occurring was, in a way, proof that things had grown peaceful around Lord Leo.

Although Sarah and Aqua were eventually pacified and soothed one way or another and taken out of the room, there was one person whose mood did not lift.

Percy Leegan.

He had listened to Sarah's story with great interest, but no matter how much he looked like he was enjoying the dinner party, his heart had not been at ease.

Percy had not been able to take any part in bringing an end to Darren. To be more accurate, he 'hadn't been allowed to do anything'.

Originally, it had been the same for Kuon, who had brought five hundred soldiers in reinforcements, and for Camus, who had taken the unit of warrior monks and gone rushing to Leo's side. Neither had received those orders from the prince, and both had acted entirely on their own. Camus had even gone against Leo's orders "not to move the soldiers". Although the pair's actions had proven effective in the war against Darren, that was only something that was clear with hindsight. Leaving their actions unsanctioned would disrupt the chain of command, and there was a risk that in the future, Leo's orders – or even his very existence – might be taken lightly.

Therefore, Leo Attiel should have publicly reprimanded both of them and handed down suitable punishments. Yet neither of them had received the slightest criticism. On the contrary, the prince openly praised them. And so the one who had remained in sole charge of the Personal Guards at the temple – in other words, Percy, the only one who had faithfully abided by Leo's orders – seemed to have drawn the short end of the stick.

*This trend can't be allowed to continue. It will affect our movements in the future. Should I advise the prince of that?* He wondered. However: *No, if it comes from me, he might take it as me being jealous of Camus and Kuon.* His face flushed red with shame.

He felt he was being childish.

Should he say something now?

No, for the first time in a long time, Leo was enjoying a dinner with his fiancée and the friends he could open up to in a relaxed atmosphere.

"Things are going to get tough for Kuon from now on, aren't they?"

Leo was implying that Kuon would be bearing the brunt of any fighting between Sarah and Aqua, and turned to Percy with a smile, looking for his agreement.

"It's just as you say," Percy laughed without thinking, and, Kuon, who didn't understand what they were hinting at, was left feeling bewildered.

*Maybe it's fine for now. Later, after a bit more time has passed...*

In the end, he didn't have the courage to say anything, and kept it to himself.

There was one other reason for his despondency. And that was Lord Gimlé Gloucester.

When he had been at the temple, Percy had written a letter to Gimlé, the father of his fiancée, asking him to help the prince. And when his appeal had been ignored, Percy had been furious. It was probably because he himself was the only one who had been no use to Leo, but his anger was lasting for longer than even Percy had expected.

After the events with Darren, Percy had dropped by his parents' house in Tiwana on one occasion. At the time, Lord Gimlé had also just arrived in the capital.

“I travelled with my daughter. It's been such a long time, why not come and see us at our house?” Percy received a pointed invitation.

Percy Leegan was the oldest within Leo's group, so he often had to run around mediating between the other youngsters, but in actual fact, he too was also very young.

*He abandoned the prince and me, but the final outcome is that Darren was defeated and the prince survived, so now he feels the need to make it up to me –* Percy felt repulsed and ended up turning down the offer, claiming to be in poor health.

Although it had felt good at the time to metaphorically flip Gimlé the bird, Percy regretted it later. He should have swallowed back his anger and his repulsion, and met Gimlé with a cool, calm expression.

And then, there was also Liana.

Perhaps Gimlé had revised his opinion of Leo, and was hoping to draw closer to him with the help of his daughter's fiancé. Basically, that might have been a chance to win over a steadfast ally from among the vassal-lords.

But Percy had shaken off Gimlé's outstretched hand. If, from here on, Gimlé took a harder stance against the Personal Guards, there wouldn't just be the question of what would happen to Percy's engagement with Liana, there was also the fact that the prince would have gained yet another difficult enemy.

*Even though I went and gave the prince advice about Miss Florrie, this is how I*

*ended up handling things...*

In place of the somewhat bitter-tasting wine, Percy placed his forefinger in his mouth. He licked its the tip and traced his right, then his left eyebrow with it.

“Oh my, do you also know that charm, Sir Percy?”

Percy nearly jumped out of his skin when a voice suddenly spoke to him. When he turned toward it, it belonged to none other than that very same Miss Florrie Anglatt. From over her shoulder, he could see Leo, Camus and Kuon grouped together, talking.

*Is it about that war that I don't know about?* he wondered with a trace of self-mockery.

Florrie was probably bored of the talk about battles.

“You transfer the gloom in your heart from your mouth to the eyebrows, where the wind blows it dry... I learned that from my mother. Were you educated in the ways of Badyne, Sir Percy?”

“No, I...”

Percy had learned the 'good-luck charms' that he occasionally performed out of habit from a prostitute that he had once been intimate with, back when he was even younger than he was now. But obviously, that wasn't something he could say.

“I was just imitating a good friend of mine who does those things a lot. But I hadn't realised that you were a follower of Badyne, Miss Florrie. If I've offended you with my thoughtless imitation...”

“Oh no. My mother only taught me the good-luck charms for fun when I was a child. The Badyne faith has terribly strict teachings, doesn't it? Someone as weak-hearted as me isn't fit to be a believer,” she laughed bashfully.

After which, she pointed to the space next to Percy. “And over there, are things alright?” she asked. “Leo... or no, that lord prince, is constantly talking about war with his friends. It's a little tiring.”

“Is that so?” Florrie's eyes widened with apparent surprise, then: “Have you noticed?”

“N-Noticed what?”

Florrie brought her face close to his as though they were really having a secret conversation, and Percy unconsciously sat up straight. The smile on her face was brimming with playfulness.

“The two serving maids who help with the meals here in Guinbar – the girl with the braid is Lana, and the tall one is Anne, but anyway – every time they look at you, they go red and look embarrassed, but they also seem quite happy. I'm sure they both like you, Sir Percy.”

“Oh, really?”

“How cold of you! But of course, I suppose that you're used to it.”

“N-Not at all. It's just that I find it hard to believe. Miss Florrie, are you sure you aren't mistaken about those two?”

“Absolutely not,” Florrie looked a little sulky. “I've always been sharp when it comes to things like that. Even when I was a child, I could tell what the relationship was between people on the estate just from a single glance. Oh, for example, how my older brother Walter likes that woman he's always taking flowers to, or how Brett, the gardener in charge of pruning, always looks sullen, but he seems to spend time with Cathy, the lady's maid. When I told Leo about Brett and Cathy, he didn't believe me. But later on, they got married,” Florrie looked proud of herself.



As they continued to chat about nothing in particular, Percy noticed that the sharp pain in his heart had softened a little.

*Did she perhaps realize?* The thought dawned on him.

It was probably in Florrie Anglatt's personality that if someone was feeling isolated, she could not leave them to themselves. Although neither Leo nor Camus had noticed that Percy was feeling gloomy, she had approached him.

*If it's this young lady, then surely...* She must have likewise drawn closer to Lord Leo, when he had been experiencing the loneliness and anxiety of being left all by himself in Allion. Percy could well-imagine what the two young children had been like back then , and he smiled faintly.

## Part 3

Although Oswell Taholin was a vassal-lord with a castle and lands in Atall, he had often dreamed of receiving an appointment in Allion, yet he had failed every time.

And this time as well.

He had been going to use Darren, who held a personal desire for revenge against Leo and Savan, to carry out the wishes of one of Allion's generals, Hawking, to both erase Leo and destroy the church that was being built in Savan's territory, but... there is no need at this point to go into details about how that ended.

Darren was defeated. Oswell had sent Lance Mazpotter's unit to him, but they had disappeared after the events. As far as Oswell knew, they hadn't even sent a messenger. Perhaps Lance had been defeated in battle. They were, after all, a bunch of hardened thugs, so if that had happened, they would have scattered in all directions, forgetting any sense of duty towards their employer.

*Darren and Lance were both useless.*

He and Darren had both shared the same secret, but Oswell was far more cautious than Darren had been. Even though he sent secret letters to Darren, he always had them go with a messenger, who made sure that they were burned after Darren had finished reading them. There shouldn't be a single scrap of evidence still remaining in Olt Rose Castle that could prove the relation between Darren and Oswell.

Although that was something of a relief, it didn't do anything to lighten the bitterness of having his plan thwarted. For a while, Oswell was as sulky as a child.

Unlike Darren, he wasn't in the habit of going hunting or horseback riding every day; unlike Leo, he didn't read much; and nor was he a man who

particularly treasured the time he spent with his family, like Bernard did. At court, he was, on the whole, an eloquent orator and a man who made his surroundings laugh with his ready wit, but he didn't really like to be in the limelight.

He didn't particularly enjoy drinking, either. He had no particular feelings about food, and he wasn't thinking of taking a mistress this late in life. On a superficial level, he had plenty of friends, but no close companions that he could spend hours at a time with, so other than work, he didn't really have anything that he could do with his time.

He mostly stayed in his room, sitting in a chair with his own thoughts. He had no serious problems in his day-to-day life. His wife was a silent and submissive woman, and his two daughters had married into the houses of long-serving retainers. Oswell had also handed over the management of his lands to his adult son. Seen from the outside, Oswell's life was as easy and as satisfying as could be.

But he thought.

Since he very few problems, his thoughts quickly flew beyond every day matters and scattered in various directions.

Oswell Taholin was a man who had originally strengthened his ties with the princely house, yet he had suddenly started intriguing with Allion and, from then onwards, he had plotted several times to betray Atall's ruling family. Perhaps the time simply spent thinking, alone in his own room, had influenced that.

In the past, Hayden had inwardly accused him of being 'easily swayed', and that criticism wasn't unfounded. During the time he spent plunged in his own thoughts, and although he himself didn't realise it, Oswell's pride had gradually inflated. He began to think how melancholy it was that he should be in a single room of a tiny castle in a small country like Atall, he who pondered more than any great scholar, and whose thoughts galloped over every topic under the sun.

*I'm running out of time.*

He was no longer young. He had to hurry to a place where he could properly display his keen intelligence, and receive praise and honours in recognition of it.

What was Atall? Who cared about the princely house?

His self-importance and conceit, which had swollen while he himself was unaware of it, was now so bulging and was inflated that he could no longer contain it. It was when Oswell was in that state that he received a proposal from Allion, and it was as shocking to him as an arrow to the head, and alluring enough to make him weep.

And yet...

*Damn you, Leo! Not just once but twice, and now three times...*

Dark emotions coiled about him and crept into Oswell's heart.

As far as he had been concerned, Lord Leo's existence was insignificant. Previously, in response to Hayden's request, Oswell had counselled the sovereign-prince to send reinforcements to Conscon Temple. At the time, Leo had still been a hostage in Allion. What would happen if Atall took action within Allion's territory, and if, as per Hayden's plan, they were found out?

*If the prince is killed, he had thought, well, that's too bad.*

That was it. That was all there was to Leo's existence: no more than a fleeting life destined to vanish after having been toyed with fate, someone who was unable to take control of their own fate, simply because they had been born into a noble house. And yet, Leo had fled from Allion without permission; he had killed Hayden, the one who was supposed to open up the path for Oswell to become an Allian aristocrat; and now, he had defeated Darren, who had been the most perfect tool imaginable for Oswell to use.

Now, he had no choice but to acknowledge it: Leo Attiel was a fearsome enemy who stood in Oswell's way.

Being unable to deny his existence meant that Oswell's dream of becoming an Allian noble would remain unreachable, that the time he had spent plunged in thought by himself had been in vain, and that his life would end in a tiny country like Atall.

*Leo has to die.*

His existence was not only a barrier for Oswell; Hawking Ingram of Allion also

regarded him as dangerous. Which meant that Leo's head would be the perfect present to deliver to Allion one day.

No matter how he looked at it, it seemed that his course of action had already been decided. In his room, which was conspicuous for the Allian-made furnishings within it, Oswell continued to spend gloomy nights.

So, what should he do?

Should he imitate Darren, and start by trying to gain allies at court? No, they were only fair-weather friends who changed with the wind. When Darren had been talking big, a great many people had taken a leaf out his book and harshly criticised Leo, but now, they all kept their mouths shut. In fact, now that Darren's various misdeeds had been exposed, there were plenty who praised Leo, saying that: "The prince splendidly dealt with that disloyal cur who had forgotten his own place."

Getting them on his side now would require correspondingly huge amounts of effort, yet despite all of that hard work, he had no way of being sure that they would help him out if anything occurred.

*Doing the same as Darren would obviously just lead to failure.*

Darren had been fixated on showing off his power as an Ataltese vassal-lord right until the end. In that case, the first thing to do would be to gather allies at court and send in soldiers as soon as he saw the right opportunity. However, since Oswell intended to abandon Atall itself, he really didn't feel like using such a long and tedious method.

– Now then, on to Hawking Ingram, whose name was mentioned just now.

Oswell had maintained his ties with that crafty general even after Darren's death but, Hawking being Hawking, he was also in secret correspondence with someone from the Holy Dytiann Alliance, to the east of Atall. And that person was Bishop Baal.

Leo would have found it extremely strange if he had known about it. Hawking of Allion and Baal of Dytiann were the very two people who had once furiously traded verbal jabs in front of his own eyes. The two of them had been incapable of holding back from attacking and reproaching one another... so why?

Their verbal sparring had, of course, been genuine. It was not a play put on to deceive Leo. But on top of having representatives attend the conference, Allion and Dytiann had also exchanged letters and communicated through messengers. Since both sides had essentially been looking for 'the right moment to quit', they didn't only exchange vociferous claims: at times, they also hinted at concessions and, occasionally, appealed to the other's fellow feelings.

Though they carried neither swords nor guns, these two people were undoubtedly on the frontlines of a war between nations. They understood the other's point of view better than anyone. As the letters piled up between them, and although it was different from feeling of belonging to the same country, a strange sense of camaraderie was born between them.

This was by no means unique to Hawking and Baal, but was something that had been true since times immemorial. Moreover, as could be seen from his relation with Oswell, Hawking's diplomatic strategies were sometimes a little "obstinate". Even when it seemed that a situation needed decisive measures, he would take the time – or even too much time – to obtain allies abroad.

And this time as well, it was probably Hawking who had approached Baal.

Bishop Baal of Dytiann was a man who, for some time now, had loathed Leo every bit as much as Darren had.

Naturally, he didn't vent his emotions when meeting messengers from a foreign country, but Hawking was a man who had spent many years at the heart of intrigues and plots. Baal had recently been getting almost excessively close to Dytiann's "king", Mordin, and, although he avoided doing so publicly and always acted behind the scenes, he was also busy criticising Mordin's younger brother, the Head Archbishop Wymer, and whipping up anti-Atall sentiment among those who agreed with him, working them into a fervour about how they needed to attack Atall. When Hawking somehow found out about it, he realised that Baal hated Leo with single-minded determination.

Hawking Ingram had realised far faster than either Darren or Oswell that: *Lord Leo might one day become a danger*. And because of that, he was currently deploring Darren's failure even more bitterly than Oswell was. And just then –

*Oh, interesting...*

Hawking spread the letters that he had received from both Oswell and Baal side-by-side on his desk.

Within Dytiann's territory, two men had been invited to a large bishop's hall on the banks of the river.

