

0.5 ギャット

自衛隊
彼の地にて、
斯く戦えり

3. 動乱編

Illustration: 黒獅子
柳内たくみ
Yanai Takumi

下



アルファポリス文庫



ヤオは騎兵の本隊めがけて
LAMを撃ち放ち、
人馬もろとも
派手に吹き飛ばした。

テユカはロウリイを
側面から襲おうとする敵
弓弦を鳴らして矢を射か

ロウリイが高機動車の
荷台を蹴って飛び出す



ゲート

自衛隊 彼の地にて、斯く戦えり

3. 動乱編〈下〉

柳内たくみ Takumi Yanai



アルファポリス文庫

主な登場人物 Main Characters



伊丹耀司
いたみようじ

33歳。
陸上自衛隊二等陸尉。
オタク趣味の持ち主。



レイ・ラ・
レレーナ

16歳。
ヒト種の賢者、魔導師。
頭脳明晰で無表情な少女。



テウカ・ルナ・
マルソー

165歳。
エルフ上位種族の娘。
金髪碧眼でスタイル抜群。



ヤオ・ロウ・
デュツシ

315歳。銀髪のダークエルフ。
妖艶な肢体の美女だが、
とにかく幸が薄い。



ロウリイ・
マーキュリー

961歳。
神エムロイに仕える巫神。
フリフリの黒ゴス神官服を纏う。



シャンデイ・
ガフ・マレーア

17歳。
ピニャの騎士団に所属。
講和会議の通訳も務める。



ピニャ・
ラーダ

19歳。
モルト皇帝の娘。
騎士団を従える女傑。



すがわらこうじ
菅原浩治

外務省のエリート官僚。
帝国との和平交渉を
担当する。



くりはらしほの
栗林志乃

24歳。
格闘徽章を有する自衛官。
小柄だが巨乳。



シェリー

12歳。帝国貴族
デュエリ家の一人娘。
活発な性格で頭の回転も早い。



ポーゼス・コ
パレスティ

19歳。
帝国貴族のお嬢様。
ピニャの騎士団に所属。



テューレ

ゾルザルの愛玩奴隷。
帝国に滅ぼされた
ヴォーリアバニーの女王。



アルペジオ・
エレナ

24歳。レイの姉。
通称アルフェ。鉱物魔法を
専門に研究している。



ゾルガル・エル
カエサル

帝国の皇太子。ピニャの兄。
残虐な性格で臣下からも
恐れられている。



モルト・ソル
アウグスタス

異世界の帝国に
君臨する皇帝。

Chapter 7

Nagata-chou, Tokyo.

Let's go back in time to about half a month ago, when Itami and his group were hanging around Rondel. Kano Taro, who has been appointed as Minister for Foreign Affairs among Morita's cabinet, is having lunch with Noji and the other secretaries in the Minister's office. The secretaries, all of whom aspired to become politicians, listened intently to Kano as they ate.

They weren't only appreciatively accepting what Kano had to say though, as they would sometimes refute him, and sometimes, they would express their own ideas and opinions. Among the people working under Kano, there was an atmosphere where they could discuss anything. Just like this, they summarize each other's ideas and identify the advantages and disadvantages of their arguments.

[Why is it that Japan's economy is worsening while the numbers show that business is booming..... In short, it's because there's a lack of medium-class jobs.]

[Medium-class jobs?]

[That's right. There are a lot of those fellows spinning about business jargon, but in short, I think that was what all of them meant. High-paying jobs require a high level of skill, good judgment and a lot of knowledge..... such a way of thinking still somehow exists in Japan. However, I hate to say this, but there are some jobs that can be done even without being Japanese. These jobs are being taken to foreign countries where the labor cost is cheaper in order to cut costs. This means that the only jobs that remained are service jobs with relatively low wages. Moreover, these jobs are being filled by exchange students and foreigners. That leaves the people of our country with lacking jobs to take.]

[Is that why the disparity has widened?]

[Once again, it isn't that the disparity has widened. That disparity has always existed. It's just that the so-called middle-class, who used to work middle-class jobs and earn middle-class incomes, disappeared. That's why that disparity became conspicuous.]

[Then, what should we do if we want to have an economic recovery?]

[In my opinion, we shouldn't be too friendly with foreign countries. I'm talking about China and South Korea. It's important to keep a sense of tension or distance from these countries, to the extent that companies are a little reluctant to set up factories or branch offices, which gives people the medium-class

jobs, in foreign countries. This will bring the medium-class jobs back to Japan. I believe that Houjou-san's visit to Yasukuni Shrine when he was the prime minister had such a purpose. However, those corporate bureaucrats who profit from foreign commerce only have their eyes on short-term profits, saying things like "long live friendship", not even realizing that they are making a choice that will hurt their country and its people.....]

[I see.]

[If I had to use a simple analogy to describe the way we run our nation today, it would be nomadic. Cows and sheeps are our country's corporations, while we are their herders. We need to lure the cows and sheeps into the grasslands of Japan, and enrich our people with the milk, wool and meat they produce. However, the cows and sheeps want to go to other grasslands where they can eat more delicious grass. The best way to keep the herd from running away is to enclose them in.....]

The globalization of the economy would mean having this enclosure removed.

[If we were to do that..... the cows and sheeps would complain, wouldn't they?]

[That's why, we need to create a situation where cows and sheep are discouraged from going to the neighboring grasslands in a way where we don't have to enclose them in. However, please keep in mind that there would be some idiots who, without thinking ahead, want to turn all the sheep and cows into meat (raise the corporate tax rate) so that the people can eat their fill. If such a thing is done while we're currently under a recession, Japan would definitely decline tremendously.]

[If that happens, all the cows and sheeps will flee.]

[Right? Well, the truth is that corporations aren't as cute as cows and sheep. In the past, the state was compared to a leviathan, the leviathans now are those corporations. Surrounded by such beings, we need to be monster tamers.]

That being the case though, how were they going to control these monsters? Not wanting to miss his words, the secretaries leaned forward. But just as Kano was about to speak though , the door to the office was slammed open.

[Minister. Excuse me for interrupting your meal.]

Without waiting for a reply, one of the counselors pushed open the door and rushed in with a stack of papers in hand.

[What's the matter, making such a ruckus at mealtime?]

[Urgent report from the Special Region. A simultaneous crackdown on the peace camp has begun in the Imperial Capital.]

Putting his chopsticks aside, Kano skimmed through the stack of reports before muttering a few words.

[The heck is this?]

A deep crease appeared between his brows.

[They seriously went and did this. Op..... Oprichniya?]

[Oprichnina, Minister. It's the abbreviation for the local term "Committee for Protecting and Restoring the Emperor's Sovereignty and Authority".]

[So, Shirayuri and the others who are staying there are safe, right?]

[Yes. It seems that the Empire has no intention of breaking the agreement with our country. The Jade Palace, where they are staying, has been surrounded by Princess Piña's Knights to ensure their safety, so they should be fine for now.]

[For now..... huh. That means you don't know how long that situation will persist, right?]

[Yes. But the most urgent problem is that the pro-peace senators and nobles are being arrested one after another.]

[Is it that bad over there?]

[Yes. The problem with that special Oprichnina law is that the "Oprichnina" subjectively determines what constitutes as a violation of imperial rights.]

[That means, it wouldn't matter for them if they're acting on a pretense huh?]

[Yes. Under the interpretation that “recovery from a situation in which the sovereignty and authority of the Emperor is threatened takes precedence over all else”, that special law permits coercive searches and the arrest and detention of suspects even without concrete evidence. Every human being will have some frustrations with the status quo. If it’s beaten hard enough, even a freshly woven cloth will gather dust. However, this law determines that even such animosity defiles the authority of the Empire.]

[And there would be no neutral people in the eyes of that “Oprichnina” huh. As I thought.....]

Even though Kano had said as such, he thought that it wouldn’t turn out too bad.

[Based on the comprehensive information from the site, it seems that they are all made up of people actively advocating for war. Moreover, they are all radical young people, 400 of them. Their numbers are still rapidly increasing. With such a situation, we can’t expect any impartiality or neutrality at all. In fact, what this “Oprichnina” is doing is almost the same as what the “People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD)” did, brandishing their power in the former Soviet Union.]

The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs is the parent organization of the KGB (the Secret Police). To give an idea of what kind of people they were, as depicted in films such as “Stalingrad”, instead of helping retreating allied generals, they would shoot them from behind from one side to the other and force to “fight if they don’t want to die”. In short, if you act suspicious, you’ll be shot to death. Even if you weren’t acting suspiciously, they were fellows who would just shoot someone to death on a whim. For example, Sulla of the Ancient Rome created the Cornelli to slaughter the popular factions, and Hitler created the Waffen-SS. There’s also Mao Zedong who organized the Red Guards and carried out a great oppression under the name Cultural Revolution.

[They’re completely ruling through fear. Would that Zorzal fellow really got that far?]

[Yes. If you say one word of criticism about them, you will be caught. The citizens of the capital are so afraid of them that they stay at home and shut their doors.]

As if to throw in front of him, a few photographs of the scenery around the Imperial Capital were placed in front of Kano. It was as if it were a dead city, completely devoid of people.

[This is terrible.]

[Yes.]

As the Imperial Capital had been under near martial law since Zorzal seized power, it can't be said that this happened suddenly. However, there were few responses back then. And now, this has happened. Hearing about this report, Kano worries how the people in the capital are living now.

[Anyway, what should we do about the pro-peace faction? The only safe places for them now are Arnus or the Jade Palace.]

[Hmmm, what are you trying to say?]

[As a matter of fact, I've been approached by some of the pro-peace members to see if we could shelter them.....]

[We can't do that, oi!]

Slamming his desk, Kano stood up.

[Now, try to imagine the situation where we support the pro-peace faction. The mainline warriors are going to think even more that what they're doing is right. They'd be like "See that, I knew they're in league with Japan. Root out the traitors!"]

[But Minister, if we continue to overlook this, we will be criticized when the media finds out about it. The press are about to start entering Arnus, and I suggest that you be considerate of that.....]

[Leave those who criticize for the sake of criticizing alone. Those they arrested haven't been executed yet, have they?]

[Nevertheless, it would only be a matter of time.]

Kano's lips twitched in response. Thereupon, just like a superior giving guidance to a subordinate who wasn't good at making decisions, he spoke.

[Half-hearted help will only make the situation worse for those who are being held captive. If you are going to help, make sure you help everyone at once..... By helping some of them, think about how the people you left behind will be treated. Such a situation would prompt them to tear them to pieces, right?]

[Ahh..... You're right.]

[Listen, make sure you talk to the guys on site about that too. I'm not saying we aren't going to help them. I'm telling them to keep an eye for the opportunity. Also, get in touch with the Minister of Defense, Natsume-san, as soon as possible. We need to get the JSDF to discuss a rescue plan.....]

[Why don't we just go ahead and occupy the Imperial Capital?]

[That's no good. Japan currently can't afford to go that far. The stability of the Special Region must be maintained by the Empire. We would end up just like the US, which has exhausted its national strength by occupying Iraq and Afghanistan, if we were to do that. We can't risk Japan itself by taking on too heavy a burden just for a cheap sense of justice. Am I clear?]

[.....I understand.]

As he watched the Counselor's back as he walked out of the Minister's office, Kano's scowl deepened and he clicked his tongue.

[D*mn, what a mess.]

Having completely lost his appetite, Kano left most of his lunch uneaten. However, the situation in the Imperial Capital was far worse than what was reported to Kano. For although reports had been made to Kano that many people were being held captive, the description of what had happened to those who had escaped and were being pursued had been completely omitted. The "Oprichnina", which was described by Foreign Ministry officials as the Empire's version of NKVD, had shown leniency by imprisoning, rather than executing on the spot, those who had obediently let themselves be captured. But once they resisted or fled, they did not hesitate to reveal their true nature.

Marquis Casel, known as the leading figure in the pro-peace movement, had been hiding from the pro-war faction by hiding out in a distant relative's mansion since just before the proclamation of the special Oprichnina law. He did have the option of escaping the Imperial Capital and returning to his fief on the frontier. In fact, he had his family and clan members flee the Imperial Capital along with their servants and other staff. However, in the "Special Region", where information transmission is slow, being away from the Imperial Capital means that one can't grasp the situation. If something were to happen, he wouldn't be able to respond quickly. Having considered this as dereliction of his duties as a politician, Casel missed the time to escape.

Just as he had hoped, as long as he remained in the Imperial Capital, information continued to come in. However, all he received were ominous reports that his fellow senators and nobles had been captured or were being pursued. In addition, there were even messages that sounded like screams, telling of their plight and asking to be sheltered. However, there was nothing that Casel could do. He has the military might and wealth of a frontier lord, but they are located far from the capital and are of no use at a time like now.

He could bring a private army to the Imperial Capital, but that would take time and would be meaningless without the army being of a certain scale. In the first place, calling soldiers to the Imperial Capital without the Emperor's order or permission would mean starting a rebellion. Because of that, he spent his days worrying about the future of the Empire, feeling helpless and unable to do anything.

[Casel-sama. Would you like some more wheat porridge?]

As if to cheer him up, the girl smiled at him. Casel wonders if perhaps, the frustration was showing on his face. Not wanting to grow too old to appreciate her thoughtfulness, Casel forced his drawn cheeks to a smile and expressed his gratitude like a good-natured old man.

[I'm fine, Sherry. In fact, you should eat some more. You're still growing.]

Thereupon, the young lady of the household who was serving her bashfully smiled.

[Please don't worry, I'm eating plenty. But if I eat too much, my stomach will become flabby and Sugawara-sama might dislike me.]

Having the body of a child, it's already a handicap when it came to seducing Sugawara, or so the young lady blurted out. She even said that if it's possible, she would have liked to have a little more plumpness around her chest. How long has it been since the doors in the Imperial Capital closed their doors? The Tyueli family's reserves must be running low already. However, the cheerfulness of the Tyueli family, as if they didn't consider this life of poverty a hardship, made even Casel feel saved.

[Oya oya, you're already at the age where you worry more about sexual appeal than food? You're very precocious, aren't you?]

[Sexual appeal, please don't say such things, Marquis-sama. Showing contempt to the pure love of a maid, you have a way with words, aren't you?]

[Oh, I should apologize then.]

[No, that won't work. As punishment, you'll properly eat all of this wheat porridge.]

With pursed lips, Sherry filled the Marquis' plate with a heaping portion of gruel. When the Marquis saw the heaping pile, he looked surprised and exaggeratedly screamed "I can't eat this much. Help me!", to which everyone laughed.

[You've raised a very good child, haven't you?]

Patting Sherry's head, Casel praised the young head of the Tyueli family and his wife.

[Unfortunately, she's also a bit cheeky.]

[No, no, cheekiness is a quality that should be praised. That means she had the insight that didn't match her youth. And yet, she remains modest. I believe that her wisdom will support my family in the future.]

[However, for this to have happened.]

The head of the Tyueli family's shoulders slumped, but Casel cheered him up.

[No night is ever too dark. Even storms will eventually pass. Until then, the key is to endure and survive. We just need to eat and save our strength.]

With those words, Casel rolled up his sleeves and gently thrust his spoon into the pile of porridge on the plate in front of him.

Suddenly, however, there was a violent banging on the door and shouts, and there were even those that sounded like a scream from the front door.

[This is bad! Master, the "sweepers" broke in!]

As soon as they heard the servant's warning, the married couple sat up.

[Marquis. There's a passage in the cellar leading to the river outside. Please use it to run away!]

[Umu, alright. You lot too, get ready quickly!]

[Yes!]

In a panic, the two ordered their servants to pack up their personal belongings. If they were going to escape for survival, they couldn't just leave on their body. At the very least, they needed to have money and clothing. Especially if they were fleeing with nowhere to go. At the entrance, the sound of something heavy and solid banging against the door could be heard already, as if they're trying to break it down.

[That's not good! They brought out the battering rams. The door won't last that long!]

Just as the Marquis said this, there was the sound of wood being crushed and doors being breached. Immediately after, the sound of countless footsteps entered the mansion. Even the screams and cries of desperation could be heard, and most of the people in the room could guess what those who had broken in were doing.

[Marquis, please run! Sherry, it's an underground aqueduct. Lead the Marquis away from here. Understand?]

[Yes. Mother, Father, please hurry.]

[I know. Your mother and I will be right behind you, so you go ahead!]