Neville and Godwin. Both had received family names from the Church but, currently, both had also been stripped of that right. "Invited" was perhaps not the right word, either, since both of them had their hands tied behind their back, and were being led by soldiers armed with guns.

Neville was in his twenties, and Godwin in his thirties. Both were young and had sturdy physiques. Their clothes were crude, and their hair and beards had grown long, but when he saw them, the first thing Baal said to them was not a greeting but: "I hardly recognised you"



He wasn't being sarcastic. The last time he had seen them, they had been a far worse state than this. They had been covered in dirt and in the stench of faeces and urine, and their tattered clothes had been reduced to virtually useless scraps of cloth. That was normal enough, given that the first time Baal had met them, it had been in a prison.

Both of them were military men who had once fought for the Holy See. Within Dytiann's domains, anyone with any skill, regardless of their origins, has been gathered up and conscripted as soldiers into the 'Cruciform Army, the armed force under the direct control of the Holy See. Most of the time, they defended the papal domains and, whenever they received an order to do so, they headed off to suppress insurrections in whatever part of the territories these occurred in.

Nowadays, there was no organisation within Dytiann's territory called the 'Holy See'. Both of them were part of what was now referred to as 'the Old Church faction'; in other words, they were among those who had lost their power and their holy titles when the 'Current Church faction' – Mordin and Wymer included – had rebelled.

When Mordin's troops had been drawing near to the papal domains, a great many bishops and priests had gathered up all the riches they could carry, and quickly fled the territory.

The Cruciform Army was not the only one in charge of defending the papal domains, and each territory sent a complement of regular soldiers, but far from joining them to turn their spears against 'the enemies of God,' most of those soldiers had either escaped or betrayed them by joining Mordin. The Cruciform Army, which was largely made up of men recruited from the masses, was the only one who stood firm to the end against Mordin's troops.

From their commander, Maximo, downwards, they all of them flung their lives aside and literally used their own bodies as shields to defend the cathedral. The bloody result was that out of three thousand soldiers, more than seventy percent died in battle. Those who survived, like Neville and Godwin, were thrown into jail – every last one of them. Meanwhile, their families were kept under house arrest, and under surveillance. But perhaps the ones in charge of the monitoring were reluctant to keep an eye on all of the houses,

especially in the villages that had provided a lot of men to the Cruciform Army.

“Evil teachings are being concealed within the villages, and the only way to stop them from spreading further is to purge them with fire,” they declared, before setting the villages alight and burning to death every one of the villagers.

When Mordin heard about it later, he was furious, and sentenced those responsible to be burned at the stake. But that didn't change the fact that those who belonged to the 'Old Church faction' suffered miserable fates no matter where they were.

The one which should have awaited Neville and Godwin was to die in prison. Bishop Baal, however, had visited them there about a month earlier.

In all honesty, Baal had not known their names. But he had been employing people to gather information on the survivors of the the 'Old Church faction,' and he had frequently been told that although these two were not famous, they were both highly skilled. And nothing could have suited Baal better than 'unknown but skilled'.

And now, one month later, Baal had the two men removed from prison and brought to his hall, albeit with their arms still restrained.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” Baal gestured the two young men towards chairs.

Godwin immediately complied but Neville, the younger of the two, remained standing. The soldiers who had brought them there pushed him by the shoulder, as though to force him to sit, but he didn't budge an inch. While Baal was wondering where on earth he found that kind of strength in that body of his, which had grown emaciated from long imprisonment, he also signalled to the soldiers:

“It's fine,” he had them back down. “You won't yield to a sworn enemy? It seems you still have a soldier's spirit.”

“A sworn enemy?” Neville laughed with such naked contempt behind his grimy beard that the soldiers who had only just calmed down at Baal's orders now once again flushed an angry scarlet.

“I don't know you. If I was going after a sworn enemy, it'd be Mordin, Wymer,

Guerric,” he continued to enumerate the heroes who had destroyed the 'Old Church faction'. “Try giving me a blade, even a small one. I'll immediately send every last one of them to Hell, those bastards wallowing in their greed to rule over Dytiann, trampling on His Holiness the Pope's dying wish. I'm not going to bother with a nobody like you, so untie me right now and...”

Unable to control himself anymore, one of the soldiers struck Neville in the back with the butt of his gun. That was followed immediately by blows to his chest and stomach, and hard enough to break bones. The young man fell to his knees and hunched his back, but he did not utter a single cry of pain, and his glaring eyes never turned away from Baal.

His state of mind seemed the same as that of one already dead, who no longer felt pain in this world, but whose hatred and resentment still vividly remained. Deep down, Baal shuddered at being hit with the horrifying emotions of a corpse.

“Enough,” yet even so, he gave his orders to the soldiers in a low and dignified voice. “You say that we are trampling over His Holiness' dying wish. Well, there are a heap of objections I could make to that, but there's no point going over the endless fights of that time of civil war, when blood was washed away with blood. And my reason for calling you here would also be lost.”

“And what business do you have with the likes of us?” Godwin spoke for the first time since arriving there.

He was similarly emaciated, but he was a head taller than Neville and had once been known as 'the colossal monk'.

Baal nodded.

“I have something I earnestly want to ask of both of you.”

Neville snorted scornfully when he hear that, while Godwin's expression turned solemn. Just as Baal had said, the war which had unfolded was one in which both sides had slaughtered the other, 'washing blood away with blood'. And those grudges ran especially deep within the survivors of the Cruciform Army, who had lost so many of their companions.

“You really think we're going to do as you say, you who snatched away the

pope's throne? There's nothing to talk about. ...Kill us. That's what you're planning on doing anyway, if we don't listen to you. Go on, stab us through the heart right now. Our souls will rise to the Heavens and there, we will once more serve His Holiness.”

Neville showed all the determination of the martyrs that are spoken of and written of in history, but when Baal continued to try and convince them, he did so by alluding to their families, who were still being kept under house arrest. Not surprisingly, the expressions on the men’s faces changed. Neville ground his teeth fiercely and scowled at Baal again.

“Is that a threat?”

“How you choose to take it depends on you. However, what I mean to say is that if you fulfil my request, I intend to release both your families from under surveillance. And besides...”

Since it looked like Neville was about to say something again, Baal spoke quickly to block him.

“...This is not a request that goes against your loyalty or your convictions. I'm not going to ask you to sell out your companions from the Holy See, or to become my subordinates, or anything like that.”

“Then what *do* you want?” asked Godwin.

Baal pressed his fingers together above his desk, and gave them a smile that was unusually friendly for him.

“In this world, there is an agent of the Devil who spits on our most important teachings, who tramples all over the Holy Book, and who, with his sweet words, deceives good people who once shared our beliefs before dragging them down into hell. I want you to destroy him. That man's name is Leo Attiel.”

# Chapter 5: Assassination Plot

## Part 1

It was about two months after Darren's death that Leo received a letter from Oswell Taholin. The sender was surprising, but then so were the contents: he claimed that he been petitioned by the people of his fief to “create a space for the Cross Faith in my castle town.”

Works had begun to convert a house there into a church, and had been completed about a month later, so now: “I would be overjoyed, Lord Leo, if you could visit me,” to both discuss how to administer the parish, and to attend the inauguration ceremony.

Oswell had already looked around here and there, and had hired several priests from Dytiann. Through them, he had invited a minister of some reputation to come from Dytiann and officiate at the ceremony.

It was true that when Conscon Temple had been in danger of being invaded by Allion, Oswell Taholin had single-handily persuaded the sovereign-prince to send help to them. In fact, once the matter became public knowledge, Conscon had sent a letter of thanks in which they named both Magrid and Oswell. He had always been a man who showed sympathy towards the Cross Faith.

Naturally, this was also good for Leo. If the Cross Faith acquired more strongholds throughout the country, then the prince's influence would grow in proportion to them. Besides, if it had to be said, then the church in Savan's territory served as a connection between the faithful in Atall with Conscon and Allion, which were geographically close. Oswell, on the other hand, seemed to want to give the job of running his parish to priests from Dytiann. Maintaining

relations with the Cross Faith in both the east and the west was also very convenient for Leo.

– Or rather, it was too convenient.

“It's a trap,” Percy asserted without a second's hesitation when Leo showed the letter to the main members of the Personal Guards.

Once, during the events involving Lance Mazpotter, Leo and the others had guessed that there might be a connection between Oswald and Darren, and now, Oswald had very rapidly made approaches to Leo after Darren's death. It was clearly suspicious.

“But, this Oswald person, wasn't he originally strengthening his relationship with the ruling house?” Sarah, who had forced her way in behind her brother, interrupted. “Then couldn't he be the kind of man who wants to cozy up to both sides? So even though he helped Darren, once Lord Leo defeated him, Oswald decided to make good with you, Your Highness. He's a guy who knows how to get on in life as a noble.”

“Women should keep out of this,” Camus yelled as usual.

*Why is that Camus can't hold back from saying things that he knows will lead to a fight?* Percy sometimes wondered.

Actually, this was a fault that he shared with his little sister, Sarah, and neither of them were ever satisfied unless they said exactly what they thought. And since Sarah had opened her mouth wide as though to argue back, Percy hurriedly stopped the siblings' brawl by pretending to offer her an explanation, while covertly watching for the prince's reaction:

“Still, if we're talking about Oswald, then His Highness already suspected that he was secretly tied to Allion – or, more accurately, to Hayden.”

Leo merely gave a slight nod, leaving Percy feeling disappointed. There was no way that the prince wasn't suspicious about Oswald's overtures. Percy had thought that if he brought up Hayden, then Leo would offer an explanation that coincided with his own opinion.

*Exactly. Oswald is the noble who, all by himself, convinced the sovereign-prince to send out soldiers to Conscon. And looking back on Hayden's actions at the*

*time, it seems like he expected that to happen. Oswell was probably secretly connected to Allion, and he swayed the sovereign-prince in the direction that Hayden wanted. If you want proof, just look at how that man, who was so fixated on the temple, seemed so completely indifferent when Allion marched on Conscon that second time – or something like that.*

Yet Leo's response was muted. Or rather than muted, he was enveloped in the atmosphere of someone who had already made up their mind, and who found it difficult to explain that to others...

“You can't possibly...” Percy suddenly spoke up, “... Prince, you can't possibly be thinking of going to see Oswell?”

“There's no hiding anything from you, Percy,” leaning against the window frame, Leo smiled a little bashfully.

*Why... when you know it's a trap...?* but before Percy could ask that question, Leo continued:

“There's a good chance that he is on the alert,” he said while gazing out of the window. “But it's also a good opportunity for us.”

*It's dangerous, but it's also a good opportunity* – that was almost a tenet of faith with Leo. He had often repeated those words to himself and to his companions before then. One easy example was how he had deliberately set off to the holiday villa with only a few bodyguards to draw Darren's attack upon learning that he was plotting to kill him.

“If we do what the enemy wants us to, then that also means that the enemy's intentions will become very easy to read,” he explained once more.

By that point in time, Leo already saw Oswell as an 'enemy', and he had been waiting impatiently for a chance to get rid of him. And that 'chance' had come thanks to the 'enemy's' actions.

Percy understood what Leo was trying to say... but the situation was different from when he had invited Darren's attack in the resort area. In fact, it was the exact opposite: instead of lying in ambush for the enemy, they would be the ones walking up to a foe who was sure to have made every possible preparation.

“It's too dangerous,” Percy objected to the end. “Please reconsider. Instead of accepting Oswell's invitation, it would be far better to provoke that bastard into leaving his castle and killing him, just as you did with Darren.”

“What are you...” Percy's words were so extreme that Camus' eyes widened in surprise, but Percy stubbornly continued to shake his head.

It hadn't been long since the affair with Darren Actica. It was now widely known among the people that Darren had planned to murder Leo and to wrest away Savan's stone quarry, but there was no denying that Leo Attiel's impetuous actions made the nobles – sovereign-prince included – very nervous. The trap that Oswell had set was surely a dangerous one, but what would be far more dangerous was if Leo caused yet another disturbance.

Percy Leegan was absolutely right. Anyone with any common sense would have supported him. Even Leo himself agreed with him.

*There's probably something wrong with me.* Yet every time he had that thought, there was one scene that came back to him – that time at the banquet when he had told Hayden: “I'll show you how I'll turn the tables on you.” The threat that he himself had spoken back then was one that Leo had never ceased to hold to heart. And he constantly drove himself forward with the thought that: *If there wasn't something wrong with me, then I wouldn't be able to turn this situation around.*

Now that Darren was dead, Leo viewed Oswell Taholin as the greatest threat. If he really had been tied to Darren Actica, who had tried to destroy Leo, then there was a strong possibility that he would continue to pose a threat in the future. And if you added to that a connection to Allion, then he would be a far more difficult opponent than Darren had been.

*If I stop now, it will all have been for nothing.* Up until then, and also from then onwards, Leo drove himself forward with those words.

*Defeating Hayden, killing Darren, and also, allowing all those soldiers to die in the battles surrounding those events... it would all have been absolutely for nothing. And my life as Leo, the second prince of Principality of Atall, will also lose its meaning. In the future, those unknown historians will laugh, saying that: “He was a man who didn't accomplish anything, and it would have been better*

*for him to simply live out his entire life as a hostage in Allion.”*

Leo was firmly set in his decision.

But Percy's attitude was also unwavering.

“For now, please turn him down. We have too little information, and we don't have enough time to remedy that. I agree with you that Oswell is an 'enemy', but please be patient for just a little while longer. That would also be best for your future. If you are too hasty, you will only end up losing everything for nothing at all.”

Leo was perfectly aware that it was a valid argument, and one which he could not refute. By the time they had talked it over again several times, the day had already passed.

Yet Leo could not afford all that much time when it came to his trip to Oswell's territory and, before long, he arrived at the point where he needed to start preparing for it, even though he not been able to counter Percy's objections.

At that point, he was forced into making another decision. It was probably the first one like it since he had travelled through Allion, fleeing from being a hostage; Leo decided to take action without taking Percy's opinion into consideration. To prevent Percy from suspecting anything, he deliberately gave him something to do that would take him far away, and, during that time, he hurriedly finished his various preparations for the trip.

*Once I get results, I'm sure Percy will understand,* thought Leo.

Yet if he had been the same as he usually was, he would have taken as much time and used as many words as he needed to to win over approval from all of his close guards: Percy, Camus and Kuon, and when he intended to make his move, he would have first worked at persuading them as though his life depended on it.

That was how it went when he decided to fight Hayden. Even though Camus had vehemently opposed his plan, Leo had literally put his life on the line to convince him to take part in it.

However, the circumstances then and now were different.

Back then, Leo had not had a single soldier that he was free to move, but now, his Personal Guards had swelled to over two thousand. Percy was just one person, and even if he did not agree with what Leo did, Leo now had enough 'power' to force a change in the situation. So, in other words, he no longer needed to waste time in trying to persuade the one person that was Percy, or to put his own life on the line.

When Percy Leegan returned to Guinbar, he received a shock. It had been five days already since Leo and his group – which included Camus and Kuon – had left the castle.

On top of that, he had left a verbal message to pass on as an order: “I'm leaving five hundred men with you, Percy. Have them continue their training while they guard the territory.” Which translated to: *Stay where you are and don't move without permission.*

“The fuck is this!”

Percy vented his emotions which such rare and open violence that the nearby pageboys and new recruits trembled.

*Don't move. Don't move, you say? Camus and Kuon both moved, completely ignoring your orders. But you didn't criticize them for it. So what if I move too? His Lordship won't be getting angry as long as the result works out, right? Well, isn't that right, Prince? Isn't that right, Leo!*

He was incandescent with rage. It looked like they had gotten cocky just because things had worked out well that one time.

*Camus and Kuon are both pathetic. Is risking their lives the only things they can do? Simply blindly obeying isn't loyalty. They're just acting like idiots who've given up on using their own brains!*

At the same, since he had suddenly been left behind like this, he also wondered if the problem didn't lie with his attitude towards Leo.

*I opposed the prince's decision. I wasn't wrong, but... maybe I was too stubborn afterwards, when I refused to listen to his arguments.*

He couldn't say for sure that he hadn't been influenced by his jealousy towards Camus and Kuon, and by the feeling he had because of it that the way the prince was treating him was unfair. If he hadn't directly opposed Leo, but had simply offered him a different opinion, if he had listened to what Leo intended to do after accepting Oswell's invitation, then there should have been both a way and the time to figure something out. Maybe not much, but there should at least have been something.

“Shit!”

Standing near the warehouse where stones for the church construction were kept, Percy let out an angry howl that sounded like it could have come from a wolf.

## Part 2

Oswell Taholin's territory, Archon, stretched from the eastern tip of the Iron Chain mountain range down towards the south. Since the mountains protected it from the northern cold, it was an area which remained comparatively mild even in the winter, whereas in this season, which was starting to carry a hint of summer warmth, the many forests that dotted the land helped soften the heat. As a result, it was an area where all of the noble families had built holiday villas.

“Live in Tiwana to spend money; do business in Dharam to make money; retire with money to the banks of the River Archon,” was a saying that was often repeated within the country.

Fields stretched out on either side of the highway, and farmers could be seen working vigorously, harvesting the wheat. A group was travelling along the road towards the castle town, looking at those figures without really seeing them.

A carriage rolled on at a leisurely pace, and those travelling on foot around it all wore leather cloaks over their long religious robes.

“Still, I've always thought so, but you really are stupid, Neville,” said a tall man. “Look at how you were when we met Bishop Baal in his hall. Saying too much for no reason just got you injured. At times like that, you should stifle your breathing, stifle your presence and keep a careful watch on the situation. Especially in one like that where we didn't know anything: we were surrounded by enemies, and we didn't know why those enemies had us brought to them or what they wanted from us.”

“I'm greatly obliged to you for your teachings, venerable elder,” retorted the young man walking next to him.

The tall man stuck out his lower lip and shrugged.

“*That's* exactly it. You look so solemn, no matter what you're saying. There are times when I think I'm a complete fool for talking to you.”

“Everyone knows that you're uneducated, Godwin. And yet you think that you can call me an idiot and make fun of me? I really can't stand guys like you.”

“Want me to strangle you with your own hands until you repent, cretin?”

How long had it been since they had met Bishop Baal? Their appearances had completely changed from what they had looked like while in prison, when they had been emaciated, covered in grime, and with long, unkempt hair and beards.

Godwin had recovered the brawny body that had made him stand out even among the warriors of the Cruciform Army, and which had lead to his being feared as the 'colossal monk'. He now strode along the highway as his thick blond hair fluttered in the wind.

Neville, on the other hand, had cut his hair short, like a monk. When they had met with Baal, he had been as thin as a skeleton, which made the sharp glint of his eyes stand out almost eerily. Now, however, he had regained weight, his dress was neat and tidy, and his virile good looks caused quite a number of those they passed on the road to want to turn around and look at him again. His cheeks were still a bit sunken, but then again, that had always been how he looked, even before the prison. Compared to Godwin's more rounded face, he gave off an austere impression.

“Heh, that was a joke.”

“A joke? I've known you for a long time, but I still don't get your jokes.”

“I get what you're saying, Godwin, but I can't change myself at this point. From the moment I became aware of how I am but an empty void in God's gracious presence, changing how I am was no longer in my own hands.”

“That's a beautifully poetic exegesis, comrade.”

“What's an exegesis?”

“It means to explain to other people something that you saw, or heard, or felt. Pictures, songs or talking are all forms of exegesis for people.”

Neville's joke about Godwin being 'uneducated' had clearly rankled, and he was showing off the half-understood knowledge that his companions in the Cruciform Army had taught him.

The two of them were from the same village. Godwin, who had been known for his strength since he was very young, had been the first to enter the Cruciform Army. Then, a few years later and almost as though chasing after him, Neville had also donned the that unit's blue uniform.

Neville was a scrupulous young man, and even within the army corps, he was especially devoted to his duty. It was to the point that if he had received the order from above to 'die', he might have cut his throat on the spot. On top of that, he was extraordinarily skilled, and when it came to handling the halberd, there were very few people who could win against him in a one-on-one fight.

But by the time he entered the corps, the civil war was already in its final stages, and he was captured before his fame could spread throughout the lands of Dytiann. Even so, the two of them were able to escape thanks to the help of friends.

While they were being hidden in one place and another by acquaintances from all over, they attacked carts transporting goods to the Papal States, and continuously made things difficult for Mordin and the others who were trying to make changes to the states. Ultimately, however, those were no more than the struggles of pygmies in grass canoes against a huge, oncoming wave. After three years, the two of them were caught by the troops of the 'Current Church faction', and thrown into a filthy and cramped underground dungeon, where there were very few to provide them with anything they needed.

That had been less than a year ago.

Bantering in their own style, Neville and Godwin continued along the highways of the Principality of Atall, in the direction of Archon. Their destination was Aconrey, the town built at the foot of the castle belonging to Oswell Taholin, one of the vassal-lords. And there, the two of them would wield their blades to kill Leo Attiel. That was the mission that Bishop Baal had given them.

When they had first heard it, neither Neville nor Godwin could believe their ears.

“What do we have to do with the prince of a small country like Atall? And assassination? Go ask someone else,” said Neville.

“This isn't assassination,” Baal answered seriously. “You will be destroying an envoy of the Devil and exorcising the taint of evil from this world.”

“Aren't you the bastards who took the citadel? Then why aren't you giving such a glorious mission to one of those on your side? If you're really acting in accordance with the Lord's will, you should be able to chase away a devil with just your prayers, right?”

“I don't have time for endless debates,” Baal cut through Neville's words as though he found them truly childish. “Time is precious. What I want is a swift and prompt decision from those able to bring down that Hell's spawn.”

Baal stressed that one point, that 'time is precious', without offering any further information.

Neville and Godwin had family back in their native village. The only one Godwin had left was his elderly mother, but Neville had married in his late teens and had children. They had wanted to go and see them after they escaped, but since they knew there was a high chance that the 'Current Church faction' would be monitoring their relatives, they both of them decided to consider that they no longer had any family, and acted accordingly.

And yet...

“I will release your families if you successfully carry out this mission.” – There was no way that the young men's hearts would not be swayed when they heard those words.

It was probably because he could tell that their hearts were moved that Baal smiled then for the first time.

“There would normally need to be a certain amount of recognition and glory for heroism but, since that is what you wish, I will not make this matter public. I'm proud of you for not seeking fame, fighting only to bring about the time when God's glory will shine upon the whole world,” he even went as far as to say.

*Your names will not be made know – essentially, what that meant was: it will not be made public that you took part in an assassination.*

It was thanks to those words that Neville made his decision. He, who was

from a farming village, had taken up weapons and taken lives only because he deeply believed that he needed to do so for the Pope, God's representative in this world. It was true that his family had been taken hostage, but he had devoted himself to the Pope, and if his name spread because of his being involved in assassination, then he would never again be able to face either his family or his now deceased master.

Neville informed Baal that he would accept the mission.

*But after that, I'll drag you on a chariot of flames and plunge you into regret as deep as the depths of Hell that you ever let me hold a weapon again.*

Hatred blazed in his heart.

A few days before Neville and Godwin arrived in Aconrey, Oswell received a reply to his invitation from Lord Leo.

"I am truly delighted to learn of your desire to experience God's will through his teachings. I am also anxious the learned gentlemen from Dytiann, and I will certainly do myself the pleasure of coming to visit you in a few days."

Oswell felt himself tremble when he read the contents. He looked over them again and again.

*Finally...*

Both his mind and body were so tense that it felt as though he was being squeezed by some giant hand, and he felt like he was suffocating and unable to find any ease. As I mentioned previously, the path to success had crumbled in front of Oswell each and every time. Lord Leo had recently become a major roadblock to him.

He would kill Leo.

And of course, he wasn't the only to share this thought. With Hawking of Allion acting as a link between them, Oswell of Atall and Baal of Dytiann were working together to make their shared wish come true.

First of all, using the fact that Leo was trying to propagate the Cross Faith within the country, Oswell had invited him on the grounds that he was building

a church. Even if the prince refused with the excuse that he was too busy, or something like that, simply establishing a parish within his fief meant that Oswell would have any number of opportunities to invite Leo again in the future. Which also meant that Oswell was prepared to be in it for the long haul. However, Leo had jumped at the bait with unexpected alacrity.

Leo would blithely wander over and enter the house that was being converted into a church. There, warriors chosen by Baal and disguised as priests would be waiting for him. The bishop had gone to great pains to gather a dozen skilled but unknown individuals. And at the head of that list were, needless to say, Neville and Godwin.

But Leo might be on his guard if there were nothing but nameless attendants.

And so, also on Baal's advice, a priest by the name of Gemili was travelling with them. He was the man who had been shaken about in the carriage.

He had belonged to the same monastery as Baal when the latter was still a monk. Even back in those days, Gemili had lived a life of laziness and dissipation so, even though he was a little older than Baal, his junior had despised him since their youth. Gemili, however, was the youngest son of a domain lord with enough authority to employ soldiers from the Papal States, so he had been ordained unusually quickly. Still, he was a terrible drunkard. Not even his father's influence could cancel out his repeated excesses, which was why he had worked as a parish priest in Baal's church for more than ten years now, without ever making it to bishop himself.

Baal had given Gemili this task with the air of giving small change to a child and sending them on an errand. He had, of course, hidden the truth, and had simply instructed him to: "Travel with Neville and the others to carry out missionary work in Atall."

Setting his personality aside, Gemili was well-known. So even if there were somebody at Leo's side who was knowledgeable about Dytiann's internal affairs, they probably wouldn't expect anything strange to occur since a big name from the 'Current Church faction' had publicly announced his participation.

At the house, Leo's group would meet and talk with those from Dytiann,

including Gemili, Neville and Godwin. Oswald would initially be present at the meeting, but would soon leave because of having some business to attend to.

“And that's when you kill Leo,” Baal had carefully gone over his instructions to Neville and the others.

He did not inform those who were to carry out the assassination that Oswald was working with him. He worried that if they knew that there were people within Atall who wished for the prince's death, they might start questioning why they were the ones who had been chosen to assassinate him.

Which was why Baal told Neville and the others that: “Your weapons and escape route will be prepared by one of my agents, who will be sent beforehand to infiltrate the Taholin House.”

That was not the only thing that Oswald and Baal kept hidden from the assassins.

Oswald would arrange to have soldiers lie concealed around the house; they were to wait until the meeting was in progress, then simultaneously shoot fire arrows at the building. Meanwhile, the exits would, of course, have been locked, and if anyone managed to force their way out, they would be met with armed and armoured soldiers.

Leo's group would fall prey to the flames or to the soldiers' swords and spears, but so would Neville and the others. Father Gemili would be no exception.

Oswald Taholin would just barely manage to escape the burning house – that would be the official story, at any rate – and would pretend to learn from his servants that: “Neville's group killed Lord Leo. The fire must have been caused during the struggle. When we heard the uproar, we came running over with soldiers and slew Gemili, the ringleader, as he was trying to flee our territory.”

They would also claim to have 'understood the situation' after inspecting the corpses:

“Neville's group came here as official envoys from Dytiann's Church, but they had falsified their real identities and actually belonged to the former Holy See, which fought against the current Church authorities. They were aiming to cause

war between Dytiann and Atall by murdering Lord Leo.”

“Those damned rebels probably intended to take advantage of the turmoil that would cause to bring down Dytiann and allow the old Holy See to seize power again. Father Gemili shouldn't have had any connection to the Holy See, but it looks like he used in this plan either because he was being threatened by them, or because he had been tricked.”

That was the version of events that they publicly announce.

By throwing Neville, Godwin and the others to the flames, and blaming them for Leo's death, they were aiming to prove that neither Oswell nor Dytiann's regime were directly connected to the prince's murder. However, it was of course inevitable that Oswell would earn the fury of both Dytiann and Atall for having foolishly invited the assassins.

Which was why Oswell and Baal would pretend to hurriedly set up a meeting immediately after the events to: 'handle this mutual emergency as quickly as possible.'

“This was all done by the partisans of the former Holy See, and our two countries cannot be foolish enough to fall for the plot and turn our blades against one another,” they would say as they pretended to work out a solution. For example, perhaps they could propose that Mordin might come to Atall on a condolence call? In that way, Oswell would paint the image of himself as a man who was doing everything he could to calm the tension between the two lands, and so he would avoid taking too much damage to his reputation.

Put another way, Oswell was fully aware that this plan would lead to his reputation being tarnished for a while.

It was the same for Baal.

Even though the crime would be committed by a group which was hostile to Dytiann's current government, the Church's influence would inevitably suffer since they had been unable to prevent it from happening. It was only five years since the end of the civil war, and its embers had yet to be extinguished, so that this would be a hard blow for the country. But Baal was willing to risk it, so deep was his desire to see Leo dead.

## Part 3

A large part of why Percy had tried to hold Leo back was because, while they knew that this was probably a trap, they had no time to investigate what the trap was. And Leo himself was also perfectly well aware of that.

Take, for example, the envoys from Dytiann who were coming to visit Oswell's territory. Were they real ones? If they were fake, then they must be assassins aiming for Leo's life. But if they were assassins, then it was hard to believe that they had simply disguised themselves as priests of the Cross Faith. If Leo's side had a bit more time,

then they could have sent messengers to Dytiann to check the identity of these visitors.

*Is Oswell tied to Dytiann?*

Although Leo had considered it, he also believed that Oswell's treacherous connection was with Allion instead. So was it possible that he could be closely linked to Dytiann at the same time?

And then, it was also possible that the priests from Dytiann were no more than bait to lure Leo in, and that something completely different would be used to try and murder him.

Poison, or an attack by soldiers posing as marauders... No, if it was a question of posing as something else, then the chamberlains that were to take care of him at the residence could be replaced by soldiers who might kill him while he slept...

In short, they had no idea what to expect.

Which was why Percy Leegan had been so desperate to get Leo to change his mind.

This was basically jumping naked into the den of a starving dragon.

Yet it was also a good opportunity to get rid of Oswell, who was in Leo's way. Leo was ready to walk towards the dragon which waited for him with its jaws wide open, and so he left Guinbar without telling Percy.

He went with a little less than a dozen attendants. These included Camus, the representative from Conscon Temple, two deacons who were acting as representatives of Guinbar Church, and several of his Personal Guards, Kuon and Aqua included.