Nodding at her father's words, Sherry walked into the cellar with Casel in hand. Having seen them off, Sherry's father turned and exchanged glances with his wife, before they nodded their heads. Quickly moving a cupboard in front of the entrance to the cellar, they blocked it off and began piling up tables, chairs and other furniture in front of it.

[As long as Sherry is alive, the Tyueli family will live on.]

[Don't worry. She's got the support of her husband.]

[Yes, she has a good eye for men. He may look cold at first glance, but inside, he is a man of strong feelings. There must be. I'm sure there is. She'll definitely be safe.]

In the end, the wife took out a couple of bottles of amber-colored liquor that she kept in a cupboard, pulled off the lid and said "That girl's cleverness was because her father taught her well". Responding with "What do you mean, haven't she got her capabilities from you?", the head of the family pulls over a lit candlestick close.

[I mean, you chose me, right? That's proof that you had a good eye for me. Don't you agree?]

Realizing that they were just praising themselves, the two of them chuckled to each other. But then, without any tact, a member of the Oprichnina and the men commanded by him appeared. The men were dressed in long black robes that would have made them look like temple priests, and they wore helmets

on their heads that resembled Kobolds. Held in their hands were custom-made brooms made from the fur of a beast. It was a symbol of their will to bite traitors like Kobolds and sweep them out of the land. Because of this appearance, they were given the epithet “sweepers” by the people. The hallway was so narrow that only the couple could only see three or four people among the intruders, but there appeared to be an even larger group waiting behind them. Behind them, they saw the fallen figure of a servant who had been working to organize their everyday life. Having faced the death of a person they knew, the two stood side by side in a relaxed, unforceful manner.

[My, oh my, it seems we have guests. I wonder what's the purpose of your sudden visit?]

[The head of the Tyueli family and the madam, right?]

Although he thinks it's very rude to ask someone in response to a question, the head of the Tyueli family answered in a calm manner.

[Indeed. And who are you?]

[We are the Oprichniina. You are suspected of infringing upon imperial authority. Obediently allow yourselves to be bound and follow us.]

[If it's “treason”..... I know what that means, but “infringing upon imperial authority”, those were terms I'm unfamiliar with. Could you tell me what exactly constitutes as infringing upon imperial authority for future reference?]

[No, it's not that those words were difficult to understand. In short, every word and action that is unfavorable to his Majesty constitutes as infringement of his imperial authority.]

[Unfavorable to his Majesty..... I may have spoken badly or insulted, but that's about it. I'm sure we've never done any acts that were considered as such.]

[That would be an act of defiling the authority of the Empire. Such a thing, by its very nature, is unacceptable.]

[Wait, wait, stop for a moment, okay? Does that mean we can't complain or express our bad emotions, like “I don't like this country” or “I hate this or that”? There's no such thing as a pure and innocent person. I have never seen a person who has remained pure of heart. Everyone has thought or even said things like “I hate this person” or “that race is unpleasant to be around”, don't they? I know such a part of a person isn't commendable, but isn't that within the scope of freedom of the inner mind and freedom of expression? And, generally speaking, who gets to judge that, and by what criteria?]

[We will make our own subjective judgment based on the allegation that the authority of the Empire has been tarnished. If you are cleared of suspicion, you will not be punished. The only thing we ask is that you tell us where Marquis Casel, who has already been found guilty of personal diplomacy, is located, even if we have to make you speak by force.]

[Incidentally, may I ask whose allegation brought you here?]

[I originally wouldn't be able to answer your question because we must keep the existence of the petitioner confidential, but within these circumstances, I suppose I don't mind. Actually, it's my allegation.]

[As I thought. You are the ones who interrogate and judge too, right?]

[Yes. That's exactly right.]

[In that case, I'd hate to be obediently caught by you here.]

The head of the family shrugged.

[That's right. See yourself off and never come back again. I hate ugly and brazen men like you.]

The wife too, looked as if she was turning down the advances of a persistent man.

[Oh my, even madam is saying such things.....Speaking of which, I don't seem to see the young lady of the house. We suspect she may be guilty of the same charges.]

When asked where their daughter had run off too, they both answered in unison that they didn't know.

[She's a girl who's somewhat used to debauchery after all, she had probably fallen for some man and is likely indulging herself in some sort of sex play.]

[Husband. Isn't that a bit much? She's only 12 years old.]

[Hmph! If you ask me, whether they're one of those who politely greets or those acting like a sneaky thief, it's all the same when your daughter becomes someone else's.]

[Oh my, are you jealous? How very mature of you.]

The couple suddenly started arguing, and the members of the Oprichnina were taken aback.

[Ahh, hello? Hello!? Could you and your wife leave your quarrel for later?]

"

"

[Ara, I'm sorry. We were having fun with our conversation that, look, our guests were feeling left out.]

[It seems like conversation with you is futile. We will now only use force.]

With his words, the men slowly began to make their way towards the couple.

[Ahh, that's right. I forgot to provide our guests some drinks.]

[What, you don't have to mind us. We'll immediately finish our jobs here..... Oi, you lot.]

[Yes.]

Thereupon, men with ropes stepped forward to seize the couple.

[Now that won't do. It would be a disgrace to the Tyueli family for generations to come if we failed to serve even one drink to our guests.]

As Sherry's mother said this, she splashed the alcohol from the bottle she was holding onto the men. This bottle was among the three bottles gifted to them by Sugawara, sake with 50% alcohol content. The men who had been exposed to the alcohol didn't hide their agitation at the cool sensation of the alcohol that was rapidly taking away their body heat. Meanwhile, those who were drenched on the head and got alcohol on their eyes held onto their faces, groaning in pain.

[Uwaaahhh, w- what is this!!!?]

[Madam. D- Doing this won't buy you any more time!]

Giving the enraged men a sidelong glance, the head of the family and his wife gulped down what little sake they had left, as if making a toast.

[This alcohol sure is strong. I've always dreamed of sharing a drink with the man who would be Sherry's husband..... but it's a shame that we had to spend it on something like this.]

[I wish I could have held my grandchildren in my arms.]

[It's a shame I can't see her on her wedding day. Oh no, have I always been such a greedy man? All these regrets just keep coming up and my resolve is getting shaken.]

[I just hope you're satisfied with the fact that you have married me.]

[I suppose. Most of my wishes were certainly fulfilled with that. As for the rest of my wishes.....]

Nodding his head, the head of the Tyuli family stepped forward with a lit candlestick. Sensing what he was about to do, the expression on the men's faces immediately changed.

[W- Wait. Wait wait wait, we can talk this out!]

[Hmph. There's nothing I want to talk out with you lot.]

Saying thus, the head of the family set the alcohol around them on fire. Within a blink of an eye, bluish-white flames spread everywhere, and with their screams, the members of the Oprichnina were instantly set on fire. The bluish-white flames burned mercilessly into the men's black clothes, changing its color to red.

[Uwaaaahhhh!]

[Hyyiiiihhh! It's hot! It hurts! Help me! I'm on fire!]

Amidst the screams of the fleeing men and the amused laughter of the couple, the mansion of the Tyueli family was quickly engulfed in red flames and began to billow black smoke.

The underground aqueduct, as the head of the Tyueli family said, led to the river's edge, from which one could get above ground. As expected, the garrison did not seem to think that the Tyueli family's basement was connected to such a place, and there were no guards or pursuers to be seen as far as they could see around them.

[Geez, Mother and Father really are taking their time. I wonder if they got so greedy with their luggages that they became stuck along the way?]

Sherry was out on the river's edge, waiting for her parents to appear. She was anxious, looking around and peering into the underground aqueduct over and over again. Beside her, Marquis Casel was pondering how to interpret the warning from the head of the Tyueli family that he had been confronted with at the time of their separation.

If it really was as he thought..... No, perhaps, it might just be his imagination. However, if he just kept on hesitating, he would be wasting the precious time that the couple had made for them.

But even if that's so, even if that were the case.....

In the end, he couldn't be ruthless enough to make an immediate decision. Unable to give up hope that the couple would escape with them, Casel decided to hide in the undergrowth on the riverbank. However, just as long as the time they hid there, the fear that the sweepers might arrive before the two of them did surfaced. The mere thought of it made him so nervous that even the slightest rustle of his clothes or the sound of the wind rustling the leaves and grass made him unable to even breathe.

In the midst of all this, Sherry finally couldn't take it any longer and sat up.

[Marquis. I'm going to go back and fetch my parents and the others.]

Saying this, she tried to go back to the underground aqueduct. However, Casel hurriedly reached out and caught the girl's arm.

[You must not return!]

[P- Please let me go. Mother and Father must have run into trouble.]

Casel thought. Perhaps, this girl is aware of her parents' true intentions. That must be why this intelligent daughter of theirs is so anxious. But if that really was the case, he had to be more determined. As the person who had been entrusted with their daughter, he couldn't let her return to the jaws of death.

[You can't go back!]

[Stop! Marquis, please take your hands off me. Please let go of me!]

[No. We need to get out of here right now.]

Finally making up his mind to leave..... which is also a decision to abandon the couple, Casel carried Sherry's small body up. However, even with a larger build than her, Casel still found it difficult to continue to carry her when she was resisting so desperately, and he almost dropped her several times along the way.]

[Father! Mother!]

[Be quiet!]

Casel tried to make her stay silent, but he couldn't think of the right words to say. At a time like this, all he could come up with was a curt "Be quiet". Even though he was old enough to know better, he was getting tired of himself for not being able to come up with sensible words.

At that moment, black smoke began to rise from the direction of the mansion. Sherry, who witnessed it, let out a shrill scream.

[NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! FATHER! MOTHER!]

[My goodness.....]

Witnessing it himself, Casel also involuntarily stood still.

[Marquis, please put me down! Father and Mother are still.....!]

[No. Your parents sacrificed themselves to save you! You're going to let their feelings go to waste!]

[That's a lie! Father said he'd be coming with us!]

In the end, Casel could no longer carry Sherry, who was violently flailing about. He had to bring her down once to keep the young lady from being accidentally thrown to the ground.



However, the young lady tried to run out as soon as she got her feet on the ground, to which Casel desperately tried to hold her back.

[I said you can't. It's not safe to go back!]

[No. I don't want to, please let me go. Father! Mother!]

Casel finally raised his hand, and slapped Sherry's cheek as hard as he could. He had no choice but to slap her.

[Listen to what I'm saying!]

The pain and shock of Casel's slap caused Sherry to fall to the ground, absentmindedly holding onto her cheek.

[Come, get up.]

Forcing the young lady to stand up, Casel pulled her hand away. Pulled by the old man, Sherry wobbled along, like a puppet that needed the directions of others.

[Uuuuu, uuuuuuu.....]

[Stop crying! It's depressing!]

[Uuuuu, hic.....]

Him, who couldn't even encourage a single girl at a time like this, is supposed to be a politician who is supposed to assist the Emperor and lead the people. How could he save the country if he couldn't even save just one person? Scolding himself within his mind, Casel despaired.

* * * * *

The fire at the Tyueli house was extinguished spontaneously that evening. Fortunately, the stone buildings haven't caught their neighboring houses on fire. However, the interior of the house was in a terrible state. Stepping into the building, where the air was still hot, the scene inside felt as if one had walked into a hearth. The interior plasters, furniture, stairs, ceiling paneling, curtains, and other furnishings must have been burned up in the fire, and the interior walls were black with smoke and soot. The floor was littered with charred wood and debris from the fire, and there were objects lying in the crevices that could have been either furniture..... or perhaps, human remains.

It was a stark reminder of how terrifying fire is.

Among such piles of rubbles, the members of the Oprichnina dug up clues to find survivors, who are unlikely to still have remained in that mansion engulfed in flames, and possible fugitives. Whenever they

found an object that they were certain was the corpse of a former comrade and a former resident of the mansion, they would carry it out. But no matter how they looked through them, there were no clues left that would allow them to imagine what they looked like before they died. Therefore, they had no choice but to mourn them all together.

At the end of such work, the men discovered the entrance to the underground aqueduct. At that point, however, half a day had already passed since they had entered the mansion. If anyone had managed to escape, it was highly doubtful that they would be able to catch them. It was at this very moment when it was confirmed that the underground aqueduct was connected to a nearby river that the Vice-Praetor, Luflus, accompanied by the Crown Prince's representative, arrived at the site to urge his subordinates with their work.

[Casel and the people that escaped with him must have escaped from here. We shall pursue them immediately.]

The Committee Head of the Oprichnina told Luflus that they were going to pursue.

[It will be too late now. Do you really think that Casel would just wait for us?]

[Ah, no, but just in case.....]

"

"

[Your sloppy leadership has resulted in the loss of some of our excellent men. Not only that, the head of the pro-peace group escaped. Committee Head, what are you going to do about it?]

[I- I've never expected that the Tyueli family would go so far as to set their house on fire.]

[Did you really think the whole pro-peace faction was a bunch of cowards? As rotten as they may be, they're still nobles. There were even some of them who had chosen to die with pride. In that sense, the final moments of the head of the Tyueli family and his wife were truly magnificent. They deserve our respect. If the situation weren't as it is, I would call them my friends. Can the same be said of you though? All you do is make excuses and produce no results. These were actions that should be looked down on, don't you think?]

[H- However, Praetor-dono. I have also arrested many members of the pro-peace faction. I have searched through 65 homes and detained 263 people. Saying that I've done nothing is.....]

[It's not about the numbers. What matters is the disappearance of the important targets.]

Interrupting from the side is Tyuule. Acting as the Crown Prince's representative, her tone sounded cold and dismissive, and her everyone word seemed to compel everyone like an invisible blade.

[Where did Prince Diabo run off to? Why has the Marquis Casel, the leader of the pro-peace faction, not been found yet? I can only assume that someone's negligence has caused this situation. There must be someone who does well running off their mouth, but secretly rebels against his Highness. As you can tell, my ears are good at hearing things. If any of these people are being negligent, just a little whisper will suffice, so I would appreciate your cooperation as well.]

Tyuule looked at the surrounding members of the Oprichnina with a snicker.

[T- There is no one who is being negligent. With a sense of duty in our hearts, everyone is searching diligently.]

Lufluf straightened his posture, forcing his back muscles, which were trying to contract, to straighten out.

[I'd like to see proof of that sense of duty. Preferably, in a tangible way.]

Perhaps sensing Tyuule's piercing gaze, Lufluf nervously shivered and cold sweat dripped down his forehead. Being the Vice-Praetor, he's supposed to have the second most important position in the Empire after the Minister. He's supposed to be in a position in which he leaves the work to his subordinate politicians in his office and just complains about their work. Despite this, cold sweat dripped down Lufluf's body at the scene, fearing and showing respect to Tyuule, who was supposed to be nothing more than the Crown Prince's favorite slave.

Here shows the reality of his position and that of Tyuule's. Nowadays, within the Empire, everything is determined by how close one's position is to Crown Prince Zorzal.

[It is rather unfortunate that I have to report this to his Highness.]

Seemingly overbearing, Tyuule said. It was a tone that seemed to corner, provoke and spur him on.

[P- Please wait, Tyuule-sama!]

As if to cling on her, Luflus called out to Tyuule before turning towards the Committee Head and pressed him on.

[Don't disappoint us! You also have a family of your own too, right!?]

[Ah, no, but Praetor-dono. But, ummm.....]

Seemingly fumbling his words, Luflus spoke.

[Think carefully before you speak. What is it that 's important to you? Consider how far the consequences may extend depending on your decision.]

[.....A- As long as I..... As long as I take responsibility, w- what about my family?]

[It's alright. His Highness doesn't mistreat those who fell in battle. He hates only cowards and those who do not fulfill their duties.]

Saying this, Luflus takes out a dagger from his pocket and pressed the sheathed blade against the Committee Head's chest. At first, the Committee Head looked as if he didn't understand what he was being forced to do. Slowly, he looked at the sword in his hand, then pulled out the blade out of its sheath and gazed at it, seemingly finally realizing what he was holding. Eventually, with a trembling hand, he pressed the tip of the blade against his neck.

Seeing him do as such, Tyuule turned away, as if she had already lost interest, and began asking Luflus questions. She doesn't even pay attention to the sound of something falling down a short distance away.

[You people are responsible for finding the Marquis. Am I wrong? I am not mistaken, yes? Therefore, you should pursue them. Don't pretend to be something you are not. It's just a matter of whether you're doing your duties or not.....]

[Y- Yes. That is correct. W- We'll get right to it.]

Luflus turned around and gathered the members of the Oprichnina, showing how he was only in a position where he decipher and convey orders.

[How are we going to search for the Marquis and that household's young lady!? Someone give a suggestion. Now!]

The end of Luflis' statement was changed in tone that it sounded somewhat like a scream. One could even describe it as a desperate cry. Perhaps, infected by his sense of urgency, the expressions on the members of the Oprichnina changed, and as if all of them had something to say, everyone started speaking one after another.

[L- Let's pursue them immediately.]

[Vague. Give me something concrete!]

[Put a bounty on their head to encourage people to give out their locations.]

[We've already done that!]

[Let's increase the bounty!]

[Have then increase it then!]

[Let's arrest his family and make an example of them.]

[Casel's family is in a remote territory. How many days do you think it will take to send troops over there? Moreover, most of his family in the Imperial Capital had fled before the law was enforced. The only relatives he had left here was the Tyueli family!]

[Then, let's go after that family of his! There must be others who have fled outside the Imperial Capital. We should go after all of them, including those who have escaped!]

Among the Oprichnina, a relatively young man stepped forward.

[T- That's going to take a lot of work, isn't it?]

[However, it's better than sitting around doing nothing.]

[Are you going to do it then? Very well, take a single squad from the garrison and go!]

[Yes!]

The man who had suggested the pursuit went off in a heroic fashion, as if he had finally found an excuse to get away from this place.

[Now, what do the rest of you propose?]

[We can comb through the Imperial Capital.]

[That's why I'm asking for your damned suggestion! Be more specific!]

"

"

When asked so, the man pulled a map of the Imperial Capital from his pocket. His hands were shaking, as if he was nervous.

[P- Please take a look at this.]

Upon his words, everyone came up to look at the map.

[The underground aqueduct coming out of the house of the Tyueli family was connected to the Purom River. So, we should blockade all roads and alleys within two leagues of the riverside and search all the houses there.]

[Do you think we have the manpower for such a thing? Do you have any idea how many houses we have to search?]

[No, in fact, I don't think we would need to search that many houses.]

[What do you mean? Say it.]

[We can intentionally leave one area of the encirclement lacking in personnel. Searching houses in itself would cause a commotion in the city, so we don't actually have to take the time and effort to search every single one of the houses. It would just be to keep appearances.]

[I- I see. Searching houses is just to smoke out the prey.]

[Yes. Casel currently doesn't have a reliable hiding place. Therefore, they will surely appear in the area with few personnel. With this plan, all that is needed is the force necessary for the blockade, so it should be enough to mobilize the entire garrison of the Imperial Capital.]

[Your name?]

[Hahh! I am Gimlet Gin Lime.]

[Gimlet, that was a very specific and good suggestion. Excellent. Truly excellent. I hereby appoint you to the position of Committee Head. You have the responsibility and authority to carry out this plan.]

[T- Thank you very much.]

Seeing this, one of the relatively older members of the Oprichnina raised his hand.

[P- Pardon me, Vice-Praetor. May I speak?]

[What is it? I hope you're saying something constructive.]

[Ah, no, ummm, it's just..... Within two leagues of that river, ummm..... is the Jade Palace, so would that be alright?]

[Ahh? Ahh, you're talking about that huh. There's no need to worry about them. The guards there are Princess Piña's Knights. We may not be able to go near it, but neither can Casel and that young lady with him.]

Still flustered though, the Oprichnina member continued.

[However, if they were to ask for help from those knights.....]

[Can't we just ask the knights to hand them over?]

[Will the women there really hand them over just like that?]

[They will have to. The special Oprichnina law was passed by the Senate and officially proclaimed by his Highness, the Crown Prince in the name of his Majesty, the Emperor. If they try to disobey the special Oprichnina law, they will be rebelling against the Empire.]

[I have a suggestion. How about we send some men over there to keep an eye on them?]

[Are you volunteering?]

[Y- Yes. I will stay on watch and keep an eye on the Knight Order.]

[I approve your suggestion. Well then, get to work!]

Thus, the members of the Oprichnina began to move again. As if agitated by fear, as if they were driven by their fear.....

After making all the arrangements, Luflus timidly turned around and peeked at Tyuule's face. But from what he sees, the bored-looking Tyuule only seemed to be mumbling something to herself, toying with a liquor bottle that had been burned and distorted by the high heat, with her toes. Had he been a little closer, he might have realized that she wasn't talking to herself, and was instead having a conversation with someone. However, the atmosphere around Tyuule seemed to make it difficult for him or anyone to thoughtlessly approach her.

[Bouro, are you there?]

Upon her words, an insidious-sounding voice echoed low from the other side of the rubble.

[Yes, what do you desire?]

[For the situation to become more interesting. I believe I don't have to tell you the rest.]

[The hounds are currently chasing the fleeing prey. Seeing them trampling over the flower beds and overturning tables would certainly be quite entertaining. Understood, I will do my best. Kuhihihihihi.]

Meanwhile, Casel and Sherry, who had escaped from the Tyueli family's mansion, were walking in a residential area of the Imperial Capital that had lost all signs of life, and they chose to only move along the alleyways. However, although they kept walking, they didn't actually have a specific destination in mind, nor did they have any guidelines for what they would do to escape. However, if they stayed in one place, they would attract people's attention. That's why, they kept moving.

If they felt that she was about to meet someone, they would turn a corner, and if they felt someone following them from behind, they would turn down a corner and let them pass. They just kept on mechanically repeating this.

Just like that, they kept going around and around the same place over and over again. It became a natural process of avoiding the main street and intersections where the soldiers stand guard. They knew they had to get out of the Imperial Capital. If they could, they would have done that. However, the walls that protect the Imperial Capital can also serve as a cage in times like these.

No matter where they ran, in the end, they were still inside a cage. The only difference is whether they're captured within a small cage or a wide one. That being the case, their exhausted mind started to amuse them with the thought that it would be better to let themselves be captured. However, even though the Imperial Capital is much larger than an actual prison, it's at least possible that you can decide for yourself what you want to do with your future.

[I'm tired from all this. Sherry, are you alright?]

Casel spoke to the young lady, who had remained silent for a long time, as if trying to put her in a good mood.

[It would have been great if I had properly eaten as you had told me. As expected, I'm getting hungry too, hahaha.]

So far, no matter how much the old man called out to her, the young lady showed no sign of responding, and simply continued walking as Casel led her. It was as if she had lost her will itself.

[I suppose it can't be helped.....]

—seeing as she lost her parents like that. Moreover, here she is, running around with no time to grieve. If she looked really energetic at a situation like this, Casel would have been worried instead. It would be up to him, the adult, to think about their current situation. He should be happy that she's walking on her own. Urging his old bones, Casel looked around. The sun was starting to set. They should soon find a place to hide and rest their weary bodies.

[Now then, what shall we do?]

[First would be obtaining food.]

To Casel's surprise, Sherry answered his mutterings. The young lady, who had never shown any intention to do so, spoke to him.

[I too am hungry. Anyhow, we need to eat food and build up our strength.]

[Be that as it may, I forgot to bring any money.]

Even as Casel was puzzled by the fact that Sherry, who had been silent until then, had suddenly started talking, he told her that he had been so surprised by the commotion that he had failed to take his wallet with him. Moreover, there is a shortage of food in the Imperial Capital. The stores were all closed, and even if they had the money, buying in itself isn't something they couldn't do.

Probably dismayed at having exhausted her energy by walking around unnecessarily under such circumstances, Sherry looked like a mother looking at her troubling child. Nibbling on her thumbnail, she slightly tilted her head in contemplation.

[In that case, we should just ask the locals.]

As if spurred on by the moment, Sherry took her hand off Casel and started knocking on doors of the middle-class' homes everywhere. She began to call the homeowners and politely asked them to share their food. The first ten houses she knocked on refused, telling her "they don't have enough to share", but after knocking on the eleventh house, the owner of the house showed his true colors as he asked her, "What is she offering?".

[Would this be good enough?]

Cutting the string of the pearl necklace Sugawara had given her, Sherry pulled out two pearls and presented them to him.

[I'm sure your wife would enjoy new earrings.]

Looking at the white pearls shining in Sherry's tiny palm though, the man shook his head.

[That wouldn't be enough.]

One small pearl like this is worth more than a gold coin. However, food prices seemed to be skyrocketing.

[How about four then?]

[I can trade with you if it's for the whole thing.]

The man demanded Sherry's necklace itself. Hearing this, Sherry didn't falter, and with shine in her eyes, she warned him.

[While I don't mind giving you the entire thing, it'll just cause discord in your household.]

[Why?]

[This necklace is only large enough to fit around the neck of a child like me. Your wife should be an adult woman, right? For her to be able to wear this, you will need at least..... yes, at least ten more of these pearls. But Homeowner-sama, wouldn't you have to do a lot of hard work to buy more?]

[I suppose so. But if that's the case, I can just take two of them out and use them as earrings, and sell the rest off. How about that?]

The man looked proud, as if he had thought of a very good idea. However, Sherry was not to be outdone, as she responded to him with a teasing smile on her lips.

[On the contrary, that wouldn't be possible because of a woman's greed.]

[Hmmm? Why not?]

[Only men would think of using two of them as earrings and selling the rest for your daily needs. Women would inevitably think that If only they had ten more, they would have been able to show off their necklace. Just ten more. Just thinking about how they would only need ten more of these, the color of their eyes would change, sometimes to the point where their personality also changes. And, just who do you think will she start pushing to give her that?]

[H- Hmmm.]

As if he had just imagined the scene Sherry described, the man shuddered.

[If you only had two to begin with, I'm sure your wife would be satisfied with the earrings.]

[I- In that case, I should just hide the other pieces from my wife and not show them to her. What do you think about that idea?]

[Oh my, that's even worse! Ahh, I can already imagine it. Even though you had hidden it in a place that shouldn't be found by anyone, before you know it, it's on your table. And there standing beside it is your wife, glaring at you with her arms crossed. Greeting you with the words "And who were you planning to give these to? Even though you only gave me two!"]

[Whaaaaa, I'm begging you, stop already!]

Even though he didn't actually hear her say that, the man turned pale and held his head, as if his wife had yelled at him.

[It seems that you have experienced something similar.]

[I'm sorry, I apologize already so don't say any more than that.]

I'm sure the same thing will happen even if you exchange them for money. "How did you get this much money and what do you intend to spend it on? Or perhaps..... what have you already spent it on?" I can assure you that doing such a thing would have you condemned to the harshest degree.]

[If it's my wife, she'd definitely do that. That's just about right. That's exactly what's going to happen.]

[That's why, I'll tell you this. Please make do with four..... no, five.]

[Why five?]

[One of them would be for you to spend. The other four would be for you to give to your wife. Tell her that this is all you have for now, but that one day, you will collect enough to hang around her neck.]

[With the money I earn though, that doesn't seem very realistic.....]

[The fact that it's unrealistic is why it's great. If it's such an outrageous dream, your wife won't actually expect it, and will thus be truly happy about your gift.]

Men are creatures who see reality at the end of their dreams, but women are creatures who dream within reality. They calmly look at reality and know its tastelessness. That is why they adore men with grand dreams, telling him to do his very best. And if it's for their own sake, why would they hate him for doing such a thing?

[Y- Young lady. How old are you? You look pretty young to me.]

[I recently turned 12.]

[At your age, you're terrifying..... I'm starting to feel sorry for the man who will be your husband, young lady. I mean, if you're too cunning, you won't find many suitors like that.]

[There's no need to worry, I already have a partner.]

[I feel sorry for that guy. He must have been a daring person.Alright. I'll settle for five, just like young lady said.]

After the man withdrew into the house, he handed her a bag of food that he had been carrying. Sherry also handed five pearls to the man, who deeply bowed to him in gratitude, and inspected the contents of the bag.

[Ara, it's in Japanese.....]

Inside was the JSDF's combat rations. The olive-drab painted exterior read "cracker meal" in black letters, and the nutritional values were written below it.

[Hmmm, you can read that? Truth is, I worked as a manservant at the Jade Palace. I begged a guest to share some of that with me. That's why we had some food to spare. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to share my food with others, no matter what you trade them for.]

[Are the Japanese people there alright?]

[The Jade Palace is fully guarded by Princess Piña's Knights. As long as they're in there, they will be at peace.]

[Is that so.....]

Sherry nodded in relief. Seemingly having thought of something upon seeing such a Sherry, the man turned his gaze to a distance.

[.....Young lady.]

[Yes, what is it?]

[They have two guard shifts a day, one in the morning and one in the evening. The lady knights over there are really formal, and they have to go through this exaggerated ceremony of changing guards every time. Their security at those times was so lax that even I could see it.]

After momentarily blanking out upon his words, Sherry deeply bowed her head again and politely thanked him. She then left that house.

[I think that as long as we manage to leave the Imperial Capital, we would somehow be able to manage. Why don't we go to a village or a settlement somewhere, find horses and food, then return to my territory?]

Renting a room in a private house, Casel suggested what to do next while eating a beef ham steak from the cracker meal that Sherry had procured. Looking like a squirrel with puffed out cheeks as her mouth was filled with crackers, Sherry asked back.

[Is the Marquis' territory far away?]

[The Empire is vast. Even if we traveled by horse, it would take us about 30 days.]

[With that distance, I don't think our traveling expenses would be able to last.]

Sherry clutched on her few pearls, which couldn't be called a necklace anymore. At first, they tried to rest and eat on the side of the road. However, in a time of food shortage, doing so in the Imperial City would have drawn the murderous stares of people looking for food for their family and their children. So, they hurriedly knocked on the door of a house, and by offering a few pearls and half of their provisions, they managed to get a place to stay for the night. Whether the owner of the house could be trusted or not though was a gamble they could only bet on.

[.....Even though we have to go such a far distance from now on, we currently aren't able to leave the small range of 1 or 2 leagues in every direction.]

[We are surrounded after all.]

[I'm sure those sweepers will start tightening that net they've spread out.]

[Umu. You're right..... but what method do you think we could use instead?]

[Of course, since they aren't actually casting a net, they're probably trying to corner us somewhere.]

[I see, so they want to smoke us out. I'm not sure how they're going to do that, but that makes sense.]

[I'm pretty sure they prepared some kind of escape route somewhere.]

[I see, so that would be where they're waiting for us.]

Thinking about such a situation, Casel deeply sighed. He realized that if they did that, they would have to jump in even if they knew it was a trap. They had found themselves in a desperate predicament before they knew it. At that moment, Sherry spoke.

[Marquis. Let's seek asylum.]

[But how? You just now said that we couldn't pass through the walls of the Imperial City. My territory is far away, and the borders of the Empire are even farther.]

[No. As a matter of fact, there is a foreign soil within the Imperial Capital.]

[What nonsense are you talking about?]

[No, it's true. Due to a diplomatic agreement, the Jade Palace could be described as another country. No one from the Empire would be able to do anything within its territory.]

[How surprising. You want us to take refuge in the Jade Palace? However, do you think the Japanese envoys will welcome us with open arms?]

[I will cling upon Sugawara-sama's pity. There's nothing else we can do now.]

Hearing the name brought up, Casel grunted, seemingly having thought of someone.

[It'll cause him quite some trouble.]

[This Sherry will atone for her sins by serving him for the rest of my life.]

[I bet it won't be just that. Doing this will probably cause trouble for a lot of people. This action may cause more of a ruckus than the word "trouble" can possibly describe.]

[Marquis. I am actually a rather scheming girl.]

[Hoho..... A scheming girl, you say?]

[I got close to Sugawara-sama for the Tyueli family's sake, which was on the verge of collapse.]

[Umu, for a child of your age, you're remarkably resourceful.]

[By being right in between the Empire and the country of Japan, I thought we could greatly benefit.]

[In a way, such a decision was right. Had this not happened, your name would have had considerable weight in diplomacy.]

[However, such a decision also caused Mother and Father.....]

[That's not true. That's only because your family sheltered me to safety.]

[No, I think the Oprichnina would have come to our household even if the Marquis hadn't come. They didn't like those who were friendly with the Japanese.]

[That might indeed be the case. Even when we don't particularly want to be friendly with them.....]

[This scheming girl here is wondering..... if there's a way for me to get revenge for my parents.]

[Against the sweepers?]

[No, against something much larger. However, in order to fight against something greater, I will need far more power than what I have now. And now, I'm thinking of how to pull such a power to my side.]