Later, the different platoons within the Personal Guards, who had been given orders beforehand, would also depart. Leo had them remain on standby at Olt Rose Castle, which had once belonged to Darren, whom he had only just defeated.

It was the height of the Ataltese summer when Leo Attiel arrived at Oswell Taholin's castle. Since most of Atall enjoyed a mild climate, there was no need for him to spend the entire trip jolted about in a carriage. He travelled along the same highway bordered by wheat fields that Neville, Godwin and the others taken about half a month earlier.

Camus' nerves were on edge as he wondered if the entire town might not become the stage for an assassination. Gripping his spear tight, he stayed close by Leo's side and didn't budge from there at all, anxiously peering around in all directions. But, of course, the only thing to greet Leo when he entered the town were the cheers from the crowd, and no arrow suddenly came flying, nor was he abruptly surrounded by soldiers armed to the teeth.

That evening, Leo was invited to a reception held in the castle's great hall. Apparently the idea was for the guests to have a chance to see each other before the real meeting.

“Has it finally come?” as usual, Camus' eyebrows were bristling up like flames.

“No,” Leo's tone of voice was the same as someone trying to soothe an unruly horse. “Quite a few of Aconrey's merchants and bigwigs have been invited to the banquet. I don't think there's any way that they'll try to kill me there. They'll start by giving us a warm reception so that we don't suspect anything.”

“But, my lord, look at Darren, who was willing to kill his own people to give himself an excuse to attack you. And after all, Oswell is a villain of the same stripe. We don't know what might happen.”

At that point, Kuon interrupted:

“Looks like the gates to the castle are going to be left open until the end of the banquet.”

Apparently, that was information gathered from his subordinates in the Personal Guards. He had now gotten to the stage where he could show that much forethought.

“We need to place the Guards inside and out in case we have to close the castle gates in a hurry.”

“Understood. Kuon will be in charge of that.”

“Aye.”

Seeing Kuon nod and give a slight bow, Aqua, who was travelling with Leo as a Personal Guard for the first time, looked at him strangely.

Speaking of Aqua, it hadn't been long since 'he' had gotten into a violent quarrel with Sarah, who had also come along as an assistant to her brother, in his capacity as the representative of Conscon Temple. She was the one who had promptly gone to get information from the monks from Dytiann, and who reported back to Leo about the priest named Gemili.

“There's no doubt that he really is a priest from the 'Current Church faction', but he isn't anyone who particularly stands out within the Dytiann Alliance. He is probably connected to the upper echelons of the faction. We hadn't heard of him either. But he's been working as a parish priest alongside Bishop Baal.”

*Baal?* Leo shivered suddenly.

He had met Bishop Baal twice in the past. The first had been when he and Arthur, the commander of the Sergaia Holy Rose Division, had met with Leo to talk about volunteering reinforcements to Conscon Temple. Back then, Baal had stared persistently at Leo with eyes as cold as a snake's.

Sarah, his informant then and now, had claimed that “Arthur and Baal have a

*thing going on."*

The second time they met was after Arthur's death. On that occasion, Baal had avoided looking at Leo, as though holding himself back. But from time to time, when their gazes happened to meet by chance, Leo clearly caught sight of a fire in Baal's eyes. To put it more bluntly, rather than a fire, it was hatred. Rage and the urge to kill.

Those eyes clearly understood who it was who had lured Arthur Causebulk into a trap, then killed him.

Leo had no doubt at all that Bishop Baal bore a bitter grudge against him. And now, the priest who had come over apparently had some connection to him.

While attending the banquet, Leo could not rid himself of the fear that any and all of the people who greeted him were hiding a blade at their breast, and that at any moment, they might plunge it into his heart or slice through his neck with it. However, the party passed its height without any particularly noticeable occurrence. Just as he himself had said, Oswell surely wouldn't have him assassinated so publicly.

Leo's mental strain gradually melted away. He spoke with Father Gemili. His usual manner returned as he exchanged trifling jokes with Oswell. Whereas earlier, he hadn't touched the wine, he now stretched out an arm to take a goblet, and emptied its contents in one gulp. His throat had been parched, probably because of the stress, and the drink was so delicious that it seemed to flow throughout his entire body.

But... was it a case of negligence?

Camus' vigilant gaze was scanning the entire hall. Kuon was monitoring the escape routes from the castle. It was the same for the other Personal Guards.

For just one second, their attention shifted away from Leo himself.

The wine cup dropped from his hand and rolled on the carpet.

"Prince?"

Camus, who was beside him, was a fraction too slow in turning around. The colour drained from Leo's face as he staggered then, like a doll which had lost

its support, he pitched forward, face first.

“Prince!”

“Your Highness!”

As shouts rose up all around, Leo started frothing at the mouth before losing consciousness.

Early that morning, a thin layer of clouds hung over Aconrey, and a light rain started to fall on the houses and on the streets that people were hurrying along.

“Have you heard?”

Maybe it was because of the gloomy weather, but those who were talking together looked despondent, and spoke in hushed voices.

“They say His Highness, Lord Leo, has died.”

“I heard it too. Even though he was waving at us so cheerfully just the other day.”

“It seems he was poisoned at the welcoming banquet.”

“Shh! Be careful what you say.”

Even though it was still early, armed soldiers could be seen patrolling around the streets, which explained that sudden, sharp tone and the cautious check of their surroundings.

“It's not true that he died. I heard it from a guy who sells vegetables to the castle, so it's definitely reliable.”

“What? That bastard Boyle, acting all puffed up and talking like he knew everything... Right, he's going to give me back what I treated him to yesterday.”

A man who seemed to be well-informed stopped a man who looked like a carpenter as he started rolling up his sleeves.

“Hold your horses. The story wasn't completely unfounded. It looks like it's true that His Highness collapsed at the banquet...” He continued his story with a self-important air.

Three days after Lord Leo arrived at Aconrey Castle, rumours such as those started to circulate on every street corner in the castle town, in every tavern and in every house. Oswell had declared martial law, but it was impossible to stop people from talking.

And it was undeniably true that Leo Attiel had collapsed towards the end of the banquet, after downing a goblet of wine. Given the timing, it was hardly surprising that people were saying that: "Prince Leo was poisoned."

And when thinking about the circumstances, the natural progression was to suspect that the criminal was Oswell Taholin, the castle lord of Aconrey. Although, taken the other way around, it also meant that if Oswell were really plotting to assassinate the prince, he surely wouldn't have chosen such a conspicuous method.

And in actual fact, Oswell had been thrown into a panic when Leo collapsed. Had his own plan been pre-empted by someone who wasn't in on it? At first, he had turned to look at Gemili's group, then his gaze had travelled those from his own House, but every last person there seemed as alarmed as he was.

It was the same for the prince's attendants too. While everyone turned ashen, a large priest called Camus lifted Leo into his arms and shouted at Oswell to call for a doctor.

Leo had been taken to a room in the castle and Oswell had done what he could by sending for medical help.

Three days had passed since then.

Oswell had come up with three hypotheses.

The first one was fairly ridiculous: *since Leo is only a boy, he made himself ill by gulping down too much alcohol when he isn't used to it.*

The second was that: *maybe he somehow got wind of our plan and is only pretending to be ill. While he lies in bed he will be observing how we react.*

As far as Oswell was concerned, that was not a situation that invited optimism.

However, when the doctor he had sent for came out from seeing Leo, he

announced that it was impossible for the prince to be pretending.

It was clear from the way his skin had passed beyond pale and had instead started to darken that there was a problem with his blood circulation. On the night he collapsed, he was seized more than once with convulsions. His fever couldn't be brought down at all, and there was no end to his diarrhoea and vomiting. The doctor had given him a decoction of herbs to drink, but Leo even threw that up, and as his body could not take in any nutrients, he grew increasingly weaker. In just three days time, Leo had wasted away into nothing more than skin and bones.

“What's the cause?”

Upon being asked that, the doctor had shaken his head and replied that he couldn't say for sure.

“It's most likely some kind of snake venom, but the prince's symptoms are unlike those caused by any snakes found around Atall. It might be a poison that was compounded for some specific purpose,” he added, and Oswell Taholin went speechless.

If it was poison, then it strengthened his suspicions, and fell in line with his third hypothesis. Namely –

“There's someone in this castle who wants to kill Lord Leo and frame me.” When thinking about who this 'someone' was, it could only be Dytiann or Allion.

The plan had originally been for Dytiann to share the blame for not having been able to prevent the crimes of the former Holy See, but it was conceivable that they had decided to pin sole responsibility on Oswell.

But... given that Neville and the others had, from the start, come to Aconrey with the intention of carrying an assassination, Dytiann's current government, which was pulling their strings from behind, must surely realise that if Oswell had them arrested and tortured, they would confess everything. Why would Dytiann go to all the trouble of sending assassins, only to create a more dangerous situation for themselves?

*Then... is it Allion?*

That didn't quite fit, either. If Oswell were an eyesore for Allion – which he

himself would find hard to believe – then they had plenty of far simpler methods of dealing with him than setting up this convoluted scheme. For example, Hawking could just send one of Oswell's letters to the sovereign-prince with a warning that there was a traitor in the country. Hawking Ingram had exchanged personal dealings with both Oswell and Baal, so he fully grasped all the circumstances and was in a position to make use of them.

*But... what in the world for?*

If his goal was to have Leo murdered, then he just had to sit back without doing anything.

Did he want to cause Oswell's downfall in order to avoid having to keep his promise about appointing Oswell to a position in Allion?

*Argh! I don't know. What is this? What's going on?*

The situation left him drenched in cold sweat. Even if someone was hidden behind all this, if Leo died now, then Oswell would have to shoulder all of the blame and disgrace.

*Please, I'm begging you. Don't die.*

It was almost farcical how a man who had schemed to murder Leo was now the one person in the world who was the most anxious about Leo's wellbeing.

The group from Dytiann, which was originally supposed to be found guilty of Leo's assassination, seemed bewildered by how things had developed. And since they didn't know that Oswell and Baal were connected, he couldn't get in touch with them. For now, they seemed to have decided to stay at the castle 'until Lord Leo recovers.' But then, regardless of how the situation evolved, they probably wouldn't feel the same sense of urgency as Oswell, since Leo's death was exactly what they hoping for.

When the prince failed to regain consciousness after three days, those at his side requested that doctors be invited from the capital. Oswell Taholin had no reason to refuse.

And more importantly, the priest called Camus who made personally came to make the request was glaring at Oswell as he would at an enemy general across the battlefield. He definitely suspected the vassal-lord was the poisoner. If

Oswell shook his head in refusal, those powerful hands might wrap around his neck and start strangling him.

A messenger on dispatched from Aconrey on a fleet-footed horse. Yet that night, Leo's health improved ever so slightly. After he managed to drink a little tea and eat a small amount of easily-digestible food, his fever dropped considerably.

After another two days, and without waiting for any team of doctors from Tiwana, he left his bed and went to see Oswell.

“It looks like I've caused you trouble.”

Although his face was still almost bloodless and his entire body was haggard, compared to how he had previously been almost unable to speak, his voice was a lot clearer.

“I'm sorry to have kept the visitors from Dytiann waiting. If possible, I'll meet with them tomorrow.”

Here again, Oswell Taholin had no reason to refuse.

*Thank goodness you survived* – even though his feeling of relief was so overwhelming that he felt like hugging the prince, he was inwardly going over and over the plan for Leo's assassination on the very next day.

The dark clouds hanging over Aconrey had not yet cleared.

# Chapter 6: Venomous Serpent

## Part 1

The mansion that Oswald had converted into a church was on the outskirts of the castle town. Rumour had it that this villa had formerly belonged to a distant relative of the princely house, who had sold it to pay off gambling debts.

And today, Leo would be meeting with the envoys from Dytiann in that house with a high fence.

The main part of the building was being altered to include colonnades, and it was already looking like a church. It was destined to soon be burned to the ground, yet Oswald had spared neither money nor manpower, and used both lavishly. He had even paid expensive fees to a painter for the religious frescoes on the walls and ceilings. As a result, Leo's group looked up admiringly at the paintings as they climbed the staircase to the second floor of the side building, without the slightest inkling of the gruesome scene that was scheduled to unfold.

Gemili, Neville and the others were already waiting in a square room with a balcony. The two sides exchanged greetings. On Dytiann's side, when they saw Leo, they were startled by his haggard appearance, and several people expressed concern about his health.

"I am very sorry to have worried you. But I'm fine now. So then, shall we begin?"

Since Leo himself suggested it, they started the meeting straight away.

The time appointed for the assassination was fast approaching.

It would soon be sunset.

Neville had not said a single thing during the talks. Father Gemili, the representative for the Dytiann priests, was currently pleading in favour of Atall's Church integrating the monastic orders. Dytiann's cathedral was essentially the main seat for all the monasteries within the country. In that, it differed from Allion, where religious orders flourished. Although they all belonged to the same Cross Faith, there were different sects depending on what country they were in.

While Neville's posture remained rigid as he listened to the conversation, beneath the table, he clenched and unclenched his fists, preparing himself for when the time came.

Still, Gemili's frivolous voice and insincere attitude offended him. Even though this entire meeting was meaningless – most of those present would probably no longer be part of this world within a few hours – it irritated him that this kind of person was acting like a mouthpiece for Dytiann.

After Leo had collapsed, that man had done nothing but loaf around. As he was not in on the plan, and had only been brought along to help gain the trust of the Atallese, he was not aware of the true purpose behind the meeting. And so, he didn't feel the slightest bit nervous, and instead seemed to view this task as nothing more than a good chance to kick back and relax while in a foreign country.

After making a single call on Leo to inquire about his health, he had declared that: “We've now got more time to do whatever we want,” and started going out to have fun day after day. By the time he staggered back, he always reeked of alcohol.

What annoyed Neville and the others more than anything, was how each and every time, he made them listen to how he had been 'welcomed by a woman'.

“It's not like with tarts. This was a girl with real class, even though she's still young. Half a year from now, she will have to marry a man she's never even met, so she's visiting the town to try and taste at least a little freedom before then. When I preached God's teachings to her, there was an entranced look in her lovely almond-shaped eyes, and she rested her head against my shoulder. I

absolutely must take the time to go again and guide her towards the path of the faithful," he would cheerfully tell them.

It made Neville sick. Whenever he thought about how that gang of conmen had destroyed the Holy See and were now ruling however they pleased over the land in the name of "God's teachings," he went beyond anger and felt nothing but wretched and ashamed.

Well, never mind about Gemili. There was something they needed to do before worrying about him.

Every exit to and from the mansion was blocked by Oswell's men. The road leading to Aconrey was of course one of them, but even the paths heading outwards were blockaded, as they seemed to be on high alert, intent on preventing anyone from entering or leaving. On the other hand, none of those soldiers were inside building. The only ones present were the two parties taking part in the talks, and a few servants who were preparing the dinner for after the meeting.

Which meant that the prince would only be able to rely on the few guards that he had brought with him, but from what Neville would see, they didn't look very reliable. The only exception was the well-built man introduced as the representative to Conscon Temple; he at least looked somewhat competent. He didn't have the slightest trace of composure, however, and his gaze had been wandering around incessantly throughout the meeting. That might be his own brand of vigilance, but the fact that he couldn't relax meant that he was the type to exhaust themselves before the time came.