[.....That would trouble many people.]

[Yes. Great power is difficult to handle. One needs to be delicate and attentive, for such a power can shatter all sorts of things, including the toughest boulders. However, I hope everyone will take the brunt of such a power.]

[Do you think we..... no, do you think you have the right to do that?]

[No. But it can't be helped, I don't want it to simply end like this. I am only 12 years old, and I plan to live for another 70 years or so, seeing, hearing, tasting, and enjoying all kinds of things. For that reason, I will do whatever it takes to get through this situation.]

[Perhaps, the main target of those sweepers should have been you.]

[I learned from history that it is always only those who are willing to fight, not those who are righteous, who survive. There are two kinds of peace: the peace that is fought for and won through battle, and peace gained by making others submit, stolen away from others. Those who are unwilling to fight for fear of sacrifices and dirty their hands with sin will be forever deprived and forced to submission. Isn't that the natural order of things? Or perhaps, it was only human society that is special? I don't think that would be the case though. Therefore, as I go on, I will stain my hands with blood. I don't care about those who will be inconvenienced by my actions. If anyone later blames me, I will show them an apology worthy of praise, while sticking my tongue out at them behind their backs.]

[I understand. I too will shoulder the burden of those sins.]

[I'm sure..... this will move things along very nicely.]

Looking at Sherry, who was quietly speaking of her decision with a downcast look on her face, Casel couldn't tear her eyes away.

[Sherry. I want to apologize to you.]

[For what?]

[For hitting you back then.]

[No. I believe you didn't have any choice.]

[However.....]

[I was able to resolve myself thanks to that, as I no longer have the luxury to cry like a child. Thank you for worrying about me, but I'm fine now. So, there's no need for you to apologize.]

Casel was feeling very apologetic, for it was he who had not allowed her to be a child. It could be said that their circumstances dictated it, but it was an inescapable fact that he was one of the reasons why it happened. Even though she had been a clever child who lacked childishness, even the little bit of childishness that remained in her was forcibly cut away and she was rushed to become an adult. Moreover, she had to change into someone unreasonable. This was definitely a tragic experience for her.

After midnight, Sherry woke up from her improvised bed, rubbing the sleepiness out of her eyes. Thereupon, she shook Casel, who was sleeping beside her.

[Marquis, Marquis.]

After a while, Casel raised himself, sounding rather displeased.

[What's the matter? It's still dark. Can't you let me sleep a little longer?]

[This isn't the time for that. Don't you hear that?]

Listening carefully, they heard the sound of something approaching from a distance, like the beating of gongs and drums. It sounded like beaters rousing their prey when hunting in the forests or mountains.

[T- That is.....]

Hearing that sound, Casel muttered in dismay.

[We aren't gray bears. That's not something you do on the street.]

[However, it's extremely effective.]

Sherry held her chest as she said this.

[It's making my heart pound fast. It makes me feel unsettled.]

[Yeah. It's not too much, but that sounds make me unable to sit still.]

Since they aren't likely to be carefully searching houses door to door, they have the option of closing the door and keeping themselves hidden. However, this was a method only allowed when the owner of the hiding place could be trusted. If they remained holed up in the house, there was a strong possibility that they would be tipped off by the family members who had fallen into a panic. They felt the need to suspect not only the people in the house, but also the neighbors.

[Let's run away, making sure the people here won't notice.....]

Sherry and Casel packed their bags. However, they were two people who had run out of the house with nothing but their clothes on. They only packed what little remnants of food they had left. The sounds approached from the west. In other words, they are trying to drive their prey to the east.

[Let's go north, straight to the Jade Palace.]

[If we're going to the Jade Palace, I would have preferred as the guard shifts were changing, when there would be a gap in their security.]

[It can't be helped. In such a situation, we have no choice but to take a random chance.]

Just like that, the two quietly closed the door so as not to wake the homeowners and disappeared into the darkness of the city.

"

"

However, this concern may have been unnecessary. The owner of the house was in a state where could be bothered whether they made noise or not, for he was currently lying on the floor in a pool of blood, clutching a wanted poster in hand. From the looks of it, someone must have stabbed him in the back when he tried to tip the Oprichnina off about the two's presence in this house. Shadows carrying blood-soaked swords snickered as they watched the two depart.

[Now, dance for us and make things more interesting. Kuhihihihihihihih.]

* * * * *

[What is that sound?]

Emerging from the large tent for the Commander-in-Duty, Bozes asked the sentry who was standing watch in her field of vision.

[Bozes-sama.....]

After regaining his composure, the sentry quickly salutes and raises his voice.

[North Tent No. 1, Sentry No. 4, Private Mark, standing watch. I am reporting an anomaly. Some kind of noise seems to be coming from the west.]

The area around the Jade Palace is large enough to include gardens and is not immediately bordered by the city. Despite this, the commotion in the city could be heard, so it was clearly an unusual situation.

[Private Mark. Under my responsibility and authority, I am temporarily relieving you of your guard duty. Call all the officers on duty who are taking a nap. After that, you will return to your current duties. Give any reports to the on-duty Junior Officer.]

[Y- Yes.]

The soldier left his post and ran. Bozes looked around at the rows of tents set up in the gardens of the Jade Palace and saw that there was no unrest, at least not within the Knight Order. The only people moving about would be the sentries on duty. Soon, the upper brass knights gathered in the command tent. Instead of Panache, who was working on intelligence gathering while studying language at Alnus, Beefeater, who had taken over the role of leader of the White Rose Knights, showed up to make sure everyone was present.

[Everyone, I'm sorry to wake you all up in the middle of the night, but I want you to find out what all the fuss is about.]

Thereupon, Beefeater replied, "I've already sent out scouts."

[That helps us greatly. There is so much unrest in the Imperial Capital that it wouldn't be strange for an uprising to occur. In the meantime, all those on duty who are taking a nap are to wait on standby. Also, depending on the situation, we may have an emergency call out to all soldiers. Any questions? It seems not, so you are dismissed.....]

After giving these instructions, Bozes reached for a basket of citrus fruits on the table. Lately, she's often found herself munching on a pile of yellow citrus fruits from the basket, often eating them with the peel intact. The aroma wafted through the command center tent, almost making the people watching her feel the sour taste in their own mouth. Seeing such a Bozes, the girls, who were 14-15 years old Officer Candidates, timidly asked.

[Bozes-sama. You've been eating a lot of citrus fruits lately.]

[Yes. For some reason, I've been craving sour foods lately.]

Licking the juice of the citrus fruit from her thumb, Bozes reached for another piece of fruit.

[I- I doubt this is the case but.....]

[What's the matter?]

[No, it's just, ummm.....]

As the younger girls seemed to be having difficulty to find the words to say, Bozes curiously tilted her head. The short-haired beauty Beefeater, watching all the events occurring, frankly spoke.

[These girls are worried that you might be pregnant. Not that there's any way that's true though, ahahahahahahahahaha.]

"

"

[Pregnant..... Perhaps, I am.]

[Hahahahaha..... Huh!?!]

[Eeeeeeehhhhhhh!?!]

The astonished voices of the women echoed through the tent.

[B- Bozes-sama!]

[T- That's a big deal. What should we do!?!]

[What's the big deal? You say the strangest things. I too am a maiden. It wouldn't be strange if I get pregnant once or twice, don't you think?]

[No, no, no, that's not what we're talking about here.]

[Then, what's the problem?]

[Anyhow, I suggest that you get some rest right away, Onee-sama..... This isn't the time to be on military duty. We need to boil the water.]

[That aside, we need a doctor. I shall bring a doctor here!]

The girls began moving left and right, saying and doing things that lacked coherence. It was as if they were under the mistaken impression that Bozes is about to go under labor right away, saying things like boiling water and calling a doctor. In short, they were panicking and confused. The mention of Bozes' pregnancy had shaken them that much.

[You lot, calm down!]

At Beefeater's words, Bozes nodded.

[That's right. Even if I'm pregnant, since my belly hasn't started swelling up yet.....]

Saying this, she counted with her fingers and calmly told them, "we're still seven or eight months away from that."

[No, no, no, no, no, no, I understand what you're saying, but can't you be a bit more shaken? Rather, the problem here is that you're still unmarried. Ah, did you already have a partner?]

[Of course. It wasn't as if one of the Gods had descended and snuck into my bed at night, so if I got pregnant, it had to be with the right person.]

[L- Like I said! The problem here is exactly that partner! Is it him? Is it perhaps that man? That strange fellow named Tomita!?!]

[Yes. He's the only one I've laid with. I can't think of anyone else. Also, I'm saying this now, but he's not a strange fellow.]

[Can't you be a bit more shaken?!]

Grabbing Bozes by the shoulders, Beefeater violently shook her, making the vertically curled rolls of Bozes' luxurious blonde hair whirl up and down.

[Can you please stop? Also, in the first place, why should I be shaken? Even if this was the outcome, I had already been prepared to leave myself in his hands. I've never treated our relationship as a mere way to pass time.]

[That's even worse!]

[I'd like it if you don't say that. I am feeling very happy right now. Yes, this soft fluffy feeling I have right now..... may be what happiness is all about.]

Hearing what Bozes proclaimed, some simply shook their heads while some felt dizzy instead.

[Uwaaaaa, someone do something about her!]

Holding her head in her hands, Beefeater turned to her colleagues instead.

[Beefeater-sama, w- wouldn't this be the part where we congratulate and give her our blessings?]

[No, I really don't think this would be any good. Being the daughter of the Palesti family, do you think that would be alright?]

[It's fine. I had once been prepared to offer my body to someone I don't want to be with, but now, I am blessed with a child with the one I have decided to be with. If you don't call this happiness, then what do you call this? If my father is unhappy with this, I am prepared to abandon my family name.]

[Wait, that, eh-hh.....]

[H- How wonderful.....]

If one were to call what she feels as the Bozes Disease, the girls around her were certainly infected with it in an instant, as dreamy expressions appeared on their faces.

[Reporting.]

At that moment, the tent was suddenly opened and a scout soldier came in to give his report.

[Ummm, am I interrupting something?]

However, feeling as if he had walked into some place he shouldn't have entered as a man, he felt uncomfortable. Restlessly looking around, the head scout asked, perplexed.

[No, don't mind it..... The conversation about me ends here. Thank you for waiting, let's hear your report.]

The soldiers reported that the commotion approaching from the west was a disturbance being created by the sweepers to drive away the fugitives. It seems that the Jade Palace is completely encircled in the siege of the commotion.

[Which team is on guard duty tonight?]

[That would be my team, Onee-sama.]

In place of Bozes, who was now the Acting Commander and was in charge of their whole group, Nikolashka, her protégée, was now in charge of the Yellow Rose Knights.

[In that case, Nikolashka, issue a special call-up for all of the Yellow Rose Knights. Set up a battle formation and stay on high alert. Beefeater, your White Rose Knights are to remain on standby. This situation might take a while.]

When Bozes' order was issued, the relaxed atmosphere that had prevailed up to that point suddenly vanished. Even the expressions on the faces of the Officers and the Apprentices, who had been letting out shrill voices just a few minutes before, became serious and dignified, as if they were bows ready to be drawn.

[Special call-up for the Yellow Rose Knights! Equip Type-2 Equipment and gather!]

With the voice of the Junior Officers' rebuking voice echoing out, the soldiers leaped to their feet, donning their equipment and came out of their tent in droves. The Knight Order is a place where veteran soldiers who have been active in the frontier originally come to enjoy a comfortable retirement. Therefore, the level of skill of each of their individual members was extremely high, and no confusion occu

Chapter 8

The Jade Palace was allotted a fairly large plot of land in the Imperial Capital to serve as a guesthouse in the Empire. After passing through the archway of the main gate, visitors will see an elegant stone building in the center of an open space cut out of the forest and covered with grass. This is a coveted environment for the inhabitants of this bad neighborhood who, due to the scarcity of land, build houses wherever there is a small space where a human being can lie down. There are also small springs and streams in the forest. It's like a nature park with wild birds and small wild animals. If one were to liken this atmosphere to a place, it'd be like "Shinjuku Gyoen" or "Hibiya Koen", an oasis of greenery in the middle of a concrete jungle, might come close.

However, in terms of purpose of existence, to house state guests and their equivalents, it wasn't a place where citizens could just drop in for a bit of fun. On the contrary, if one entered the premises, they would be chased away or arrested by the guards. Therefore, the residents of the area could only take advantage of the natural environment nearby by walking along the outer edge of the forest that surrounded the Jade Palace.

Even so, Sherry and Casel ventured into the forest surrounding the Jade Palace. As expected, their path was blocked by Piña's Knights. Even though the sky to the east had only begun to lighten slightly, the road leading to the main gate of the Jade Palace was firmly fortified with heavily armed Knights. They thought that it would be better to enter the grounds through the forest by the side road, but this too was heavily guarded, with soldiers carrying spears and swords scattered here and there on patrol.

[Hmmm. I had heard that Imperial Highness Princess Piña's Knight Order were a group made up of old soldiers who just wanted to have a leisurely retirement, and women and children playing soldiers, a group only for ceremonies, but looking at them like this, they don't look like they can be trifled with.]

Even at a time like this, a young girl who appears to be an Apprentice Knight is patrolling with an old Junior Officer, receiving instructions on how to keep an eye on things and how to be attentive. The soldiers who were being instructed by the girl were also looking at her as if they were watching over their daughter or granddaughter, and they were not bothered by the slightest mistake, but rather were giving her words of advice to correct the situation in an appropriate manner. The girl, too, never snubbed her nose at the difference in status. She listened attentively to the words of the old soldiers, whose depth of experience on the battlefield was unrivaled. That is probably why, whether you look to the right or to the left, there are no gaps in the security of the Knight Order.

Realizing this, the two knew that it would be impossible for them to get close to the Jade Palace without being seen by the guards. As he muttered “I guess we really had no choice but to wait for the ceremony of changing guards huh”, Casel hid behind the trunk of a large tree.

[Marquis. With the situation like this, I think we should just confidently reveal our presence and have them guide us.]

Sherry, crouched in the cover of the undergrowth, said.

[What?]

[If we can't get close enough while hidden, I don't think we have any other way.]

[After we reveal our presence, what then?]

[Can't we just tell them..... that we had business with the Jade Palace?]

“Why do we have to sneak around?”, or so Sherry asked with a serious expression on her face.

[No, that certainly might be the case, but will they just let us through when we tell them that?]

[The Knights don't seem to have blocked the Jade Palace, so I believe they would allow those who come to the palace for business to pass through.]

[That might indeed be the case. However, I still don't think they will allow us to visit.]

[But that would be up to the Japanese, wouldn't it? That's why, I think that if we were to confidently come forward, they would at least try to announce our arrival to them.]

[I suppose so..... Indeed.]

Casel acknowledged the correctness of Sherry's words. Returning back to the path they took, he and the young lady then took the road to the main gate of the Jade Palace. There, lightly dressed, the two of them

formed a line and proceeded without sneaking around. Then, with one hand raised in the air, they walked up to the unit of Knights who were blocking the gate.

The guards' response to their approach wasn't one of questioning because a suspicious person approached, but instead, they received him in a polite manner. Even with Casel's dingy appearance, it was fortunate that what he wears somewhat looked like what a prominent noble wears.

[Under the Imperial Decree of his Majesty, the Emperor, the Jade Palace is currently restricted to visitors. I'll ask this as part of our job, but may I ask what is your business here?]

[Umu, you did well fulfilling your role. I am Senator Casel. I have come to visit the Japanese envoys for a very important matter.]

[I- If it isn't Marquis Casel..... You and the young lady have come alone at this hour, on foot, unaccompanied by an escort?]

The soldier who had come out to respond looked around to find the ride in which Casel should have ridden and the personnel accompanying him. It seems like she had mistaken Sherry as Casel's daughter.

[Umu. In addition to the urgency of the situation, the city was also in an uproar. That's why we're in this state. My apologies, but I'd appreciate it if you could announce our arrival as soon as possible.]

[Y- Yes. I will report to my superiors immediately, so please wait for a moment.]

And thus, a messenger soldier was forced to run out of breath. After a while, a female knight arrived to greet him. It seems that their attempt to confidently come forward was correct. Just like that, the two had successfully crossed the line of vigilance that they had been cautious of earlier.

The Jade Palace was only a short distance away. Now that they were in the inner circle of the Knights, they no longer had to worry about being taken by surprise by the sweepers. Perhaps because of this, they even had the mental composure to joke around with each other. Casel, who had become talkative, asked the female knight who was guiding him about various things.

[You said you are now acting as the person in charge of the Knights?]

[Yes. Her Highness, Princess Piña, is currently at the Imperial Castle.]

[Then, who is the acting commander now?]

[It's Knight Commander Bozes Co Palesti.]

[Hoho, the young lady of the Palesti house huh. She's a fine one indeed.]

When they eventually came to the front of the command tent, the female knight told them to wait a moment, before opening the doorway and began to exchange words with someone inside. Meanwhile, Sherry's eyes were glued to the Jade Palace building. This place where she is standing now is technically already within the grounds of the Jade Palace. However, judging from the way the soldiers of the Order were guarding it, it seemed as if there was an invisible line somewhere, which the soldiers were guarding.

What is this boundary line that separates the Jade Palace from the place where Sherry currently stands? Where is it? Wondering about this, Sherry looked around for it.

[Whoa there, young lady, you can't go any further than that.]

Thereupon, a soldier in his mid-forties, who was standing in attention with a spear in hand, called out to Sherry. The soldier, who had been standing as still as a mannequin, suddenly moved, making Sherry so surprised that she fell on her buttocks. The soldier took Sherry's hand and helped her to her feet.

[Beyond this point would be the Jade Palace. The border, so to speak.]

Hearing his words, Sherry's eyes around a few paces towards the Jade Place from the tent that the soldier pointed to with his spear. However, she couldn't find anything that looked like a line anywhere, so Sherry couldn't understand what the soldier meant for a moment.

[No matter how hard you look for them, you won't find any lines drawn anywhere. It's just a convenient boundary that was set for the implementation of the agreement between the Empire and the Japanese. In case you're wondering, this lawn over here marks the other side's territory.]

[I see. So beyond this area would be Japanese territory huh.]

Saying this, Sherry looked at the boundary where the color of the earth changes from the earthy brown to the grassy green. The soldiers said they just decided it for convenience, but even so, beyond this line was defined as another world where even the laws of the Empire couldn't reach. For Sherry, threatened by the laws of the Empire, this line is the most reliable barrier she can rely on. And right now, it's right in front of her.

As long as she crosses this line, she will be safe.

Just the thought of this made her want to start running towards that side right away. In fact, it would be easy for her to slip past this soldier if she suddenly started running without warning. However, it seems that Sherry's intentions were clearly expressed from the look in her eyes. That was probably why the soldier guard spoke, seemingly calling her into attention.

[Just don't go any further than that, okay? Our job is to make sure that no one crosses this line without our permission. We're even told to do whatever we have to do to do that. You know what this means, right? Unless you have permission, you can't enter.]

[Yes, I understand.]

Letting out a sigh, Sherry nodded. At that moment, a voice called out from behind her.

[Sherry!]

When Sherry turned around, she found Casel waiting for her. Behind him, a female knight was opening the entrance to the tent, as if to say they may enter. Meeting up with them along the way, Bozes first offered them a chair. As the two sat down, Casel and Sherry couldn't help but relax their shoulders in

relief. Seemingly as if he haven't had the time to relax until that moment, "Ahh, I would love to just go to bed now", Casel grumbled.

[I'm glad to see you are safe.]

[Yeah, I somehow managed. However, most of the people in my family were cut down.]

Casel thanks the squire girl for the drink she offered and holds out his hand. His figure looked as if he had aged a decade in the past few days. Sherry, on the other hand, looked intrigued to see a girl almost her own age serving in the military, even as a squire.

[By the way, regarding your request to announce your presence to the Japanese envoys, the person I sent as a messenger has returned. Unfortunately, the reply from the other party was, "We have no reason to meet with you, so we decline".]

[.....A flat refusal huh.]

Casel's shoulders slumped.

[As I thought, you had intended to seek asylum to Japan huh? They seemed to be very wary of that though.]

[You saw through it immediately huh. I take it that others have tried the same?]

[Yes. We've had a number of people come to us, asking for protection.]

[From the looks of it, it seems like their pleas didn't work. By the way, how were they doing now?]

[As long as we don't attract the attention of the sweepers, we can manage to guide you out of the Imperial Capital, but from there you'll have to make do with your own abilities.....]

[I see. In that case, would it be alright if we ask you of that too? We can't get out of this place with the uproar they're making.]

Even when one doesn't listen carefully, they would still be able to hear the sound of beaters chasing away their prey. As if those sounds had really driven their prey to flee, Casel can't bring himself to be close to those sounds.

[If you're fine if it's just bringing you out outside the Imperial Capital..... That would only be as long as we don't get discovered though.]

If they had been discovered, they would be asked to hand them over. If that were to happen, the Knights would have no choice but to comply.

[That's good enough for me.]

It would even be difficult to get out of the Imperial Capital, so if that could be done, it would be enough, or so Casel thought. However, Sherry wasn't satisfied with that. She wasn't satisfied with just one round trip by messenger, for she didn't believe that negotiations with the Japanese had been conducted properly. They said they had turned them down, but was that really Sugawara's intention? In the first place, did they give her name? If Sugawara knew she had come, he should have reacted a little differently.

[Ummm, well, could I at least meet Sugawara-sama?]

[Sherry-sama, the place they're in is a foreign country. Please don't ask for the impossible.]

Beefeater, standing next to Bozes, chided her.

[But if you let him know that I am here, Sugawara-sama may receive us.]

[Ohh, you're quite the confident one. What is your relationship with Sugawara-dono?]

[S- Sugawara-sama is the man who will eventually become my husband.]

[.....]

Upon her words, Casel just shrugged, Bozes warmly smiled at her, and Beefeater asked again, seemingly astounded by her words.

[What did you say?]

[As I said, he's my husband.]

Hearing a young girl talk about her dreams for the future is very amusing. However, for such a child to brandish her dreams in a situation like this would just trouble the adults around her. Furthermore, if they were to rely on such vague information in a situation where their lives are at stake, it's like saying, "There's an oasis over there," and then heading off into the depths of the hot desert with a random guess without even looking at a map.

Such a way of thinking must be stopped at all costs.

[How old are you?]

[I'm twelve years old.]

[That would be too early of an age for anyone to marry, don't you think?]

In this world, the age to be considered an adult is fifteen.

[It's up to the person concerned to decide what they think, not those around them.]

[That's indeed true in our Empire. But from what I read, Japanese laws dictate that a woman must be at least 16 to get married.]

Bozes, who had researched the Japanese marriage system during her language training in Alnus, shared her knowledge here. But this only served to make Sherry even more stubborn.

[Then, we'll just have the official marriage when I turn 16!]

If she insists so forcefully, even Beefeater has no choice but to move. They must move to confirm the facts, and make the girl properly confront reality.

[I understand. If that's what you want to talk about, we will discuss this matter again with Sugawara and bring up your name.]

[Can I leave it to you?]

At Bozes' request, Knight Leader Beefeater sat up while casually responding.

[Yeah. It's not much trouble.]

Just like that, Beefeater went to the Jade Palace as a messenger. The sun had not yet risen, and it was still twilight. Even at that hour, the diplomats and military officers in the Jade Palace, including Vice Minister Shirayuri, were already awake, gathering and analyzing information. Rather, they have been working for some time now, hardly taking a satisfactory break. Even in the Jade Palace, one could sense that the Imperial Capital has been enveloped in a turbulent atmosphere ever since Zorzal seized power, and one only needs to read the text to understand that the implementation of the special Oprichnina Law would push the situation in an unforeseen direction.

In fact, the JSDF's intelligence network spread throughout the capital was reporting in real time that the arrests and detentions by the Oprichnina were progressing to the level of a blood purge. Especially since yesterday, their arrest has become a veritable hunting and gathering of people, as if at the instigation of someone else. It was as if they could hear the ground shaking and falling apart from all the efforts they had made so far to make peace.

[Ahh, it may be impossible to peacefully conclude a peace agreement now.]

[I wonder if anything can be done about it. With a situation like this, we can't even negotiate the return of the people they took captive.]

Loudly clicking his tongue, Sugawara raised his voice, as if in desperation.

[We are now in a situation where all our efforts are ruined because of how slow the politicians decide. Can't we at least try to hide or rescue the pro-peace faction or invade the Imperial capital? Japan and the Empire are at war, so it doesn't matter if we bomb them or not.]

[O- Oi, Sugawara.]

Sugawara kept his mouth shut at his colleague's warning. The representative of those politicians he had been dissing, Shirayuri, was also in this room. Shirayuri laughed and said, "I don't mind. I won't get angry just for idle complaints.". However, it was clear that an awkward feeling had overtaken the meeting. Perhaps that was why Sugawara turned to his colleague and spoke.

[Could you try contacting the Ministry again.....]

However, the answer he received was still the same: "Refrain from doing rash actions. Wait and see."

Of course, he could understand the logic that saving one person would mean having to save two more, and saving two more would mean having to save four or five more, and so on without limit, which would irritate the Oprichnina and make the situation even worse. But it is the human heart that still wants to reach out and suffer. That's why, in their eyes, Kano and Prime Minister Morita seem to lack decisiveness and make them want to spit out a swear or two.

At that moment, a call came in from one of the knights guarding the Jade Palace. Since phones don't exist in this world, the Knight who is the messenger came to them and verbally told them their message. This would not be the case if it were a daily, regularly scheduled business contact, but most of the time, those who abruptly visit them were people who want to seek asylum. At times like this, Sugawara and his staff regretted that they should have had the phone line connected, even if it was being unreasonable of them.

Refusing a request while making eye contact with the other party, even if they aren't dealing with a person they're connected to, can be quite a heavy mental burden.

If it weren't for Lady Beefeater, who came as a messenger, and who was particularly cold-hearted in her role, the guilt of abandoning an acquaintance who was seeking help would surely have been more than enough to make him want to give up his work. Unusually, however, Lady Beefeater had come to visit them consecutively within the same morning. She also pointed out Sugawara by name and said she had something to tell him. Sugawara, while his colleagues looked on, offered Beefeater a seat and went to sit down in the chair across from her.

[What is it? Another request for asylum?]

[No, it's regarding those people who just requested asylum earlier.]

[If that were the case, I believe I should have already declined.]

Probably feeling irritated that they brought up something that he once turned down, his tone was somewhat strong.

[Marquis Casel is a leading figure in the pro-peace faction. We indeed would like to help him, but the notification from the government of our country was still the same.]

However, Beefeater, who usually withdraws with a straightforward "I see," as if to oppose the tone of his words, responded with a stronger tone.

[However, the Marquis' companion has asked me to ask you to repeat this request..... and especially naming Sugawara-dono, she has a message for you.]

At that moment, a girl's voice echoed from outside the window.

[Sugawara-sama! It's Sherry!]

Spontaneously standing from his seat, Sugawara looked outside.

[Sugawara-sama! Sherry has come to see you!]

Far beyond the window, he could see soldiers guarding the Jade Palace and a girl who looked like Sherry. Everyone here knows her. She was well-liked by everyone, as she had spoken welcoming words in fluent Japanese at the celebration for the repatriations of the prisoners of war. That is why everyone's eyes turned towards Sugawara.

[I brought you a message from that girl.]

[From Sherry?]

[Ohh? That means her words weren't necessarily a lie huh.]

Beefeater's eyes opened wide in surprise. At the very least, it proved that Sherry's mention of a personal relationship with Sugawara had not been constructed entirely in her wildest dreams. This at least means to make her understand that there seemed to be no doubt that the relationship was more than an acquaintance.

[From what she told me, she apparently intends to have Sugawara-dono as her husband.]

[No way.]

As for Sugawara, he had no choice but to respond to those words. In fact, he had never made such a promise, and he had never said or done anything to raise such an expectation from her. Beefeater nodded her head in understanding.

[No, it's alright. I don't think you cheated her or did anything for which you have to take responsibility. I experienced something similar when I was her age. I ran wild because of something I misunderstood. Just a little kindness had turned my mind into a pink flower garden. I become hopeless when I'm being protected and stuff like that.]

Perhaps recalling some sweet experience she had in the past, Beefeater giggled with a slight blush on her cheeks.

[I- I'm glad you understand.]

Sugawara sighed with relief. However, Beefeater continued with a frown on her lips.

[However.....]

Saying this, the young girl's voice was still echoing in the Jade Palace at dawn.

[Still, it's not like my assumptions just ran wild without any trigger. How can you be so sure you didn't say or do something to make her think that? I understand. I know you would never lay a finger on her. But on the contrary, this makes the situation even more difficult. That makes her feel like you found her precious.]

Saying this, Beefeater turned her gaze away from the window and looked at Sugawara.

[She came all the way here because she put her trust in your kindness, this thought process that you made her believe in. She literally put her life on the line to come here. Well, how about it? Why not act like a man here for her?]

Those words weren't something Sugawara could bear. To refuse a request for asylum is equivalent to cutting off the life of the other party. On top of that, it was pointed out to him that he had a fair share of responsibility for her adoration of him. Up until now, as an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a cog in the machine, Sugawara has thought and acted with the words "orders from above" as an excuse, but now that he has been asked to show his worthiness as an individual and as a man, he cannot be allowed to run away using the national interest as a shield.

[If you can't do that, cover your ears and close your eyes. She'll eventually give up and go somewhere else.]

[Somewhere else?To where exactly?]

[Dunno.Cover your ears and close your eyes, and you wouldn't need to know that, don't you think?]

Not wanting to indulge his question, Beefeater didn't answer. She rested her body gingerly against the backrest and looked at the ceiling.

[Sugawara-sama! Please, won't you at least let me hear your voice?]

"Whatever", muttering this, Beefeater sat up. Thereupon, seemingly having remembered the message she brought, she narrated it just the way Sherry had spoken it.

["I am very much aware of the trouble I am going to cause you, but I beg you to show me some mercy. If that is not possible, please tell me you don't know me and go somewhere else. That way, I can give up"..... or so she said. Seriously, what a courageous child, she is.]

As if she had finished her business in this place, Beefeater walks away. However, Sugawara could not approach the doorway to see her off. If he approached the doorway, he would be able to see Sherry from there. It would also make him visible to her.

[Please. Just let me see you!]

Sherry kept raising her voice from outside the security net of the Knight Order, just like a baby bird calling its mother. She may be a young girl, but her voice surprisingly resounds well. Sugawara wanted her to stop now. If she kept raising her voice like that, she would surely attract predators that were stalking their weakened prey.

However, it was too late.

The members of the Oprichnina ominously made their appearance.

[Bozes-sama.]

Entering the tent, a messenger whispered something to the Acting Commander's ears.

[What did you say? A squad of sweepers?]

[Yes, a squad of about a hundred men. They have come to demand the extradition of Marquis Casel and Lady Sherry.]

The speed with which this was done exceeded her expectations, and biting her nails, "Aren't they here a little too soon?", Bozes said.

[They might have been watching this place. There were reports of suspicious shadows being sighted nearby.]

[We have no choice. Bring their representative here.]

After instructing him to do so, Bozes looked back at Casel and disappointedly spoke.

[Marquis. We can no longer take you out of the Imperial Capital.]

“Yeah, I heard you. They sure are quite enthusiastic with their work.”, Casel said in response, his hands covering his face. He then held his head up, rubbing his hands straight up from his forehead to the back of his head.

[Those sweepers are a little too obstinate.]

[They probably have their own reasons. Not that it matters to us though.]

At that moment, the entrance to the tent was opened wide, and Gimlet, the Committee Head of the Oprichnina, appeared with several of his subordinates. Looking around the tent, he spotted Casel and chuckled.

[Well, well, if it isn't the Marquis. You were here? We've been looking for you.]

[I wasn't expecting visitations from you after all.]

Shrugging his shoulders at the Marquis' curt attitude, the Committee Head walked up to Bozes.

[Splendidly done. With this, I'm sure his Highness Zorzal's opinion of Princess Piña will improve.]

Upon hearing the mention of Princess Piña's name, Bozes tilted her head. She couldn't understand why Piña's name was mentioned.

[Yes, that's right. Princess Piña's position is rather precarious right now. Her position is so delicate that your actions may bring her to danger.....]

Hearing this, Bozes turned pale and her body slightly trembled.

[Her Highness might be in danger..... because of me.....]

Seeing this, Gimlet confirmed the power of his words and affirming her words, he smiled in satisfaction.