The other members of the group were three soldiers who looked like they had only just been hired from the populace and who didn't even have the right posture yet, and a thin boy who looked even more childish than Leo. They weren't exactly impressive shields for the prince.

The same could be said of Neville and his group, but the others weren't even armed, since it had been agreed beforehand that neither group would take any weapons into the meeting room with them. They had all been searched before entering the room, and those guards shouldn't currently be carrying even as little as a dagger.

– Neville once more went over the plan in his head. Oswell would be present for the meeting's initial stages. As a domain lord, however, he had other business to attend to, and was scheduled to leave early because of some matter or another. They would spring into action some time after that.

A large casket decorated in gold and silver was brought into the room. It contained 'relics' that were to be presented to the party from Atall, which were meant to be transferred to the church which was being established there. In reality, it was filled with a pile of weapons.

Neville and the eight others from the old Holy See would casually go to stand by the entrance, from where they would grab the weapons and rush in to cut down Leo's group.

The first target would be the man from Conscon. If they could strike him down from the first, then the rest wouldn't be too difficult. In all honesty, seven of the assassins wouldn't even be needed; Neville and Godwin by themselves would be more than enough to kill Leo in no time.

Leo's group wouldn't be the only ones Neville would point his blade towards. Father Gemili, that fellow traveller from Dytiann who was currently waxing eloquent in fervent speech, would also be on the receiving end of it. This was one of Baal's schemes to make it look like Leo had been killed by 'traitors' to the Current Church faction, and to ensure that nobody linked his murder with Dytiann.

*You only need to injure him*, had said Baal, but his eyes revealed a different intention. 'Kill him'. Neville understood that to mean that Gemili could not be allowed to become trouble in the future. Afterwards, the plan was that the secret agents that Baal had sent to Archon beforehand – those they would meet once they arrived at Aconrey – would set fire to the mansion. They would escape during that time.

Since the guilt of Dytiann's current Church would be exposed if Neville and the others were caught, Baal was sure to invest a lot of energy into securing an escape route for them.

*The real fight will come after this*, thought Neville.

When they had been about to depart, Baal had told them: "Once everything is

settled, head for Eashar, a village at the western edge of Dytiann. I'll transfer your families there and you'll receive your pay when you get there.”

It certainly wasn't out of the kindness of his heart that he would move their families. There would, of course, be eyes to monitor them, and the implicit threat was that if Neville's group abandoned their mission halfway, well then, who knew what might happen to their loved ones...

And if they managed to safely make it to Eashar, would Baal pay the money and release Neville and the others, as well as their families, as he had promised? Baal was a clergyman in the service of God – but it would be naively optimistic to think that would prevent him from lying. Far from keeping his promise, he might be intending to kill Neville and the others, who knew some inconvenient facts about Dytiann's current regime.

Considering what the current Church was like, that was a definite possibility.

*But don't think I'm going to fall into a trap that easily.*

Their families should be safe at least until Baal heard that the mission was a success. And there were currently no chains at Neville's hands and feet; there were plenty of ways for him to do what he needed to.

After going over the entire plan, Neville looked towards Leo Attiel. The first thing that needed to be done was to successfully assassinate this prince.

When he had first seen him at the banquet, five days earlier, Neville had thought: *It's a shame.*

Leo was still only in his teens. His face and body both showed that he was basically still a boy. He didn't look in the slightest like the 'envoy of the Devil' that Baal had painted him as.

Neville felt his chest tighten. He was a man who had fought as a servant of God. He had mercilessly killed all enemies of the Church and of the pope, even when they had been women or children. The situation was different this time, but he could only try to force himself into a state of mind similar to the one he had then.

*Forgive me, little prince.* He made the sign of the cross. *You are not an enemy to His Holiness, and it's just unlucky that you acted against the corrupt and*

*degenerate Dytiann that exists now. I will happily also be branded as evil. Never mind if I spend all eternity whipped by the scourges of Hell. Your death will not be in vain. I swear it will serve as the foundation for building the true kingdom of God in this world... although I don't know if it can be accomplished in my lifetime...*

– While Neville was lost in his thoughts, Oswell rose from his seat.

“Then I apologise, but I will take my leave. Your Highness, I had intended to hold another dinner party in your honour tomorrow evening, but does your health allow it?”

“I'm fine.”

“You are young, Your Highness. Still, you will be shouldering the weight of the principality in the future, so please do not overdo it,” Oswell's expression was unruffled as he left the room.

After that, a half hour went by, and the talks were all but settled.

Standing next to each other, Neville and Godwin exchanged glances. It would soon be time. They both stole a glance to confirm the position of the casket full of weapons.

“To misquote what Lord Oswell said earlier, it isn't healthy to work ourselves into exhaustion,” Leo suddenly stood up, without any prior warning and clapped his hands.

For a moment, Neville and his group became cautious, but it was only wine that was brought in on Leo's signal. There were goblets placed before everyone there and the servants waiting on the table now filled each one to the brim. Leo picked his up.

“May Our Lord's teachings bring light upon this world,” he raised his cup.

*What the... Neville felt relieved. Well, this will be your last cup of wine. I hope you enjoy it.*

Leo drank down the contents in one go. Gemili was the next to drink, and Neville followed suit.

Gemili, the wine connoisseur, wiped his lips. “That was delicious,” he beamed.

“My home area produces good grapes, but I didn't know that you had such excellent wine in Atall.”

“Did you enjoy it? Then I'll make sure you receive a barrel later.”

“I'm very grateful.”

“But did you know that there's a secret about how this is produced? Once you hear it, I'm not sure you will still want it, Father Gemili,” Leo laughed teasingly, and Father Gemili went along with the joke.

“Oh? I wonder what it is. Don't tell me that the secret ingredient is insects, which any right-minded man hates?”

“It's something close,” Leo put his cup back down on the table then continued, “this wine contains the same poison that I drank, five days ago.”

He smiled radiantly as he made that announcement.



## Part 2

When heard the word 'poison', Father Gemili started coughing furiously. The soldiers of the Holy See, disguised as priests, stared at each other in horror. As Leo watched, them, he continued speaking.

“How do you like the taste of poison, gentlemen? The speed at which it takes effect varies from person to person. Perhaps you're already feeling as though you're suffocating? Some of you might be getting dizzy. At this point, the Devil has probably already raised his gleaming scythe over some of your heads. Oh, but then some of you might be lucky enough to see heavenly messengers come for you, trumpets in hand. You should go through those gates to the sky,” he chuckled.

Gemili was clutching at his own throat. It looked like he had only realised he was suffocating after Leo had pointed it out. Some of the other soldiers were also clawing at their own bodies, while others were simply staggering around.

“What the hell,” screamed a soldier of the Holy See, his face scarlet. “Lord Leo... bastard, you plotted against us?”

Godwin seized the man by the shoulder just as he was about to rush towards the casket. The soldier was on the verge of losing his sanity; he tried to shake Godwin off by force, but this was, after all, the 'colossal monk'. His feet seemed to have taken root, and he didn't budge at all.

For a second, it looked as though the entire place was going to be thrown into chaos.

“A prank.”

It was Neville who had spoken loudly to prevent the situation from getting worse. He then raised his empty cup, and tipped it sharply so that a few drops who remained at the bottom fell onto his lips. He licked them and said: “Your Highness, I'd appreciate it if you put a stop to your prank. Is there some reason

why you pretended to poison us, Lord Leo?" he laughed.

It was what you could expect from a man who had witnessed countless scenes of carnage. Even though he he had been told that he had drunk poison, he turned to face the prince with a nonchalant air.

"I have a reason," opposite him, Leo wiped away his own enigmatic smile and glared at those from Dytiann. "Wasn't every single one of you here planning to murder me? So what further reason did I need? You should savour in your own flesh the reward for baring your fangs at Leo Attiel, second prince of the principality of Atall."

"You damn..." Another soldier lunged past Godwin's side and tried to seize the casket.

"Wait," Godwin stretched out his second hand and caught him by the shoulder.

"Let me go, Godwin."

"I told you to wait."

Although Godwin's expression was also one of desperation, he tried as much as possible to keep his voice under control. He didn't know how to take the prince's words, but Neville was still calm, and Godwin based himself on that to evaluate the situation.

An unnatural silence fell between the two groups.

For a while, they stayed still within this strange, uncomfortable silence thick with confusion, then... it vanished like the mist when Lord Leo's laughter rang out a second time.

"That's a man who's dedicated his life to God's teachings for you. You're so calm that there's no point trying to make fun of you. Yes, you're right. I lied about poisoning you. This wine is the finest in Atall. I had it brought in for your enjoyment to embellish this stage which I set up here. I needed something sweet enough to be plausible as the last thing you would taste in this life."

"W-What..." The priest bowed his head with an air of heartfelt relief. His complexion was so pasty that it looked like he really had drunk poison. "My

lord, that was atrocious,” whether from anger or relief, Gemili's tone was vociferous. “I am one who received sacred orders in Dytiann. This isn't some amusing joke; you made a mockery of me. I demand that you apologise right here and now and...”

“However, not everything I said was a lie,” Leo interrupted Gemili as though bashing past him with a shield and glared at the soldiers disguised as monks. He raised his right hand and held up two fingers to count. “There were two truths. The first is that you plotted to kill me.”

He bent down one of his fingers. Neville, Godwin and the others watched, their mouths dry, as he lowered the second finger.

“The second is that, five days ago, I drank poison,” he stated calmly.

Neville shook his head.

“We heard of course that Your Highness' health was far from good. And we were also aware of the rumours that you may have been poisoned. However, surely you cannot believe that it was we who...”

“The one who poisoned me wasn't someone from your group, and it definitely wasn't Lord Oswell Taholin, who is being accused of it by the rumours.”

“Then who was it?”

Leo's right hand was still raised and he used it to point towards himself.

“It was me. I, Leo Attiel, put poison in my own wine cup.”

The room once more erupted with noise and confusion.

*Is he insane?* Even Neville couldn't hide the thought that was written all over his face. Only the prince and the guards accompanying him had remained calm.

Neville gulped before speaking up again.

“And... why in the world for?” he couldn't help but ask.

A faint smile once again appeared on the prince's lips as he gave a small nod.

“The first reason was to buy some time.”

“Time?”

“I had intended to act according to how Oswell expected me to, but if I'd done that, then the enemy would have set the pace and I wouldn't have been able to find out anything about their trap. So I pretended that my health collapsed, and used that time to gather information.”

Leo suddenly directed his gaze towards the window. The soldier who looked like a boy reacted to the signal and headed in that direction. Leo turned back to Neville.

“I say 'pretend', but it wouldn't have been easy to deceive Oswell and the others with a fake illness. So I decided to take a poison I'd received from one of my men, dilute it in wine and water, and drink it. And as a result, absolutely no one doubted that I was genuinely ill.”

*Honestly...* The one who sighed in frustration from not knowing how to vent his own anger wasn't anyone from Dytiann, but rather the warrior monk at Leo's side, Camus.

They had probably forgotten how he had gone ashen when Leo collapsed, but that hadn't been an act. Leo hadn't told anyone except Kuon and Aqua about how he was going to poison his own wine. The poison itself was apparently something that Kuon had brought back from his native land.

Leo had received a detailed explanation about the concoction from Kuon. How much did it have to be diluted so that the effects would be as weak as possible, but without being so weak that it become pointless? What was the right quantity to cause symptoms that would allow him to stay in bed for three or four days without attracting suspicion? By all accounts, Kuon had strongly objected at first.

“I'm not a shaman, so I don't understand it all that well, but it's dangerous, Prince. It had different effects on different people. Even if you dilute it, you could die from suddenly swallowing it. And even if you don't, you can go blind, or lose the use of your arms and legs... the shaman who made Sarah drink it said so.”

Leo, however, was every bit as stubborn. The horned snake poison in Kuon's possession could not be obtained anywhere near Atall. Which made it perfect

for deceiving the doctors, and if it looked like something which had been specially concocted, then the surroundings were sure to start whispering that Oswald might have been planning his assassination. And that in turn could be used to uncover the relationship between Oswald and Dytiann, which Leo was still unclear about at the time.

Which was why he ordered Kuon and Aqua to carefully observe how people reacted in the instant that he took the poison and collapsed. It was simple. Easy. When Leo fell, what would be the first thing that Oswald and the monks from Dytiann would look at? Oswald stared at those from Dytiann. And as for the party from Dytiann... on the one hand, there was Gemili, who seemed shaken and confused, whereas the rest of the group looked at each other. Not a single one of them turned to gaze at Oswald.

That didn't reveal the whole story, of course, but it provided a piece of the puzzle that allowed Leo to guess at the situation.

But when the prince told Camus about it afterwards, the warrior monk naturally flew into a rage.

“Why didn't you tell me about it? No... first of all, you must have been mad to take some unknown poison!” He shouted so fiercely that it made his muscles heave but, as the prince continued to weaken day by day, Camus' tone softened.

As he nursed the prince, who was losing his strength and growing increasingly haggard, Camus mulled over his thoughts.

*How amazing he is. God granted me as my destiny to meet this man,* the conviction which had come to him when they were entering Olt Rose flitted across his mind.

*Alright. In that case, I'll take poison too,* he decided. In other words, if Leo believed it to be necessary, then Camus would obey him even to the end. As long as Leo lived, Camus would not be a single step apart from him, and if Leo died, then he would choose to join him in the same grave.

Camus was prepared to live his life that way.

*So you need to be prepared as well, Lord Leo,* he whispered silently that night,

as he wiped the sweat that was pouring from Leo's feverish brow. *You are someone who will never be allowed to die alone. And even if, in the future, you want to live a peaceful and solitary life, I will never allow you to. I will always drag you back to the front stage, whether I have to cling to your legs and lick your boots, or prod you with a spear. So be prepared, Lord Leo, Your Highness....*

“It was Oswell who brought you gentlemen over here. Yet at the same time... you aren't aware that you're collaborating with him,” Leo's words had all the force of a spell, binding his audience. He continued his recitation while Neville and the others remained rooted in place.

“Basing myself on that hypothesis, I had my subordinates gather information. Investigating at random is about the same as wandering aimlessly in a desert. So as a starting premise, that one wasn't too bad. Especially if we're talking about Father Gemili...”

Leo glanced sideways towards him, and the priest almost jumped out of his skin just from that. He – and he alone – couldn't understand anything about how events were unfolding. He was still worried even now about whether he might really have drunk poison.

“It was very fortunate that we were able to get closer to you,” Leo gave him a small bow.

Gemili still didn't understand, but I'm sure there is no need to point the identity of the 'young, high-class girl' who approached him while he was going out to have fun every night...

There, in Aconrey, where there were no eyes to strictly monitor the clergyman, he indulged in the wine he was so fond of, and talked about everything that the girl asked him about. About how Bishop Baal had suddenly ordered him to temporarily leave for Atall, and how, for some reason, the monks travelling with him were all unfamiliar faces to Gemili. About how the monks were carrying a large casket containing 'sacred relics,' and how Baal had strictly admonished him not to touch it...