[By the way, I feel like I've been hearing a chirping chick for a while now, but what in the world was that?]

[I- It seems like she wanted to meet someone at the Jade Palace.]

[I see. And yet, that person is ignoring her calls. How pitiful.]

The Committee Head of the Oprichnina looked sympathetic in a rather exaggerated manner. Seeing this, Casel snorted, as if he had just heard something stupid.

[I doubt she wants any sympathy from the lot that killed her parents.]

[We ourselves have lost plenty of our comrades. You should be grateful that we aren't trying to avenge them here.]

Walking up to him, the Committee Head condescendingly urged Casel to leave his seat.

[I suppose I have no choice. It seems like this is the end of the road.]

With Piña as their prisoner, Bozes could do nothing but watch in silence.

[Her behavior is admirable, but it would be best for her if she were to give up sooner. She's just wasting her time.]

The Committee Head signaled his subordinates to take Casel away. Thereupon, the members of the Oprichnina left the tent with Casel in tow. Outside, Sherry, standing just in front of the lawn separating the Jade Palace from the Empire, was shouting over and over again. The young lady looked as if she were a crying child separated from its parents. Her throat was hoarse from screaming so loudly, and her face looked like a puppy abandoned on the side of the road, with tears welling up in her eyes.

A soldier was standing by her side, keeping her from crossing the boundary. Upon such a Sherry, One of the Oprichnina approached to seize her and took her hand, saying, "Come on, let's go." However, Sherry shook off his hand and continued calling Sugawara's name.

Inside the Jade Palace, Sugawara could not hide his irritation. He got up from his seat, sat down, and got up again, repeating this cycle. When it seemed like he had made up his mind and tried to step out of his seat, his colleagues suddenly gathered around and held him down on his shoulders.

[Don't do it, Sugawara.]

[That's right. Endure it, you need to control yourself!]

Pressured by his colleagues standing around him, Sugawara sat down again.

[D*mn it, why am I this irritated!]

Not caring about the people around him, Sugawara yelled. Seemingly adverse from a growing tumor, everyone backed away from him.

[It can't be helped. The other party is someone you're actually acquainted with. Moreover, she's a little kid. It's natural for you to be upset. However, you have to bear it. It's your job. Understand?]

[D*mn it.]

Sugawara could only hold his head in his hands.

[Enough of that!]

The Committee Head twisted Sherry's arm and yelled. The intimidation brought about by his voice made Sherry's body tremble. But still, she fought to stay where she was. She was determined not to give up hope unless she was directly told to give up by Sugawara. Otherwise, she just couldn't give up.

She understands that she was being selfish.

Sugawara had no obligation to help Sherry, nor reason to tell her to give up. It would be a mistake to expect him to do so. Everything up to this point has been just her own self-serving assumptions that roused within her. She was clearly bothering Sugawara. And yet, even if that's so. No, it's probably because it was such, that she wondered if her thoughts had reached Sugawara.

And she wanted to know what Sugawara really thought of her.

She wanted to find out. For that reason, it was okay for her even if Sugawara told her, "I can't help you, so give it up." If Sugawara told her that, she would have obediently accepted it with a smile and an open mind, knowing that it would be the end of her, not holding it against him. That is why she would not move.

Until she hears the answer from Sugawara, she will not move. She would not move even a muscle away from where she stands. One of the Oprichnina, perhaps annoyed, clicked his tongue and began to carry her up as if she were a piece of luggage. Sherry tried fighting back though, clinging on to the weeds growing from the ground. However, he was an adult, while she was but a child. Even the old Casel was able to carry her up. There was no way that the strong member of the Oprichnina would not be able to lift her up.

In the blink of an eye, her legs left the ground, and with the sound of weeds tearing in her grasp, she was lifted high in the air.

[Aaaahhh!]

A scream erupted from Sherry's throat.

[No! S- Sugawara-sama! Help me!]

If all she had done was call out his name repeatedly, he could have somehow managed to endure it. However, hearing her voice as she called out for help, he wasn't able to stand it any longer. As if he had snapped, Sugawara stood up, pushed aside his colleagues who were trying to stop him, and ran outside in the blink of an eye.

[That idiot!]

Sugawara's colleagues looked on with pale faces as they watched his back. Meanwhile, Deputy Minister Shirayuri sighed deeply with a depressed look on her face. She then nodded to the officers of the Maritime Self-Defense Force who had joined the delegation, as if they had already arranged something. Then, with a somewhat refreshed smile, she looked towards the bureaucrats.

[Alright. Regardless of how much we flounder, our hands will eventually get dirty. In that case, we might as well choose to act to save someone we know. Please contact Minister Kano as soon as possible. At this moment, we will begin accepting those who seek asylum.....]

Sherry, carried like a piece of luggage by the Oprichnina, continued to resist, flailing her arms and legs. However, she was as strong as a child throwing a tantrum. She was easily overpowered by the power of an adult.

[Get your filthy hands off her, you d*mned sweeper!]

At that moment, Sugawara's voice rang out. Hearing his words, everyone turned at once. Sugawara, who had rushed in gasping for breath, was supporting himself with his hands on his knees. It seemed that he had run as fast as he could.

Seeing him, Gimlet said disdainfully, "My, oh my, Envoy-dono. Do you have business with us?" He asked. Thereupon, as if trying to suppress his rising emotions, "I told you to get your hands off her", Sugawara said. However, Sugawara was stopped from stepping outside the grass line by the outstretched spear of the sentres, and, unable to get any closer, repeatedly stuck out his index finger at Sherry.

[Why should we follow the instructions of an enemy?]

[I'd appreciate it if unrelated people keep out of our matters.]

The members of the Oprichnina said their piece. However, Sugawara refuted his words.

[I'm related to that girl, so I'm not unrelated! I have every right to interject!]

Hearing his words though, Beefeater annoyingly interjected.

[Oh, come on. You saying you're related to her doesn't really convince anyone here. What kind of relationship are you talking about? You just saying you're related to her won't make the situation change.]

In response to this provocative question, Sugawara took a deep breath and desperately shouted.

[Waiting for her to turn 16, I was planning to make her my wife! That's the kind of relationship we have! That's why, release that girl! I'm taking her back!]

[Alright, she's got the approval! Get that girl inside!]

If one were to think about it, it is a strange logic. Even if Sugawara declared that she was to be his wife, no procedure had yet been completed. However, to make people take action, they need a convincing reason. Conversely, as long as the reason is emotionally satisfying, it will work as a sufficient trigger. For the Officers of the Knight Order, who were angry at the arrogance of the Oprichnina, Sugawara declaring "Sherry is my wife" had enough power to make them move.

Quickly reacting to Beefeater's order was the soldier who had been blocking Sherry from crossing the boundary. He snatched up the girl, who was carried on the sweeper's shoulder, and threw her toward Sugawara, as if he were throwing some luggage.

[Make sure you catch her, ladykiller!]

The sweeper reaches out to retrieve her. However, just as his toes stepped on the grass marking Jade Palace's territory, Beefeater quickly drew her sword and cut the man down. Thereupon, she gave her order.

[Form up!]

As if they had been waiting for this order, the soldiers of the Knight Order stood in front of the members of the Oprichnina. All of them stared at the Oprichnina with eyes like bloodthirsty predators, with their hand on the hilt of their sword or lined up with their shield and spear. Behind them, Sherry clung to the man, while he held the girl in his arms. This would have been the most exciting and famous scene in a stage play. However, it was a shame that they had to turn their backs to such a stage.

[Even though you gave me that pearl necklace, I ended up using it on the way here.]

[Don't worry about that. I can just buy you another one.]

Listening to the conversation behind their back, one could already imagine the scene happening.



However, that alone made the scene quite exciting. No, it is precisely because they had to rely on their imagination that the rate of beautification is so high, making it even more exciting. The Knight Order, with its high ratio of women and old people, is overwhelmingly vulnerable to such romance scenes. In everyone's mind, a composition was neatly formed, as is often the case in plays with a rewarding-good-and-punishing-evil theme, where two people in love and the dastardly ruffians who stand in the way of their love.

And now, the heroic role of exterminating these ruffians was held by them. At that moment, they felt like they were standing on a grand stage. A gush of power welling up from within them, hostility filled their bodies. So much so that they even struggled to wait for orders. Still, being well-trained, they were like drawn arrows, waiting for the moment their superiors would let go of their reins and turn them against their prey. The Oprichnina, facing them head-on, responded with fury. They believe they are the righteous ones. People can act more brutally when they are convinced that they are doing the right thing.

And because they know they're acting brutally, they are unable to let go of their position that they are righteous. The whispers of fear of what would happen if they failed in their mission also contributed to their ferocity. The unrestrained scolding of the incoming Praetor stuck in their ears like an auditory hallucination, and the image of a colleague punished simply for not being proactive in his duties were burned in their minds' eyes.

Even the slightest sign of trepidation could tip off a colleague that the man was not up to the task. If you don't snitch on anyone, even that can be accused of being a sign of negligence. Since the formation of the Oprichnina, they have always felt as if a cold blade were pressed against their backs. The only way to escape its sharp edge was to move forward. With these thoughts in mind, the members of the Oprichnina glared at the Knights opposite them.

[Y- You b*stards! Do you intend to rebel against the Empire!?!]

In response to his words, "Hmph, don't be ridiculous", Beefeater snickered.

[Our actions are perfectly legal, a security action based on the Diplomatic Agreement. Under the Imperial Decree, anyone crossing this boundary must have the approval of the Japanese government. Do you have permission from the Japanese government to enter?]

[Who doesn't need anything of that sort to capture criminals!]

The Oprichnina, which was trying to force its way onto the grounds with great vigor, also switched their broom to their weapons, and a few moments of standoff ensued between them and the Knights.

[Rout them out!]

Seeing the two within their arm's reach, the Committee Head, unwilling to give up, ordered his subordinates to rush in. Since he could not retreat, he had no choice but to give the order.

[You lot, protect the bride! Draw your swords!]

With Beefeater's warcry, the Knights unsheathed their dazzlingly beautiful weapons. Even though their opponents were people under Crown Prince Zorzal's command, they showed no sign of hesitation.

[You're just asking for a beating! Women and geezers should just get out of the way!]

[Anyone who interferes with another person's love life will be better off eaten alive by Kobolds!]

Amid a flurry of curses, Beefeater heartily proclaimed.

[This is the envoy's mansion protected by diplomatic immunity! A foreign country beyond the Imperial Authority's reach! I, Beefeater E Caty, swear upon the Emperor's name that I will strike down anyone who attempts to force their way in! Charge! Forward!]

With the clash of the two armies, the battle finally began. In the blink of an eye, casualties fell in both camps. Still, the Knight Order's soldiers, who were more than a little moved by the crying girls and the man who ran out to protect her, were not intimidated. Their hearts were filled with animosity and anger toward the sweepers. And it was obviously a heavy burden for the sweepers, who were lightly armed and had only faced unarmed opponents up to this point.

At the moment of the clash, they were evenly matched, but when they saw their comrades falling one after another, their will to fight started waning, and they were easily crushed. They were speared, pushed down with shields, and stabbed with swords, and they died without time to regret their misfortunes. Their helmets modeled after Kobolds were smashed, and a great amount of blood spurted out mercilessly, forming a reddish-black stream on the earth.

Faced with the tragedy brought upon by the decision he made, Sugawara trembled with fear. He then covered Sherry's eyes, trying not to show the bloody hell that had broken out before his eyes. But Sherry, her face wet with tears, shook her head to escape from Sugawara's hands and spoke.

[No, I have to look. Please watch over me, Sugawara-sama, and rejoice that you have chosen Sherry's safety over the tragedy that befell these people whose names I do not know. If it bothers you, you are free to scorn me, as I came here knowing that this would happen. Thus, for my own sake, I can't turn my eyes away from those who are dying here. Please allow me to look at them.]

Hearing this, Sugawara was overwhelmed by the enormity of her resolve. Thereupon, he realized something. Saving or protecting someone is an act that may result in such a sacrifice. Of course, there may be situations where no one needs to sacrifice. There may be times when everything goes well and the situation ends with a big happy ending.

However, that is not the norm.

There is always the possibility that, in some cases, everything will backfire, and a string of casualties will ensue. They must be prepared for that. But even if that's so, people will still send specialists to the fire, to the various scenes of crimes, and to the battlefield to help others. Otherwise, they will not be able to protect anyone from the malice of fate, much less from the malice of mankind. Those who fear to shed blood, whether it's from a friend or from a foe, must less themselves, they won't be able to protect anyone.

Faced upon such a situation, Sugawara thought. Why didn't he realize something this simple? No, he knew, but he did not understand. Seeing it in person like this made him realize it, even if he didn't want to. That the him before this has had a blessed life.

Knowing that they could handle random criminals by escaping and calling 110, they haven't thought about the fact that the possibility that the police officer who rushes to the scene will die in his place isn't zero. When they cry out for help for the children trapped in a fire, they haven't thought that this act will drive the firefighters close to their deaths. When they run to the hospital for fear of an unknown contagious disease outbreak, they do not consider how likely it is that the doctors and nurses who are treating them are more likely to be infected with their disease, compared to the average person living in the community. When they plan a reckless climb up the mountains or have an accident while setting up their fishing gear on a dangerous beach in the middle of bad weather, they think that a rescue helicopter would fly in their rescue anywhere, anytime. However, they never thought about how likely it is that the aircraft will suddenly lose control and crash. They can go about our daily lives without considering these things at all. However, this is not at all surprising. In a sense, it's as unnatural as something suddenly floating in the air. If such a happy state of affairs persists, it's because someone has worked hard to maintain it.

They should be prepared for that even before they stand before the funeral of those who have been killed in the line of duty. That's something one must understand. They are willing to die, not because they are paid to do so, but to fulfill the mission they have set for themselves. When viewed in terms of the price of life, the salary they receive is a surprisingly small amount.

He must think about this again.

He wondered..... Is the numerical formula of putting dozens of people at risk in order to save just one person really viable? Even so, responding to the call for help makes one human. It's impossible for people to consider profits and losses around those times.

His community is made up of a highly divided society. In the name of division of labor, they leave to others the misfortunes that, in the primitive age, would have been something they had to take care of themselves. Because they don't have the strength to do so, they ask those who have accumulated the skills and strength to take over for them. By doing so, they create a safe space and gain peace of mind on a daily basis. By doing this, they could also remain uninvolved.

As long as one benefits from the safety that comes from someone else putting themselves in danger, even if they aren't directly involved, their hands are undoubtedly stained by the blood that someone else has spilled. It's strange for one to think that they aren't dirty. It's the equivalent of eating meat and fish every day and claiming that you have never killed an animal. It's the cowardice of turning a blind eye to

this fact and believing that one's hands are clean and that one is a good person that leads to all kinds of mistakes.

Sugawara doesn't consider himself a good person, but he doesn't have definite consciousness that his hands had been stained. But for once, standing before the battle, he had to accept that he was one of the perpetrators. He could no longer look away. And thus, the two of them, bathed in blood and with streams of blood soaking their feet, stared at the battle unfolding in front of them, at the deaths of others unfolding before them.

[Sugawara-sama. Do you regret your decision?]

If he feared making the sacrifice, he could have chosen to stay out of it and watch from the sidelines. However, shaking his head, Sugawara said, "No, I don't regret it."

If he had just stood on the sidelines and watched things happen, he would be abandoning Sherry..... In other words, she would become the sacrifice he would make. That is to say, no matter what decision he makes, his hands would be sullied. The only difference between his choice is whether the blood in his hands would be the enemies' blood or Sherry's blood.

Yes, no matter what he did, his hands will be sullied and the stain will continue to grow thicker. It's not something that he can just wash away. Neither remorse nor regret will never purify his being. This sinful deed he had done would be something he must carry with him for the rest of his life. In that case, what would be the best thing he could do? What could he do? As the perpetrator, he must bear the guilt of this sin. If he wants to do something, he should think about how he can make "the least amount of sacrifice". That was the conclusion Sugawara arrived in. Thinking about this though, he thought about what Kano had told him.

[So this is why Minister Kano told us to wait huh.]

Kano hadn't told them not to do anything. What he told them was "to wait", because he was working out the ways and measures, and inferring the timing that would require the least sacrifice. However, Kano's calculations were fragile. Sugawara saw Sherry alone as more important than the others. To him, Sherry's

safety came first, and the dozens or hundreds of deaths it caused were a trivial sacrifice. This is Sugawara's crime, and realizing this, he held his head in his hands.