Naturally, information was also being hastily gathered from other directions, including details about the schedule for this meeting. They also found out that

they would not be allowed to bring weapons into the room. Moreover, they found out that soldiers would be defending the road to the mansion 'just in case', so they also collected information on how many guards there would be and where they would be positioned.

“I was able to guess quite a lot from all that. Maybe about eighty percent. As for the remaining twenty percent... well, there's no point being too greedy, and we just had to take a gamble on the rest.”

“A gamble, you say,” there was a faint sheen of sweat on Neville's forehead as he repeated those words.

What had happened was neither a prank nor an act of mockery. The prince who stood before him had fully realised that the group from Dytiann were a secret unit sent to assassinate him. Even for Neville, who was usually calm and collected, the situation was as unexpected as it was horrifying.

Yet at the same time, there were a lot of points that Neville found hard to understand. It was his first time hearing that Oswell Taholin was in on this, but setting that aside, it seemed that even though Leo had figured out the real nature of the 'relics', he had not confiscated the weapons. And his own guards were unarmed. Had the contents of the casket been replaced? No, Neville and the soldiers of the Holy See had never had it out of their sight. They themselves had carried it into the room, and they had checked the contents just before doing so.

*What is this? What's he thinking?*

When he had first seen the prince, he had felt compassion for his youth, but now Leo towered before him as an enigmatic and powerful enemy. He felt thirsty. Even when he had been in the middle of ferocious battles, and even during his long imprisonment, or his time as a fugitive before that, not a single ripple had ever caused a disturbance in his heart. As far as Neville was concerned, the world would always be easy to understand. The pope's enemies were his enemies. And those who fought those enemies and who risked their life to accomplish the same goal as him were his friends. A man who could draw the world along such simple lines was one who could remain strong even to the very end. Neville's boldness, as well as his calm, came from that. But this time,

too many complicated things were jumbled together.

Neville swallowed again. It felt like his throat was constricted. Just when he finally managed to open his mouth again – “Prince.”

By the window, the boy-soldier – Kuon, called out.

“They're making their move?” Leo asked shortly, his eyes still fixed on the group from Dytiann.

Kuon nodded. “About a hundred of them. They're divided into platoons, and they're using the bushes and the fountain as cover as they approach.”

“I see fire,” said Aqua, who was watching from another window. “They've probably prepared fire arrows.”

At that point, Leo's expression changed. The smile vanished from his lips, and his face took on a firm look.

“It's just as you heard. They will soon be attacking this place.”

“Attacking?” Neville was startled. “Are you going to kill us without even a proper interrogation because you think we tried to kill you?”

“Their target isn't you. It's me.” For a while now, Leo had been staring unblinkingly at Neville's face. “Oswell's soldiers have surrounded the mansion, and they will soon be shooting fire arrows. They think you've already killed me. But even if you hadn't, it wouldn't matter. The mansion would still be engulfed in flames, with armed soldiers waiting at the exits. All of you, as well as myself, are destined to end our lives here, as charred corpses.”

Around the same time as the events in the meeting room, the soldiers blockading the road to the mansion had lit bonfires and were keeping a careful watch on their surroundings by the light from them.

It was boring work. Normally, the happy-go-lucky soldiers would have brought liquor along, but this time, they had received strict orders from their domain lord to: “Let absolutely no one pass.” On top of which, Oswell had also insistently repeated to their captain that: “Even if something happens, you are not to leave your posts.”

“If villains try to attack, it's absolutely certain that they will create a distraction to divert the guards' attention. Do you understand? Spears would come raining down on you, so you are *not* to decide any kind of action on your own. Don't move even a single soldier. There are other units stationed closer to the mansion whose duty it is to protect the prince and the monks, so the only thing you should be thinking about is blockading the road. And don't forget it!”

That was how monumentally important their mission was.

The guards of course knew that Lord Leo was currently at the mansion. Up until a while ago, they had been exchanging comments on the sexy and beautiful landlady at a recently refurbished inn in Aconrey, but by now, they had used up their topics for idle chatter, and were keeping watch while fighting back yawns.

Just then, they felt the presence of a large group of people who had come from the direction of the town, and all of the guards quickly stood up, their weapons at the ready. Could there really be an attack on the mansion while the prince was in it... they wondered. But only for a second. Peaceful laughter was coming from the group. From their appearance, it looked like townspeople from Aconrey. Still, it was strange that they were headed towards a mansion in the suburbs at this time of day.

“Hold, hold,” the soldiers brandished their spears to stop them. “What's your business? You can't go any further than here. His Highness Lord Leo is here.”

After saying that, the soldiers tried to chase the group back, but the people – who included young and old, and men and women alike – looked displeased.

“His Highness is the one who asked us to come,” they announced. It was the first the soldiers had heard of it.

Although the prince's collapse had been kept as hidden as possible, rumours about it had flown around the town at astonishing speed. Several well-known merchants had then apparently gone to the castle with gifts, claiming that they were get-well presents. For safety reasons, very few of the items actually reached him personally, but Leo Attiel was impressed by the warmth of the people of Aconrey.

“It was thanks to your care and to your prayers that I recovered. I would

dearly like for you all to come and see for yourselves how I've recovered," he had said, and had officially announced that he could be found that evening at the mansion which was being converted into a church.

"We didn't hear about anything like that," the soldiers were bewildered. Word had spread throughout the entire town, and more people were arriving behind this first group.

"Hurry up and let us through. Otherwise, we won't get to see the prince!"

"W-Wait. I told you to wait. We'll go and have it confirmed. Don't you dare move from here!"

Soldiers and townspeople were pushing and tussling in the street when suddenly, the townspeople stopped protesting in annoyance and instead all started screaming.

*Now what is it?*

The townspeople pointed towards the wall. When the soldiers turned back and looked up, they too all let out involuntary shouts. Of all possible things, flames were rising from the mansion which was currently housing Lord Leo. The blaze was already so big that it cast a glow on people's faces, and it seemed to be burning with particular ferocity on the second floor of the building.

Naturally, the soldiers were also thrown into a panic. "No matter what happens, you can't let anyone through, and you can't move from your posts" – those were the firm order they had received from their domain lord. Part of the reason for those orders was so that, when Oswald returned because he had 'heard that there was a disturbance,' he would be able to lead these soldiers into chasing after the 'criminals'.

However, in Oswald's plan, that was only supposed to happen after the mansion was completely engulfed in flames. He had not thought for a second that there would be townspeople there to witness the fire.

The townspeople shouted at the soldiers, anger and worry in their voices.

"Hurry up and go put that fire out!"

"No, before that, you have to save His Highness!"

The soldiers also lost a lot of their vigilance. Taking advantage of that, several people broke free of the soldiers and tried to get closer to the mansion. But the gates were shut fast and the walls were high and perpendicular, making them impossible to climb.

At that moment, a new group of armed soldiers came running up. Judging from their uniforms, they must also have been on guard that evening.

“What are you standing about for? We have to get in there right away and rescue the prince,” they exclaimed, and ordered the original group of guards to open the gates.

“B-But, we received orders from Lord Oswell. There are other people guarding the mansion else...”

“You fools!” roared one of the new arrivals. “What if those guards have already been defeated? If you just stand there without doing anything, Lord Oswell will have your heads!”

True, that was probably what had happened. The captain of the guards, who had the key to the gates, opened them from the outside.

“Follow us!”

Urged on by the newly arrived group of soldiers, the guards who had been sternly ordered not to move from their posts also threw themselves into the estate.

## Part 3

Smoke had entered the room and there were noises that sounded like the walls were shaking as they were hit by a quick succession of fire arrows. Neville's group cried out in fear, but Lord Leo glanced at the window with about as much interest as he would have if a strong wind were blowing, and got up from his seat.

“Once the ground floor is blocked because of the fire, we won't have any escape route. We'll go down.”

“H-Hold on,” Neville called out, feeling that he needed to gain some control over the situation. However –

“If you want to end up burned to a crisp, by all means, do as you like. But we have no reason to stay with you. Oh, right, we need to call the servants in the mansion. Since they're also caught up in this, it obviously means that they weren't part of the plot,” Leo started to leave, accompanied by his unarmed guards.

“Wait. We'll go first. Neville and the others will follow at the rear,” Godwin just barely managed to gather his wits.

Leo's group and the servants would be placed between the two halves of the Dytiann delegation, so that they could not escape. Leo, who had stopped walking away to listen, now shrugged.

“I'm fine with that too. Oh... don't forget the weapons. I'm sure you'll need them.”

He pointed to the casket as he said that.

It was embarrassing, but there was no point in hiding it now, so Neville and the others opened the casket, and handed out the various weapons to their companions.

Neville was holding a halberd, his weapon of choice. In addition to the sharp pike at its tip, there was an axe-head and a claw-like thorn mounted on the spear shaft. It was, of course, far heavier than an ordinary spear and could be used in far more ways when wielded with skill and discernment, but there were not many who had mastered the weapon to that degree. Neville took pride in being one of the few such masters, but who knew if that would be of any use in this situation.

*We're being chased by fire and the one guiding us away from it is the target we were supposed to kill. And on top of that, he's saying that someone other than us is aiming for his life, and that we were also supposed to die here.*

This had all been planned.

Neville understood that very well.

And he could easily guess that Baal and Oswald had secretly conspired together and were going to lay the entire blame for Leo's assassination on the soldiers of the old Holy See.

*But what I don't get...*

...Was Leo Attiel.

He had attended the meeting despite being fully aware of everything. And he must obviously have known that Neville's group has been given the task of murdering him. What was he trying to do by being so stupid as to face the danger of being cut down, on top of the risk of being burned alive thanks to Oswald?

Leo stopped at the entrance hall on the first floor. The building was still sound there, but the fire had already closed in to the point where the flames could be seen from where the group stood. Heat and thick smoke were starting to fill the area. At this rate, they were likely to suffocate before the fire had a chance to reach them.

Leo turned to Neville, who had arrived last, and jerked his chin towards the entrance.

“Break it down,” he said. Seeing Neville's surprise, he explained: “The doors are probably locked. You took a lot of trouble to bring those weapons along, so

you might as well put them to good use.”

From his tone of voice, it sounded like he was spelling things out for a fool, incapable of understanding reason. Neville had gone beyond surprise and was now so literally dumbfounded that he could no longer speak, but the other soldiers were still highly excitable.

“Does a princeling from a tiny little country think that he can order us around?” they brandished their weapons, but before Neville and Godwin had time to stop them, Leo barked with laughter.

“Are you still talking about murdering me, at this point? You're so simple-minded it's almost cute. Then go on, tell me, what reason do you guys have for killing me? And once you've killed me, what exactly will you have achieved?”

“W-What!”

“The one who set you up to all of this was Bishop Baal, right? Who used to be your enemy. Baal was going to use you to get rid of me, and there was no way he was going to let you live after that. The names of those who murdered Lord Leo would be made public one after another, and you would have been held entirely responsible for the crime.”

Neville and the others had no way of knowing that right then, Leo was taking another gamble. He still had no definite proof of their real identities. But given that Baal was using them for his own ends, it meant that it would not harm the current regime in Dytiann if their names were openly revealed. Based on those facts, he speculated that they might well be part of the Holy See, and thus enemies of the government now in power.

Whether it was Neville, Godwin or the other soldiers, none of them were able to utter a word.

They had defended the Holy See to the bitter end. When the nobles and all those eminent clergymen with their impressive titles had fled before the fires of war, only the soldiers like them had remained among the flames, risking their lives to fight.

Their heavily wounded friends had smiled at them and said: “Well then, we'll be seeing you. With God's guidance, our souls will be safe in Heaven, so let's

meet there again one day.” And with those words, they had gone charging in the lead to fight enemy units that outnumbered their own two or three times over. Their backs had stood in front of Neville and the others, who remembered each and every one of them.

At some point, the corner of Neville's eyes had grown hot. If their names were stained like this, they would never be able to face His Holiness the Pope, who had already left this world, nor their companions who had bravely gone their deaths. Better by far to perish in the fire.

No, he corrected that impulse. They couldn't die here. Even if they hadn't touched him, if their corpses were found with the dead prince, the crime would be pushed onto them.

“Guwah!” Neville swung his halberd and started to hack at the door, the axe-head crashing into the solid wood.

Godwin followed suit, using his longsword, and then other soldiers joined in after that. Before long, they had smashed the door to pieces. Before the fresh evening air could even blow in through it, Neville and his companions caught sight of a group of fully armed soldiers.

Oswell's handpicked men, no doubt. Unlike the unit which had been left to guard the road, this lot knew about the plot to assassinate Leo. And their mission was to kill every single person who attempted to escape from the mansion.

Upon seeing that the door had been hacked open, they had quickly readied their spears and shields yet, even though their faces were entirely hidden beneath their helmets, it was clear that they were shaken. It had been within their expectations that some people might manage to break out of the mansion, but they would never have imagined that Lord Leo would emerge together with the very group from the Holy See which was supposed to have already killed him.

Before the soldiers had time to get over the shock, Neville and his group launched their attack. These were men who had once borne the duty of single-handedly defending the Holy See; and as was to be expected, their skill was outstanding. Neville's halberd was as swift and decisive as the wrath of God. He

had already taken down one, then two soldiers before anyone had time to even blink.

Watching that from behind, Camus roared and picked up a spear which one of Oswell's fallen soldiers had dropped.

“I'll help you too. So I'd appreciate it if you don't mistake me for an enemy!”

With that, he stood next to Neville and added his spear to the fray. Kuon, Aqua and the other Personal Guards also grabbed weapons from the enemy and stood in ranks, guarding Leo as he made a leisurely exit from the broken door.

Friend and foes alike were being cut down. In the middle of that hard battle, Neville glanced back just once to where Leo was.

Surrounded by guards on either side, the prince was observing the fight with interest. That soldier who looked like a child was far stronger than Neville could ever have imagined. If an enemy started to get anywhere near the prince, he drew up to them as fast as the wind and struck them down with the speed of lightning.

In the middle of those frantic, hectic surroundings, only Lord Leo remained standing still, as the fighting had absolutely nothing to do with him. Appearance-wise, he was very thin, with sunken cheeks and haggard looks. Yet far from seeming frail, the atmosphere that enveloped him was somewhat detached, almost transcendental even. The fire blazed behind him, twisting and leaping like some huge dragon.

Neville's heart was shaken. He felt that he had just seen something that was far out of the ordinary.

He quickly turned back around and dealt with an enemy spear, hooking it by the claw of his halberd. He gave a sharp yank, and the spear was wrested out of his opponent's hands. Seizing that chance, the tip of Camus' weapon pierced the soldier's throat.

Godwin was also in the middle of an intense struggle as he swung his remarkably large sword. Every strike he took was so fierce that it almost seemed to raise a storm, and not a single one of Oswell's soldiers could find an

opening to attack. As they staggered back, they soon got caught up in the tempest and their helmeted heads went flying.

But Neville and the others were only able to overrun the enemy for a short space of time. Even though the soldiers had initially been bewildered by the unexpected development, they still held the overwhelming numerical advantage. Platoons which had been stationed at different exits came running one after another to join the fight, until the small group was encircled by a net of enemies that was two or three rows deep.