[I might not be able to buy another pearl necklace.]

When one makes a mistake on their job, they may be fired and become unemployed. If that happens, he won't be able to afford to buy expensive things. However, Sherry softly giggled and replied.

[That you had intended to buy me one makes Sherry happy.]

Sherry had a small smile on her lips. Perhaps, she may never be able to smile as innocently as before again. That was what Sugawara thinks. Stepping into the lawn of the Jade Palace, Casel approached the two of them and tapped their shoulder.

[Son-in-law. Sherry..... Should we go now?]

According to the Imperial Customs, Casel is supposed to be Casel's guardian. In other words, he would be Sherry's stepfather. By Beefeater's logic, if he's her stepfather, he would have to accompany his stepdaughter to her wedding as their second. Just like that, Sugawara headed for the Jade Palace accompanied by Sherry and Casel.

* * * * *

At the Prime Minister's Office, Foreign Minister Kano and Defense Minister Natsume, who had come directly to the Prime Minister's Office after they realized that their conversation over the phone was heading nowhere, were engaged in tough negotiations with Prime Minister Morita. Kano, for example, looked so intense that one would have thought he was threatening the Prime Minister with a yakuza gang with the squint in his eyes and the belligerent tone of voice.

[I want you to authorize the plan to evacuate Vice Minister Shirayuri and her group immediately!]

Morita, however, was just taking it in stride.

[Errr, no. We can't.]

Hearing his response, Natsume, restraining the enraged Kano, spoke.

"

"

[And why is that?]

[If we make any big moves now, those were observing the situation and the media in Alnus will know about it. That's why we can't do that.]

[I don't think we have any choice at this point, do we? It's more important to get Shirayuri and her group out of that dangerous place. Am I mistaken?]

[Wouldn't they be alright? It's not like they're defenseless. The Knights over there will do their best, won't they?]

[Excuse my rudeness, Prime Minister, but how long do you think they can hold out? Frankly speaking, they don't have much time left.]

[But doesn't this evacuation plan call for temporarily occupying a part of the Royal Capital? Why don't you just capture the entire Royal Capital and end this war then? With our personnel, we can definitely do that.]

[Just as we had explained to the public, Japan doesn't have the capability to completely finance an entire empire right now.....]

As if to cover Morita's explanation, Morita said.

[You know, this isn't just about our people. Various other countries were also watching our movements.]

[It's just as I said, isn't it? I told you not to accept their observers, but you just had to ignore that and decided to accept them. You want to act like some goody two shoes to everyone, and this is the result.]

Upon his words, the Prime Minister's mouth twitched.

[What's the point of bringing that up now!?!]

"

"

Natsume's rosy cheeks, which made him often teased as a boyish old man, turned even redder as he intervened in what he was seen as pointless banter.

[Let me ask you then, Prime Minister. What do you intend to do in this situation?]

[Haven't I said it already? We'll wait, at least until the observers and the media leave the Special Region. After they are gone, you can do as you please.]

[You mean we're just supposed to leave them like this for another week, doing nothing!?!]

[We'll just have to make them exert some effort to hold out in this situation.]

Slamming his hands on the Prime Minister's desk, Natsume leaned forward, bringing his face close to Morita.

[And I've already been telling you this, but that's impossible! Can you even imagine what will happen to the pro-peace faction who have taken refuge in the Jade Palace once the Knight Order and their soldiers have been breached?In the end, it will be you who will be criticized for your inaction.]

[The fact that this happened would be Kano-san's responsibility. In the first place, you weren't supposed to accept the request for refuge from the pro-peace faction, were you? That's why I had been relieved before this. And yet, why is this happening?]

[It's a decision made by those on-site. Nothing more, nothing less.]

[In that case, have those who were on-site do something about it. Why are they bringing their mess to us?]

[It's our job to clean up the messes made by those on-site, isn't it? We are here, in a safe place, and no matter what we do, we can't see what's happening in the field. If they decide they have to act, we have no choice but to accept it!]

[Are you saying that we should just let those on-site run wild?]

"

"

[You're wrong! We're the ones who are supposed to follow-up with them to keep them from running wild! If we just stand idly by here, the field may run even more out of control!]

[In that case, wouldn't it be better if we'd just take over the Imperial Capital? Since you lot want this war to end quickly, you want to tilt the country in favor of turning the field into a blazing hell to restore stability to that war-torn region?]

[Can't you listen to what people are saying? First of all, you have to properly explain to the public that it would be unreasonable to occupy the Imperial Capital. Our country did not send the JSDF to the other side of the "gate" to conquer the Empire. We just want peace and reparations. Wasn't that our basic policy that Houjou-san established when he was the Prime Minister?]

[But you see, there's no way that the idiotic media would remember such a thing. All of them will definitely criticize us. They'll say we're deliberately stalling the war. That we're standing idly without doing anything in a winnable war. There are even some smart-asses in our own party that's telling us to occupy the Empire and seize every last bit of their resources. If they defected en masse, a motion of no confidence in

the Ministry will definitely be held. Then, an election would happen, which we would lose. Are you sure about this?]

Morita insisted that, in his own way, he was thinking from a broader perspective. However, an incomprehensible gulf had developed between Morita, who saw things only from the standpoint of the leader of the governing party, and Kano and Natsume, who spoke from the standpoint of Japan.

[I would rather lose an election than regret not doing what I should have done.]

[I, too, believe it is our responsibility to make decisions when they need to be made.]

Upon hearing Kano and Natsume's words, Morita shook his head in disbelief.

[So you two are telling me to quit being the Prime Minister?]

Morita looked at them both with a disappointed expression on his face.

[I understand. If you two insist so much, I'll give my approval. However, you'll be taking responsibility for this. Is that okay?]

[Yes, that's fine. Whatever responsibility that is, I accept it.]

[Do what you want then!]

And just like that, the two left the Prime Minister's residence. As they sat in the back seat of their official state car, Kano spoke.

[Sorry about that, Natsume-san. You got the short end of the stick as well.]

After Natsume responded with “Don’t worry about it. I was prepared from the start” with a light smile on his lips, he pulled out his phone from his pocket.

[It’s Natsume. The Prime Minister’s permission has been received. Start the operation immediately.]

With those words, the black official state car in which they were riding blended into the night of Nagata-chou.

* * * * *

For Mochizuki Noriko, life in Alnus was a life of idleness. She had no hope for the future, and spent her days idly waiting for the time to pass. However, when a delegation from the United Nations and a group of reporters from the media arrived in Alnus, she suddenly found herself very busy. She was seen by the media especially by foreign journalists as a coveted talent, as they compete with each other for her services. Of course, there are also others who can simply translate the language. For example, there are other people on the Special Region’s side, such as Elder Sage Cato of the Alnus Community, the children who are engaged in business with the Japanese, and the vendors.

But they were not cooperative, to say the least.

The media had quickly given up on the idea of asking them to interpret for them. Interpretation isn’t just a matter of being able to communicate their thoughts. For the press, interpretation is an understanding of both sides’ cultures and way of thinking, as well as the language itself. It was difficult for the children of the Special Region, where the concept of “news reporting” did not exist, to understand the meaning of news gathering. In this sense, the trainees dispatched by the Imperial Princess Piña would be more suitable for the job. They were originally intended to serve as interpreters, and they were working hard to

understand the Japanese language, Japanese society and Japanese culture (albeit they were heading in a somewhat skewed direction).

Unfortunately, however, it's no longer possible to ask them to interpret for them

They had developed a serious dislike for the media over what the media deemed as a "minor misunderstanding". They are noble ladies of the Imperial nobility. That is why they hate people who have no sense of propriety. However, from the very first day they set foot in the Special Region, the media has been asking them rude questions, flaunting their money to show off, and nearly broke down to a bloodshed for their attempt to push the proud women around. Since then, the girls have completely disregarded the media.

However, as the girls are the Imperials within the immediate area, they were very important targets of interviews. The fact that they can no longer even talk to them makes the staff wonder if they will be able to do their job properly in the future. In fact, such incidents are a major hindrance to their work. Returning to the topic at hand, it's Japan that possesses the largest pool of interpreters. More than 200 JSDF officers and Ministry of Foreign Affairs bureaucrats, led by members of six reconnaissance units, are already proficient in the Special Region's language to the extent that they have no trouble communicating. Even if they could speak in broken language, such a number would already be more than enough. However, the journalists could not rely on them.

They are all government officials. A truly autonomous journalist would want to understand the situation in the Special Region without the filter placed by the Japanese government. And so, they asked.

[Aren't there any civilians we could ask?]

And thus, Noriko, who was the only civilian allowed to stay in the Special Region, had been selected for that job. Rather, requests of such nature incessantly came her way. Of course, any journalist in their right mind would know the reason for her presence in the Special Region. The tragedy that befell her and her family was widely reported. However, they see that as no reason to waste the skills she has acquired in her desperate attempts to survive, namely the language of the region. They negotiated, persuaded, begged, and coaxed her. Noriko, who at first seemed to find the request bothersome, was compelled by the eagerness of their request. And thus began her busy days.

[Noriko. We'd like to interview that cat girl in the store, but can we ask you to interpret for us tomorrow?]

[Even though there were some holes in her vocabulary, she can speak Japanese, you know?]

[Please. My people weren't actually very good at Japanese. They want to do the interview in French. Besides, after what happened yesterday, I think they learnt their lesson. We're counting on you.]

[In that case, stop asking any strange question. You're the ones who'll get in trouble.]

The other day, this French guy asked a cat-eared waitress working in a restaurant a somewhat vulgar question, which earned him a sharp cat punch on the side of his face. Noriko isn't the kind of person who would translate even such joking questions with a straight face, but when it comes to those remarks, Noriko shows her earnestness and uncompromising attitude. This is because when she was abducted by the Empire, she had been forced to suffer too much due to misunderstandings and troubles caused by her inability to understand the language. Noriko's temperament has become such that she cannot tolerate lies, laxity, or impropriety.

[Noriko! Recording of an interview at a bar. Let's start!]

[Eh, I thought you said you'd start at 8:00 pm? Also, this isn't a bar, this is a restaurant.]

[No matter how I look at this place though, this really looks like a pub..... Also, it's already 8:00 pm.]

[Ahh, that won't do. We need to go now.]

Noriko runs off with the cameraman and others. They entered the restaurant at night with a group of reporters from North America, who looked like they were getting tired of waiting. A large Chinook helicopter flies over the twinkling stars. The sound of their explosive roars were so loud that their recordings were interrupted several times. The JGSDF has more than 50 Chinooks in its fleet, but only 11 of them, including spares, have been brought to the Special Region.

And tonight, ten of them took off. A large formation of other helicopters also took off and followed them.

[They're so noisy. Is it always like this?]

[That isn't the case. It seems like there's something special happening today.]

As they looked up, the helicopters disappeared to the east.

[Alright, let's get back on track and resume recording!]

There are some difficult people in the cafeteria who are uncomfortable with having a TV camera pointed at them and become angry, but those who are uncomfortable quickly leave their seats, leaving only those who generally react well. Those who remain are generally in a good mood, and they answer in basically the same manner as when dealing with a drunk customer. They don't seem to understand the purpose of the questions, but they would answer amiably as long as they didn't interfere with their work, so the joint reporting team..... North America, the EU, the Coalition of Emerging Nations, and Japan, who set foot in the Special Region, each had at least one camera in the cafeteria. good material for television.

(T/N: Coalition of Emerging Nations may be referring to BRICS, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.)

The sight of so many different kinds of Demi-Humans gathered in one place is quite good material for television. The common topics that were brought up was, first of all, their feelings toward Japan and how they viewed the activities of the JSDF in Alnus. Next, they move on to questions that ask their personal thoughts about the war and the extent of their knowledge about other countries. In addition, questions about culture and customs sometimes followed, based on their interest in the Demi-Human they're interviewing.

Although not the French journalist mentioned earlier, questions that would embarrass the person being asked were sometimes asked with a straight face, and Noriko often had a hard time cleaning up the small tragedies that occurred each time. Nevertheless, Noriko's impression of the JSDF expressed here in Alnus was that it was all very good.

[Were they telling the truth?]

"

"

However, it was not the reporting team dispatched from the emerging countries, whose main focus was on the use of anti-Japanese ideology in their policies that had asked this, but rather the team from Japan that expressed skepticism about these reactions of the residents of Alnus. He says it is strange to get so much goodwill from the inhabitants of a war-torn land. This was a statement by a man named Komurazaki or something like that. This man was the most senior member of the team dispatched to Japan, so he was looked up to by everyone in this joint team, which included personnel from various media outlets such as broadcasters and newspapers.

[But given the city's origins, there wouldn't be any factor that warrants their animosity, so I don't think there's anything strange about it.]

Nanami Kuribayashi, a member of the joint reporting team, raised her hand and countered. Nanami is the younger sister of that Kuribayashi who had played a major role in the rescue of Noriko. Though not for that reason, Noriko supplemented Kuribayashi's opinion with the knowledge she had gained during her stay in Alnus.

[The people here have never been involved in the battle or suffered any damage. So when we asked them about their impressions of the war, I don't think they had a clear idea of what they were talking about. Even the JSDF only gave them the impression that they were protected from banditry.]

Alnus was essentially an empty wilderness. The city began as temporary housing for refugees from the protected Coda village. Since then, Alnus has never been involved in a war.

[In other words, this is a Potemkin village.]

Potemkin villages are the villages and towns visited by the Empress Yekaterina during her Imperial Russian pilgrimages. They were always large, well-designed structures with newer and more splendid buildings, and the serfs who lived there were well-fed and dressed in good clothes. The Empress Yekaterina, however, was apparently satisfied that her reign was going well. The village was ironically named after the trickster and called Potemkin's Village.

Komurazaki summarized Alnus as a village staged for the media.

[In the first place, don't you think it's strange how we can't move freely around the Special Region? This place is definitely staged. Once we leave the area where the JSDF breathes, people's reactions towards them should be the exact opposite. The fact that there are restrictions on people not leaving the area for security reasons is proof of that.]

People often project shadows of themselves onto others, and then question or criticize them based on these shadows. For example, there is a religious group that continues to be investigated by the police because of incidents in the past, and the parties involved criticize each investigation, calling it a suppression of religious freedom. However, the religious group calls other faiths "evil sects" and does not allow its followers to question or even leave the group.

Another political ideology group loudly claims that its freedom of speech and association is threatened whenever it is investigated by the police, but in fact, there is no such thing as freedom of thought or speech within the group, and the state, which operates on the same ideology, even has an ideology prison. In short, people think that "what they usually do is something that others do too". Komurazaki's statement also highlights his attitude toward his daily work.

Flipping through her schedule book, Noriko made a suggestion.

[I think there's an inspection team going to a nearby village tomorrow. I could accompany you.]

[The JSDF will just show us what they want to show us, right? It's worthless.]

Noriko, as expected, laughed at this.

[You guys just cut out what you want and show the public what you want too, don't you? Doesn't that mean what you're doing is also worthless?]

Hearing this, Komurazaki raised his voice.

[I'm carrying out my mission as a journalist!]

[Is that so? I don't see how you're keeping neutrality for having a preconceived notion that it's strange that there are no negative opinions among the people you've interviewed. The truth is what you see and hear, right.....]

[There's no such thing as neutrality in journalism!]

Noriko was stunned by this. It's good to have a sense of mission. The question is which direction that sense of mission is pointing. However, if a journalist denies their own neutrality, then the information they give can no longer be trusted. Despite being a layman, or rather, it's because she was a layman that Noriko thought of this. Puzzled, Noriko asked.

[Is that all right? Even if it's difficult to be completely neutral, shouldn't you at least make an effort to remain neutral? If you guys aren't neutral, who are we, the audience, supposed to trust?]

[That's not the responsibility of the media. We're just doing business here. We do what we can to make money.]

[That's quite irresponsible of you. That explains why you don't bat an eye when reporting strange things.]

That is why they don't oppose the violent release of documentary-style propaganda films composed of hidden shots, malicious editing, and narration, saturated with the power of money, in the name of freedom of expression. This is because they don't care about the claims of those who are hidden in the film. When the people pointed this out to them, they had already decided to respond with "Say your complaints after you actually watched it". At first glance, this may sound like a reasonable statement, but in other words, what they're saying is "Pay up first".