The soldiers who had once been part of the Cruciform Army were all unflinchingly brave, but overturning this situation was all but impossible. Several of their companions had already fallen, and the net was slowly but surely tightening around them. If their numbers decreased any further, their hastily constructed formation would crumble and they would be trampled to the ground.

*At this rate...*

A hint of unease flitted across Neville's ascetic-looking face but, next to him, Camus was still wielding his spear like a man possessed and didn't show any sign of anxiety. Neville felt a strange sensation; it was looking at themselves, back when they had fought in the name of God without fear of death.

Just then, from the other side of the encircling net of soldiers, another group came hurrying. If those had been Leo's Personal Guards, it would have led to a dramatic reversal, but unfortunately, those were more of Oswell's men.

It was over.

Yet just when Neville was grinding his teeth, an astonishing thing occurred.

“Your Highness!”

“We'll save you!”

For some reason, the new group had started to break the encirclement from the rear.

These were the guards who had been blockading the road until just a while earlier.

– Perhaps the simplest way to explain it would be to say that this was Oswald Taholin's one mistake.

It was absolutely normal that Oswald didn't tell too many people about his plan to assassinate the prince. The soldiers on guard had only received orders not to let anyone approach the mansion, to which he had added the strict injunction not to move from their posts no matter what happened, since it would be a problem for him if they moved into action upon seeing the mansion go up in flames.

But it was then that the unexpected happened. A great crowd of townspeople converged there and, on top of that, a different set of guards slipped in among them and shouted for the gates to be opened...

Correct: they were Leo's Personal Guards. While the prince had been bedridden, the Guards had collected the same kind of uniforms and equipment that Oswald's soldiers used. Among the chaos caused by the townspeople's outcry, they pretended to urge their fellow soldiers to open the gates. And so, what was the first thing that the soldiers on guard had seen when they rushed into the estate?

That goes without saying: it was the sight of Lord Leo surrounded by armed men. And just as naturally, they deduced that: “The armed group set fire to the mansion and is trying to kill the prince!” Which was how the situation developed in a strange and – as far as Oswald was concerned – remarkably unfortunate way, with soldiers who had originally been serving him now fighting against soldiers who also belonged to him.

“W-Wait!” Oswald's soldiers cried out in confusion.

“Don't bother arguing!” Those of Oswald's soldiers who had been in charge of guarding the roads were desperate to kill these bandits. They felt that in a way, the fire at the mansion was their own fault. True, Oswald and Lord Leo would probably reprimand them later, but, at the very least, they were determined that they would take down this band of villains themselves and protect the prince at all cost.

Now that things had come to this point, Oswald's soldiers had no hope of winning. They had already been having trouble with Neville's group, even

though it wasn't a large one, and now they were being attacked on both sides.

Assailants, guards, soldiers of the Holy See and Leo's Personal Guards... there was a wide range of soldiers in that fight, but the flames shone on all of them equally, and the shadows they cast overlapped with one another, then disappeared one after another.

## Part 4

When the pillars of the mansion collapsed and the second floor caved in with a resounding crash, there was someone who was planning to come galloping up just a little too late. That person was Oswald Taholin.

After leaving the meeting on the pretext that he had business to attend to, he launched himself into action with carefully planned timing.

“What! The mansion is burning?” He performed his part, pretending to hear the news from a soldier then hurriedly throwing himself on a horse.

Unlike Darren or Bernard, he had never once stood on the battlefield. And actually, he wasn't used to horses either, but it would look bad if he went by carriage or rode behind one of his subordinates. So, since there was no helping it, he rushed over on horseback. He travelled along the road while suffering a thousand torments.

The blaze was visible even from a distance. Although his heart was leaping with excitement, he made it look like he was unbearably worried about the prince's safety.

Even so, Oswald noticed something unexpected along the way: the guards who should have been blockading the road were not there. In his initial plan, he was supposed to come galloping up and find them staring in shock and horror at the fire, at which point he would have yelled at them: “What are you doing? Can't you even move unless you're told to? Follow me! We're going to save His Highness!” After which, he would have lead them to the mansion.

But the soldiers weren't there and instead, there was a gathering of townspeople.

“It's Lord Taholin,” a sharp-eyed youth pointed towards Oswald.

“Lord Oswald is here!” a man past his forties cried out with relief.

“Please, you have to hurry to the prince!” a woman begged him, clasping her hands.

Oswell had a bad feeling. Still, now that he had attracted so much attention – and since they knew that the prince had been attacked – he could no longer turn back.

*As long as the results are there, it's fine,* Oswell decided, changing his mind.

Even if the guards had been drawn towards the blaze, Leo was certainly dead inside the building. “After the mansion which was being renovated into a church burned down, the only thing we found were the remains of Lord Leo and of the monks from Dytiann. And as a matter of fact, it appears that those monks belonged to the former Holy See, and that they were enemies of the current Church” – things would still be fine as long as those facts remained.

And so, Oswell only had a few soldiers with him as he arrived at what remained of the new church, which barely even resembled a building by now. The first thing which caught his eye were the corpses of soldiers littering the front garden. They had been part of the unit which had set fire to the place.

*Oh!* – just as he was starting to really worry, his eye alighted on what looked like good news for him.

Neville, Godwin and the rest of the group from Dytiann were surrounded by the road guards.

“G-Good work,” Oswell called out, practically tumbling from his horse in his haste to get down from it. “Are they the criminals? From what I've heard, they suddenly grabbed weapons and attacked the prince during the meeting, is that right?”

There had been some unexpected developments along the way, but the end result was still the same. The prince's party was unarmed, so they couldn't have failed to be killed. The main purpose had been achieved, so afterwards, he just needed to pretend that Neville's captured group had been made to confess, and everything else would go as planned.

Oswell crumpled to his knees.

“How can this be!”

It was a magnificent play, performed by a world-class actor. As the endless mass of dark smoke was sucked into the night sky, he roared in a voice so powerful that his throat was trembling.

“If only I hadn't left the mansion... Oh, Your Highness, Your Highness, forgive me! What could be more bitter than knowing that something like this happened in my territory...”

“You don't need to blame yourself to that extent, Oswell.”

“W-What are you saying? His Highness is dead. So how could I not blame myself...”

Out of reflex, Oswell turned to look towards the voice that had spoken to him, and his eyes almost started out of his head.

From behind Neville and Godwin, Leo Attiel appeared with unhurried steps. Oswell felt like he was seeing a ghost.

“Did I die? You're awfully hasty, Oswell. As you can see, I'm as well as can be. So there's no need for you to blame yourself to that extent.”

“Ah... Oh...” Oswell could only blink in confusion, unable to say a word.

*H-How? How!?* He howled inwardly. *Those useless bastards! What peerless soldiers of the Cruciform Army? They couldn't even kill one unguarded brat!*

“Nevertheless, Oswell... It's true that security was lacking. I almost lost my life.”

“T-That... yes, of course... huh, that's...” Oswell spluttered, barely managing to say anything at all. Sweat was pouring like a waterfall from his brow, and he was desperate to mop it up. “B-But it's inexcusable to have targeted your life, Your Highness. Are these the culprits?”

He pointed towards Neville and the others, but Leo laughed the idea to scorn.

“Them, the criminals? Certainly not. They're the ones who saved me from the attackers.”

Oswell gulped. The looks that Neville, Godwin and the others were directing towards him were as sharp as the bloody blades of their weapons.

“Now then,” Leo glanced back towards the remains of the mansion that were still merrily blazing away, “let’s go somewhere where we can talk for a bit, Oswald.”

From where he crouched, still collapsed on the ground, Oswald Taholin hunched his shoulders slightly.

Leo Attiel entered Aconrey’s castle with Camus and Kuon in tow. To Oswald’s amazement, there were already soldiers from the Personal Guards stationed throughout the building. According to the castle servants, these soldiers had barged in and started searching the rooms.

“I had them search,” Leo said laconically. He explained that since he did not know who had tried to kill him, he had extended his investigation far and wide.

Oswald could not oppose him. Even though this was his own castle, Leo all but guided him to a narrow room in the watchtower within its right wing. It was a dreary place, with a rough wooden table and several chairs sandwiched between the stone walls, and it was only used by soldiers on guard duty when they took their breaks.

Leo first sat down, then gestured to Oswald to take a seat opposite him.

While Oswald sat with his face turned downwards, waiting for what Leo had to say, the second prince of Atall studied the room with considerable interest.

“I-It can’t possibly be...” Finally, unable to bear the piercing silence any longer, Oswald opened his mouth to speak. Leo turned to look at him and Oswald ran his tongue over his parched lips before continuing. “It can’t possibly be, Your Highness, that you suspect me?”

“I’m only having the castle searched to be on the safe side. If anything, it will help make sure that no suspicion falls on you in the future, Lord Taholin.”

“I-Is that so? B-But, I’ve heard that there are some bad rumours going around. When Your Highness collapsed, some were saying that I might have poisoned you...”

“My life is made to be targeted,” Leo said cheerfully as he pointed to his own

chest. “I was almost killed when I was in Allion. Darren attacked me in the resort area. And now this time as well. My life has been targeted so often that nowadays, every time I meet someone, I wonder if they aren’t trying to kill me. So Oswell, I wouldn’t be surprised even if you had tried to poison me.”

“P-Please don’t joke about it,” his sweat was still flowing freely. It was almost impossible to believe that this was the same man whose attitude had been that of an adult talking to a mere child when he had spoken with Leo at the banquet held for Hayden.

Drinks were brought in at that point. Leo picked up both of the cups brimming with wine and held one out to Oswell.

“Father Gemili of Dytiann greatly enjoyed this. I brought it over from Bernard’s lands. Apparently, it’s a good area for producing wine.”

“Er, yes, the wine there is... er, really...” Oswell answered absently while desperately trying to think of a way to talk himself out of this situation.

It was obvious that Leo suspected him. First things first, what method could he use to negotiate his way out of this position? Should he spout enough lies to fill up the entire castle, or maybe cling tearfully to the much younger Leo? Either way, whatever worked.

Then, as soon as he was let free, he would have no choice but to flee to Allion to seek asylum. Unfortunately, he would have to resign himself to not receiving the splendid welcome that he had once imagined. When he pictured the miserable sight of himself escaping by night to avoid people’s attention, Oswell wanted to cry.

He took the wine cup and poured, first one, then a second mouthful down his throat.

“Is it tasty?”

“Oh yes,” he answered while completely unable to taste anything. “Y-Your Highness, the Taholin family shares a strong relationship with the princely house. Please, I beg of you to calmly consider the truth without being deceived by absurd rumours.”

“And that's what I've told you I'm doing.”

“Yes, that may be so, but...” Oswell started to argue further, but his words came out slurred. It looked like he was unusually tense.

Oswell tried to pull himself together and align his arguments, but now it felt like the entire interior of his mouth had gone numb and he couldn't even tell if his mouth was open or not. Saliva dribbled from his lips.

“Yurr Hinass,” he spoke indistinctly, “Y-Yurr Hinass...”

“Is the wine tasty, Oswell?” Leo asked again.

Oswell felt as though he had been struck in the middle of the forehead. He tried to rise from his seat, but had no strength to do so. His chair fell backwards, and Oswell landed pathetically on his backside.

“L-Leo, Leeeoh, you... bastard...”

He tried to stand up by holding on to the wall. His legs were shaking like those of a new-born calf, and his waist was trembling, but he finally managed to stand, only for his hands to suddenly slip. His nails left faint scratch marks behind them as he collapsed into a crouch, coughing violently. The wine that he had drunk earlier splattered against the stone floor. He threw up a second time.

*That's...*

Oswell fearfully wiped his mouth. That red colour didn't only come from the wine. It was blood.

His breathing suddenly grew rough. Something as simple as just breathing in and breathing out had become so very difficult all of a sudden.

He couldn't breathe in. Or out.

He felt dizzy. Even though he was supposed to be nearby, the contours of Leo Attiel's figure had become hazy, as though the details wouldn't bind together anymore. But within Oswell Taholin's field of vision, he could still make out the strange smile on Leo's face.

*That bastard.... that bastard...*

Oswell unconsciously clawed at his own chest. He tore at his clothes as if they were suffocating him. When he had scratched enough at his chest, he collapsed, face up.

Oswell's mind would never puzzle over anything ever again.

After watching the whole scene unfold, Leo drank what remained of his own wine and stood up.

“What is this?” he asked Camus, who had been by his side the whole time.

The warrior monk from Conscon Temple bowed his head.

“Lord Oswell Taholin probably couldn't bear the thought of facing his punishment. While being interrogated by His Highness Leo, he resigned himself to the fact that he could no longer hope to escape, and so mixed the poison that he had been concealing within his clothes into his wine. He committed suicide.”

“I see,” Leo nodded expressionlessly. “Then that's how it is.”

“Aye, that's how it is,” Camus bowed. His manner was as unwavering as an iron wall. He was, after all, a man who had decided that if Leo drank poison, then he would drink it too.

Camus continued to bow as he watched Leo Attiel leave the narrow room. The wind was blowing listlessly as the prince stepped out of the watchtower. The clouds must have finally lifted since there were countless stars in the sky when he looked up.

“Somebody... Is anybody there?” He heard Camus call loudly from inside the room. It was already late at night, but many people were still up and about inside the castle. The whole place would soon be in uproar.

As though wanting to enjoy the brief moment of quiet before that happened, Leo continued to look up at the stars for a long time.

# Epilogue

Percy Leegan left Guinbar and made his way to Aconrey about ten days after receiving the news of Oswell Taholin's death.

Within Archon, the towns and villages alike had been thrown into confusion. There had only just been the affair with Darren Actica. Like most of the principality, the people of Archon had turned Darren into a target for mud-slinging:

*That high-and-mighty lord noble sure was stupid for turning his arrows against the princely House.*

*He must have been jealous of His Highness' fame after he rescued the temple.*

Fundamentally, though, it was simply someone else's problem, and they would never have dreamed that the lord governing them would ever have plotted to assassinate Leo. The search made in Aconrey's castle had apparently revealed some documents which indicated a connection between Oswell and the late Darren. The people of Archon were shocked and grieved. When their domain lord died, the younger people wondered with eager anticipation if something different from the usual might happen, while the older ones worried that their peaceful days might be shattered.

From what Percy had heard, reactions at court had also been varied. Usually, he would have sent messengers to Tiwana, or asked the people from his parents' house to gather information, but right now, he didn't have the composure for that.

He was furious at the prince, who had readily left behind someone who didn't agree with his own opinion.

*I'm obviously not needed.*

Disgruntled and sulky, Percy made a point of remaining at Guinbar with the

soldiers that had been left with him, as per the prince's orders.

*Since he went flying even though he knew it was a trap, he can just do whatever he likes.*

Since the prince had cut him off, he intended to cut the prince off too, yet no one knew better than Percy himself that he was just putting a brave front on things.

He spent his days in Guinbar and by the time he received the news that: "His Highness has collapsed," the matter had already been settled over in Archon. When he heard about Oswell's death, he himself wasn't sure how he felt about it. His emotions were made up of surprise, admiration and anger.

*He's always so impatient. At this rate, one of these days, he'll be tripped up by a pebble by the roadside.*

Percy rode hurriedly to Aconrey. The first person he met there was Kuon. The sun had already set, but Percy was impatient.

"Where is His Highness?" he asked, intending to go see him at once. Kuon, however, shook his head.

"He's resting... er, no, I mean 'His Highness is partaking of his rest'. You can see him tomorrow."

"Resting?"

Even though the sun had set, it was still early in the evening.

Percy could well imagine the uproar that Oswell's death had caused in Tiwana. Normally, Leo would have made the first move by immediately going to the capital and explaining the circumstances. Yet for now, he had apparently left that task to one of his subordinates and was resting at ease at Aconrey's castle.

"What is this? Does the prince think he can just slack off because he's taken down his political opponents for now?" Percy bore down on Kuon with rare vehemence.

Kuon seemed to find it a pain, but since he knew he wouldn't be able to divert Percy's attention, he resigned himself to telling him the full story about how

they had driven Oswell to his death.

*What?* The blood drained from Percy's face. His emotions could no longer be described as simply a mix of surprise, admiration and anger. In order to deceive Oswell and gather information, Second Prince Leo had chosen to drink poison. And now, perhaps because of the after-effects, his state of health meant that he had to spend over half his days in bed.

“He's slowly getting better. The doctor says he should be fine in a month. Oi... what's wrong?”

Seeing Percy start to sway, the boy-soldier quickly held out his hand. Roughly shaking away Kuon's hand, the young Ataltese noble felt like he wanted to laugh.

*It's not going to make any difference, even if I worry about him – his expression was somewhere between laughter and tears.*

*There's no telling where the prince's enemies are, or when they will brandish a weapon at him... I was always being so careful because of that – and then he goes and drinks poison of his own free will.*

*Just do whatever you want, Lord Leo. I don't care anymore. Don't listen to what anyone says, don't pay any attention to how much anyone worries about you, just go and do whatever you decide to do. Like hell I'd care about a reckless brat like you!*

Percy went alone to the bustling entertainment district and gulped down tasteless booze. A messenger from the castle came to fetch him almost at once however. Leo was already resting in bed, just as Kuon had said, but when he heard from him that Percy had arrived, he had apparently said he wanted to see him, and had sent a messenger. Said messenger was now glaring at Percy, his expression clearly saying that he had a hard time finding him.

Percy was aware that he was already drunk. He wondered for a moment if he should turn him down, just like he had back when Liana's father had tried to get closer to him. Still –

“He 'wants to see me'? Hah, he 'wants to see me'! Fine, I'll let him see me.”  
He left the tavern with drunken, tottering steps.

As he approached the castle, his anger swelled all over again. Even though he had told himself that there was no way he cared about someone like the prince, there was no way he could stop himself from venting his complaints.

*Do you think everything in the world is always going to go the way you want? What an idiot. You should just go and swallow as much poison and as many blades as you like.*

He muttered savagely to himself.

*Yeah, and I'll do the same. I won't care even if I'm sent away from the Guards or if an assassin comes after the prince. I'll just do whatever I like.*

He started snickering. The messenger was looking at him strangely as he brought him to the prince's appartements.

The door opened onto the antechamber, where Camus was.

“Bastard,” Percy was the first to speak. He was going to immediately seize the monk by his lapels, but Camus dodged his hands.

“What are you doing?”

“Shut up. You were here, so how did you let this happen?” Percy glowered murkily at him. *“This is a pious believer? I'd feed your piety to the dogs.”*

“Percy, you're drunk, aren't you? I'm not letting you meet His Highness in this state. Come back tomorrow once you've sobered up and you're in your right mind.”

“You're the one who isn't in his right mind, you damn Bible basher. But I'll beat your personality back into shape.”

He punched him. Caught by surprise, Camus took a blow to his chest from Percy's fist.

“Bastard,” this time, it was Camus who growled at him. “I'll help you sober up right now. The treatment's going to be a bit drastic though.”

“Go right ahead and try.”

Just as the two of them were about to break into a fight –

“Camus,” they heard Leo's voice coming from the room.

Camus immediately returned to his senses.

“I apologise for the disturbance, Your Highness. I'll throw this drunkard out right away and...”

“No, it's fine. Show Percy through.”

“But...” Camus protested, yet he couldn't oppose Leo's order. The prince then went further:

“I want to talk privately. Camus, could you leave for a bit, please?” he said.

The monk reluctantly left, but he didn't forget to give Percy some whispered advice just before doing so.

“I'll be waiting right outside the room. If I hear anything, I'll come running. And when that happens, I won't let you off.”

*Humph* – feeling like he wanted to spit at him, Percy stepped from the antechamber into Leo's room.

Leo Attiel was lying in bed. When Percy saw him, he was going to hurl everything he had to say at him, yet the words suddenly vanished before leaving his mouth. Instead, as he strode up towards the bed, Percy Leegan hit Leo. His fists could have punched holes in the stone wall, but there was only a sharp sound as he slapped Leo's cheek.

“You...” said Percy as he grabbed Leo by the shoulders and shook him. “You look completely pathetic.”

“You're right,” Leo smiled.

His eyes had sunken into their sockets, his cheeks were as hollow as they could get, and his skin had turned slightly blackish. Although they were hidden beneath the blanket, his arms and legs were definitely needle-thin. A few days after taking poison, Leo had claimed that he felt better and so had taken part in the meeting, but that had actually just been a pretense, and one that had put his health at further risk. In reality, he showed no sign of getting better and, with every passing day, the poison continued to undermine his vitality.

“There was no other choice.”

“Don't mess around. There were plenty of other ways. But you think only your

way is right, and this is the result.”

“Oswell died.”

“*You're* dying too.”

“I'll get better in no time.”

“Even though you look like you're having a hard time just talking?”

“Yeah.”

“You're an idiot.”

“Yeah.”

“Idiot.”



“Percy...” Percy's hands were still grasping Leo's shoulders, and the prince placed an emaciated hand on top of one of the knight's. It trembled. But not because Leo's hand was shaking; Percy's trembling was being transmitted to it. “Are you crying?”

“I feel like crying. So why shouldn't I cry?”

Tears fell from Percy's eyes and dropped on Leo's chest, one-by-one.

*Oh, I see.*

Words spun endlessly around and around in Percy's mind.

*So much...*

*I love the prince so much.*

So very undependable and so very lonely; a razor-sharp mind allied with the ability to always take action; horrifyingly cold-blooded and worryingly kind-hearted; it was dangerous to take your eyes off of him for too long, and you never knew what he might do if you turned your attention away from him... that was the prince.

Percy Leegan realised something. The anger he experienced when he was left behind, and the feeling close to hatred that he felt when he was riding to Aconrey – both of them stemmed from his love for the prince.

In the past, he had wielded his spear for the prince and had been willing to become a shield for him if danger approached simply because he found him 'interesting'. Now it was no longer so simple. Part of it was his feeling that: *the prince is the right person to carry Atall into the future*. He was also worried that: *if the prince isn't here, huge beasts like Allion or Dytiann will devour Atall*.

It was a mix of all those emotions that made up Percy Leegan's love for Leo. Even if, in the future, they had another clash of opinions, that feeling would definitely not change.

“I'm sorry, Percy. I knew that you were right. I know that I was too impatient. I forced the situation to twist in a direction that would make me right and...” At that point, Leo starting coughing violently.

“Don't say anything more,” Percy gently pushed him back towards the pillows.

“For now, please rest.”

“If I fall asleep like this... I'm worried that when I wake up, you won't be there.”

“That won't happen.”

“Really?”

“What is it you're afraid of?”

“Afraid... right, maybe I was afraid. Even though I believed that I had to go against you and do what I had to, I was really worried about what might happen with you, Percy. What if I'd used up all of your goodwill towards me, and you were already gone from Guinbar, or even from Atall? What if I'd lost the best of companions... of friends... of brothers.”

“There's nothing to worry about. Percy Leegan isn't going anywhere,” Percy smiled like a father laying a fretful baby to sleep. “I learned some charms a long time ago. I'll teach you one of them. If ever you don't know where I am and you don't know how to find me, raise your forefinger and chant the names of the three fairies Pique, Lotta and Torin. If you do that, the fairies will come to dwell in Your Highness' finger. After that, take a single strand of your own hair and wind it around your finger and tell them: 'Look for Percy Leegan. You can't leave until you've found him'. If you do that, the fairies will use their magic and I will immediately appear in front of Your Highness.”

“I'll remember it,” Leo smiled. “Pique, Lotta, Torin, right? Pique, Lotta, Torin...”

His voice faded as he repeated the fairies' names, and before long, he had fallen asleep. Percy pulled the blanket over the prince, then turned around and left.

...Later, historians would say that 'this' was the turning point for Leo and Percy. At that moment, instead of being moved by emotion towards Leo, Percy should have admonished the prince. If necessary, he should have been ready to turn his spear against Leo to make him heed his criticism. Among those who were close to the prince, Percy was the one who understood the most about Leo's thoughts, his power to take action, and the danger he represented, yet

Percy let himself be swayed by emotion, and followed the wrong course of action... That is what they say.

But those are just the voices of historians with the benefit of hindsight. How could they ever reach the people who were living back in those times?

Leo and Percy were both young.

And the consequences that were created by the violent torrent of youth simply piled up one on top of the other.

Allow me to plainly lay out some of the things that happened later.

First of all, Leo Attiel sent a letter of thanks to Dytiann.

When Oswell had attempted to assassinate Leo, he had invited monks from Dytiann probably for no other reason than to trick Leo, yet these monks had defended the prince's life with unrivalled energy. Leo loudly and publicly proclaimed that fact, and deliberately spread it to Dytiann.

“It is shameful that Oswell planned to use the Cross Faith for the assassination, but God's guidance is truly awe-inspiring. Oswell intended to make use of them, but instead, he brought together those brave and innocent men as well as myself. We felt an immediate understanding for each other, saw through Oswell's plans, and smashed them together. I would very much like these braves to help with the missionary work here in the principality. Would it be possible to send their families over so that they can accomplish this holy mission without worry?”

In Dytiann, Leo's words made him famous even among the common people.

Who could tell how much loathing and disgust Baal must have felt?

It goes without saying that there was an implicit threat behind Leo's words: *I know. I know very well who secretly sharpened the blade for Oswell.*

Two months after Oswell's death, Neville, Godwin and the others were able to meet their families again. Incidentally, those two joined the Personal Guards at around the same time.

Afterwards, Leo established religious bases in Archon's territory centred

around Father Gemili, who also stayed in Atall, just like Neville and the others.

Florrie had also heard the rumour that Oswell had poisoned Leo and, perhaps because she was constantly by his side and nursing him, Leo's health recovered to a certain extent around then. The talk of his marriage with Florrie Anglatt finally crystallised into something concrete.

Seen from the outside, everything was going well for Leo, who had magnificently gotten rid of his political opponents and who was about to get married to a young lady from the Kingdom of Allion. However – and perhaps here again 'finally' is the correct word to use – the widening rift between him and Sovereign-Prince Magrid could no longer be ignored.

The shock of Darren and Oswell's successive deaths was huge. Of course, it was widely known that the two of them deserved it because of the crimes they had committed, but those circumstances had no influence on Magrid's fears.

*If I displease him, will that damn son of mine one day turn his blade against me?*

Even if Darren and Oswell had made mistakes, and even if Leo had flawlessly rendered justice, the crucial point was that delivering his 'justice' without consulting anyone made Leo dangerous.

And to make things worse –

“Branton has gotten cowardly recently.”

That evening, when Magrid visited Princess-Consort Kirsten in her bedchamber, he chose Leo's older brother as a topic of conversation.

“What do you mean?”

“He's already turned twenty. I figured it was about time to find him a good partner and give him a castle. On the same occasion, I was going to officially announce him as the next sovereign-prince, and grant him the title of heir to the throne.”

“Oh,” Kirsten cautiously interjected.

“And would you believe it, he refused. 'That responsibility is still too heavy for me', he said.”

“Oh my. Branton said that? Yet before Leo came back, he was so self-confident that you were even worried about it, Your Majesty.”

“Umm, Leo,” lying in bed, Magrid nodded somewhat bitterly, apparently unaware of the way his wife had almost shoehorned Leo's name into the conversation.

“He probably got influenced by Leo. Not surprising: everything that brat does has to be flashy. I've heard that the people are gossiping about it. Things like how Leo is the one they hope to see as the next sovereign-prince, and how compared to him, his older brother, Lord Branton, is only remarkable for being unreliable...”

“Leo... that child is dangerous.” Kirsten snuggled up to her husband as though she was seeking warmth. Her white skin still looked so youthful that it was almost impossible to believe that she was the mother of three children.

“If I'm being honest, Leo is dangerous and frightens me. But... it's a fact that Branton seems a little unreliable. Your Majesty... in that case, wouldn't Roy be the best choice for the next sovereign-prince? He is still very young, but he is growing up fine and healthy, and he will certainly be a successor who would follow in your footsteps, Your Majesty. Or rather, I, Kirsten, promise that even if it costs me my life, I will raise him to be worthy of you...”

As Kirsten spoke, her eyes were misty with tears, so perhaps she was already picturing her adored youngest son sitting on the throne.

# Narrator, to the Sky (in Place of Volume 4's 'Afterword')

Nowadays, there were not many people who wanted to hear stories about Leo Attiel. That was easy enough to see. Even though *he* had been invited to this imperial court as a guest, and even though at first there had been a great crowd of people, there was currently only a tiny audience left in the great hall.

Exchanges of all sorts were now thriving between this country and the neighbouring kingdom of Garbera, and apparently, the many chivalric romances that flourished there had also gained popularity at the imperial court. The nobles all wanted to invite minstrels from Garbera to every banquet that they hosted. Night after night, the spellbound guests listened to tales of virtuous knights destroying evil for the sake of beautiful ladies.

For those who were entranced with dazzling legends of chivalry, Leo Attiel's story was far too plain and lacking in glamour, since there was no heart-thumping element of good being rewarded and evil punished, and neither were there enough passionate love scenes.

– Yet amidst that:

“And what happened then? What did the sovereign-prince do? And how did Lord Leo act? No, wait... that would have been around about when civil war broke out in Dytiann again. So, anyway...”

The only one to show enthusiasm for Leo's story was the young emperor himself, and that fact made *him* feel like *he* had been saved. At the very least, *he* probably wouldn't be kicked out of the palace after being told: 'We've no use for birds who only sing boring songs.'

“Your Majesty, the hour is already late.” Sitting beside the emperor, the equally youthful empress – or better said, the almost girlishly young empress –

seemed to be fighting back yawns as she spoke. "Let's continue tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Tomorrow we leave early for Apta. You know that."

"Then it should be fine to invite our guest onboard the air carrier, right?" The empress' reply was short and decisive.

'Is that alright?' she asked with her eyes, and *he* bent at the knee in response.

"I am a wanderer with no urgent business. I am at His Majesty's disposal."

"Right, then that's decided. Hurry and get ready. I'll hear the rest starting early tomorrow."

Since it was settled, the emperor immediately got up and left. Half exasperated, half amused, the empress laughed.

"His Majesty really seems to have fallen in love with Leo Attiel. Dear guest, please take care: your throat will definitely be overused tomorrow. So when you lose your excellent voice, please be sure to put all the blame on His Majesty!"