This clearly shows that they are determined to spin a system that will line their own pockets first. They pretend to lend an ear to the criticisms that come out of this, saying, "That's a topic for the future," but they think they can just put it behind them, saying, "Yes, yes, let's move on, next topic," and that's good enough for them. All they left behind was a messy, trampled "something" with what they had done.

Such is the freak show nature of the mass media.

It's not that what they're doing is evil. They, too, make their living by spinning the system, so if one were to ask if what they're doing is natural, one could say that it is. It's also fine for them to do their best to maintain their business. And it is not wrong for them to be willing to deal with any kind of information as long as the product they are dealing with is something that can excite people's interest and attract their attention. The only thing Noriko can't forgive is how they proclaim that they "report the truth".

To Noriko, this man Komurazaki seemed to symbolize the Japanese media itself.

[What the hell is with those rude remarks? Are you trying to insult me?]

[Oh, no, not at all. Just thinking about how I would be reported if I were to insult Komurazaki-san really terrifies me. Even now, there are enough terrible things being written about me. It should be pretty clear to me about how the Japanese media isn't what we, the audience, expects it to be.]

Since her rescue, Noriko has been the subject of curious stares. In particular, she has been mentally tortured by the weekly magazines, sports newspapers, and news variety shows that try to supplement the events of her captivity by Zorzal with their vile fantasies. The fact that the contents of these programs were often accurate made it all the more difficult for her to deal with them. The reason Noriko is staying in the Special Region and not returning to Tokyo,..... isn't only because she has lost her home and family.

Of course, Furumurazaki knows this.

That is why he was frightened by Noriko's contemptuous glare. He was afraid that he would be seen as one of them. He was already in the same boat, and it was too late for that, but the way he thought he's different is already irredeemable.

[Ahh, I forgot. That's right, isn't it? You were saved by the JSDF. Of course that would make you side with the JSDF. If you are such a person, you would be offended if someone looks at the JSDF in a critical way. And isn't Kuribayashi-kun's sister a JSDF officer too? It would certainly explain why you can't see things neutrally. However, how about you look over there?]

Komurazaki pointed in the direction of the runway. The long, vertical runway extends to the southern end of the hill and can be seen from the streets of Alnus. The night lights illuminated a group of about two hundred men lying there with their equipment acting as their pillow.

[Look at that lazy lot. When the public isn't paying attention to them, that's what they're up to. The JSDF is simply a gathering of such people.]

Furumurazaki quickly wrapped up the conversation, seemingly as if there's no point in having a serious argument with Noriko, and said such things out loud. In short, he decided to ignore Noriko. And at this moment, Noriko was thinking the same thing. Noriko also thought there's no point in dealing with such a man. He is just good at using the media's profit system to get his thoughts out there. If a freak show that calls itself journalism can use the power of money to spread information convenient for them, he can do whatever it wants.

And at that moment, Noriko thought. She too will take advantage of that. She will distribute the information that is truly necessary for the recipients. From a different point of view, it's possible to say that Komurazaki is a benefactor to Noriko. For from this moment on, Noriko, who had no choice but to simply pass the time as she was swept along, actively decided how to live her life, even if it was out of animosity.

* * * * *

On the other hand, unlike Japan's mass media, the members of the observer team sent by the government of various countries seemed to be satisfied with the interpreters provided by the JSDF. Today, they are walking around the Alnus Hill area, guided by a public relations officer sent by the Japanese government. Anyway, they were feeling covetous and were willing to see, hear, and touch anything and everything, whether they were uniformed military officers or plain-clothed civilians. They want to see what kind of place the Special Region is, and to confirm the extent of the discrepancy between the information disclosed so far by the Japanese government and the reality.

The observation route was to go to a restaurant where they could see at a glance the large number of races living in the Special Region, where they exchanged a few words with the people of the region, even though they would clash with other TV stations for the recovery of information, and then visit the Union Office and the temporary homes that was built when Alnus was also known as a refugee camp.

[So, you're saying that the refugees from these two temporary home units formed a business entity called the Joint Cooperative and started doing business, which, small as it may be, led to the construction of this town?]

[Yes. That's correct, but our involvement was only minor and only at the start. We just gave the locals the chance to build this place.]

The female public relations officer, First Lieutenant Himeji, emphasized that it was the refugees who created this city. Still, a woman dispatched by the French government exclaimed in Japanese with admiration, "It's wonderful". Since Japanese is becoming a good means of communication in Alnus, the members of the observer team were all fluent in Japanese. Perhaps, this is because they want to negotiate directly with the local residents. The question is what they hope to gain from direct negotiations, but since they were allowed to visit, the JSDF weren't allowed to restrict them and can only monitor them.

[This is quite a well-implemented self-sufficiency program. I would like to introduce it as an aid program for developing regions in our country. Could we see some of the more detailed papers later?]

Thereupon, Himeji seemed like she couldn't find the words to say.

[.....Errr, you see.....]

[What, are you going to keep even that a secret? I hope you won't be that stingy.]

[N- No, it's not that we're being stingy. I- I'll ask the one in charge of that.]

First Lieutenant Himeji, who had never expected such a high evaluation, "Did we have any self-sufficiency program in place?" she thought to herself, as sweat began to pour from his forehead. It was hard to believe that Second Lieutenant Itami had built this refugee camp with such a "self-sufficiency program" in mind. In her opinion, it was probably a haphazard, spur-of-the-moment decision, and it just happened to be the right one.

[May I ask who's the one in charge of that? I would like to meet them.]

[U- Ummm, it's..... S- Second Lieutenant Itami.]

Upon hearing those words, everyone's eyes lit up.

[That Lieutenant Itami!?!]

[You know him?]

[What are you talking about, First Lieutenant? He's the one who saved many civilians in the defense of the Double Bridge and was also called to the National Diet for chasing away a Dragon to protect the refugees in this town, right? And more recently, wasn't there also the time where he went into the enemy Capital to rescue those abductees? That's a great achievement if you ask me.]

[Yes, well, I suppose.]

"Arehh?", Himeji tilted her head. Although they are supposed to be talking about the same person, she can't help but feel that they are talking about different people. Rather, she thought they were definitely talking about different people.

But when she thought about it again, it was that Itami they were talking about.

There's a rumor going around in the unit that he has also become a noble who owns a huge amount of assets (a huge diamond ore) which assures him ease and comfort for the rest of his life and was even bestowed the title of Lord in this Special Region.

[Arehh?]

Himeji felt that his evaluation of Itami was about to become incredibly distorted. What has gone wrong? The monster that should have looked so hideous and unsightly suddenly looked beautiful. Having such a frightening thought though made Himeji's skin crawl.

[They're talking about..... that tax thieving slacker of an otaku, right? That dunce who got no hope in getting ahead in life?]

Himeji tried hard to recall the rumors she had heard about Itami on a regular basis and reconfirmed her perception and the evaluation derived from it. However, the guests from overseas were unaware of Itami's daily work attitude, and his reputation was very high, probably due to the deceptive information released by the JGSDF Special Forces Group.

[I see, so he's the one who created the self-sufficiency program huh.]

[The program certainly turned out to be excellent, but that's only possible because of the business opportunities here in the Special Region. I think we should also keep an eye on that aspect. If they can develop to such a large scale just by bringing in a few daily necessities from Japan, I have high expectations for how far they can go if a major trading company is entrusted with this project in earnest.]

A government official from the US spoke up as if he were speaking for the business community. Perhaps, they really may have sent for such a purpose.

[It will be interesting to see how the Japanese government plans to proceed with the development of the Special Region. It will be interesting to see how much of the market our country is able to get involved in.]

[But from what I see in these materials, I think it would be best to start with a joint venture with Alnus Community. It seems that they are expanding their branches in the Imperial Capital and the neighboring countries, centering on Alnus. It's just, I'm not sure if they understand the concept of a joint enterprise yet.]

[If there's going to be a problem, it's the narrowness of the "Gate". It's about 16 yards wide, right? I'm also concerned about the geographical conditions of Ginza. If the roads are that congested, mass transportation is impossible. This would reduce its attractiveness by half. The Japanese government should consider measures to deal with this as soon as possible.]

[Rather than depriving the Special Region of goods and resources, our country was considering the approval of immigrants instead. We were strongly suggesting this to the Japanese government. I hope they will agree to this request.]

A scholar-looking man dispatched from China was saying something like that. The others wryly smiled when they heard this. It was clear that he was speaking directly from the policy of his home government, which wanted to prevent a decline in its influence as a resource-exporting country. China is known for its intimidation diplomacy by threatening embargoes on natural resources and indirect invasions using immigrants.

[By the way, how is the public order around here? Since you're still at war with the empire, it can't be good, right? Even today, things seemed strangely tense. It seems as if you're about to conduct some large-scale operation.]

To this, Imazu, Head of the Second Department, replied.

[Alnus and the nearby village we'll be visiting tomorrow are firmly under our control. But past that area, security is deteriorating due to banditry and Imperial guerrilla activities. Especially recently, there has been a political upheaval in the Empire, and the military has been active. As you can imagine, the troops are tense, because they're prepared to respond to their movements.]

Unlike usual, Imazu was speaking with a broken accent today. He seems to be trying to speak in Japanese using words that's easy to understand for the foreign guests.

[Weren't you in the middle of peace talks?]

Hearing his words though, the French woman from earlier voiced a question.

[We've yet to actually sign a cease-fire deal. It was within the bounds of possibility that the Empire was conducting military operations in order to make the peace as favorable for them as possible.]

[On the Empire side, if things continue as they are now, signing such a cease-fire deal would be tantamount to unconditional surrender. They were probably trying to reel back this situation a bit.]

A military officer dispatched from Russia added.

[The question is how they're gonna do that.]

A military personnel sent by the US muttered. The fact is, there are not so many options available to the disadvantaged side in terms of strength, weapons, and other factors. If they can't win even if they try to do it properly, the only tactics that the inferior side can choose are to build a strong fortification to protect it or to use guerrilla warfare to hide themselves and exploit an opening. The US military officers' expressions were bitter because of their experience of being plagued by guerrilla warfare in Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Russian military officers also have a similar expression on their faces because they have suffered so much in Afghanistan and Chechnya.

[According to our information, the Imperials have decided to switch to guerrilla tactics.]

[Handling this would take quite an effort. I wish you the best of luck in your peace talks.]

The uniformed soldiers seemed to have a premonition that this war might be surprisingly dragged out. At that moment, looking at her watch, Himeji spoke.

[Well then, let's move on. We are going to see some special local products in the Union's warehouse. Dinner and free time will be after that.]

The observer team followed Himeji in a group to the Community's storehouse. After confirming at the Community's warehouse what kind of crops could be harvested in the Special Region, or conversely, what kind of products would be in demand in the Special Region, the group had dinner, spent some of their free time at the PX (Garrison Procurement Department), and then entered the JASDF area at the foot of the hill.

The purpose was to see the facilities and circumstances of the JSDF. The JASDF area is, in essence, the area around the runway and the hangars that accompany it. However, there is no strict division between the two areas, so they could also see the JGSDF personnel coming and going, and the cover of various JGSDF artillery guns within the reach of the nighttime lights. In some places, the lights were unnaturally turned off, suggesting that there was something in the reach of those lights that they did not want the observers to see.

At that moment, they heard the sound of jet engines and looked at the runway. Two F-4 Phantoms were about to take off. Two more Phantoms were emerging from the hangar, bringing the total number of Phantoms sent to the area to four. The Russian and American military officers groaned when they saw this.

[Those are quite the antiques they got there.]

[Umu. The JSDF sure likes keeping things for a long time.]

[However, since there are no satellites or electronic equipment in the Special Region, these antiques certainly would be easier to use.]

Even though the gazes of the civilian observers had changed upon seeing these equipment, it was the uniformed military personnel that really seemed to be interested in this aspect. What caught their interest in particular was a C1 medium-sized transport aircraft, as its engines roared in what appeared to be a trial run beyond the mobile meteorological radar and mobile control tower set. It's a transport aircraft with a legend that its range was intentionally shortened for various political reasons, and like the Phantom, it is also a vintage aircraft nearing decommissioning.

[Ohh, I wonder how they got that in through that narrow "Gate"?]

[No, no, wouldn't it be more difficult to get that through the Ginza district?]

[Yes. We disassembled it, brought it in and assembled it here.]

Himeji said it as if she had done it herself, but it was the JASDF maintenance crew who did the hard work.

[Transport planes are used to carry goods from airfield to airfield. But Japan's only base here in the Special Region is here in Alnus.]

[That means it's extremely limited in its use..... I think I'm counting about 5 of those planes right now.]

[As I recall, the distance to the Imperial Capital is approximately 600 kilometers.]

[There's a little more distance than that, but that's about right. This will greatly expand our radius of operation.]

The military officers saw a line of troops lying at the end of the runway. The military officers had already guessed who these men were and what was about to take place.

[Those aircrafts are just right for a round trip.]

Thereupon, the German military officer quickly unraveled a drawn map he had obtained from the PX of the Arnus cooperative and confirmed the location of the Imperial Capital indicated on the map. The reason is that by using the distance between Alnus and the Imperial Capital as the basis, he could estimate the scale of the map he had obtained. This was made in the Empire, and its accuracy is about that of the old maps made before Ino Chuhei's map. It was centered on the Empire and showed the size and location of the surrounding countries in a general way. The reason why the German military officer obtained such a map was because the Japanese government had not published detailed maps of the Special Region.

The information on the geography of the Special Region was classified as a protected secret, and only a simple schematic map was provided to the members of the observer team. Of course, through backroom deals and the exchange of information on various levels, a certain amount of information was conveyed to countries with which Japan had close relations. However, since there were participants in this observer team from countries that had not received any information at all, basically everyone was conversing on the assumption that they did not know about the undisclosed information. Despite that though, information

that was supposed to be important was leaked in an extraordinary way. As a matter of fact, they just found it sold at a store.

[I never thought there would be a map on the bookshelf in the PX.]

[We ourselves weren't aware of that.]

[However, for an item that costs 380,000 yen to be sold there.....]

[We're well aware of the value of information. If one can buy information for 380,000 yen, it's only natural that it would make people have a different look in their eyes. Please, keep your eyes peeled around those stuff.....]

Imazu later reiterated to his colleagues the importance of information preservation. Not realizing how precious things around them puts them in danger. This applies to "information" and "technology" as well. "The Japanese should be a little more cunning and stingy," Imazu reiterated. In fact, the German military officer was so excited when he happened to pick up a map while rummaging through the PX.

[Ohhh, they sell a complete map of the Special Region's world!]

The eyes of the members of the observer team lit up. Immediately, they began to fight over this one and only copy of the map. The problem, however, was that it was priced at 380,000 yen, an expensive price for a single item. This was expensive. Really expensive. The difference in the value of this item was reflected in its price. Particularly here in the Special Region, where printing wasn't yet a common method, hand-writing on parchment was the mainstream method, so the price of published items was inevitably relatively high. However, this was not the problem. The excitement in the eyes of the members of the observer team was because they saw the price of 380,000 yen as inexpensive.

The problem arose a bit more elsewhere. More specifically, everyone's wallets contained only three or four 10,000 yen bills at most. When everyone opened their wallets and once again confirmed this fact, they all looked hopeless. The first to make a move was a military officer from China, who had recently been enjoying an economic boom. He took out his credit card from his wallet, and while everyone else was frozen looking at the contents of their wallets, he leisurely picked up the map and went to pay the cat-ear clerk waiting for him at the cash register.

However, the cat-eared clerk only responded with “What’s this nya?”.

In the Special Region, commodity transactions are basically conducted in gold and silver coins, which have their own value. Only in Alnus can yen bills, which are simply printed on a piece of paper, be accepted. Therefore, plastic cards are no more useful than a dog tag. To shop here, you need to have at least some cash on hand. However, in the age of credit cards, it is rare for people to carry such a large amount of cash when traveling abroad. That being the case, they had no choice but to give up on individual purchases and bring the Japanese yen in each of their wallets to bring the total to 380,000 yen.

First, people from the same country began to collect money together. But it wasn’t enough. This was a time when the character of each country, or rather the degree of friendship between each other, really came into play. Just as the countries connected through NATO, UK, Germany, France and US formed an alliance, China and Russia formed an alliance against them and ripping off those dispatched by the emerging nations, they made them turn over their wallets, and scraping up all the 500 yen coins, 100 yen coins, 50 yen coins and 10 yen coins, they made a fuss with each 100,000 yen they gathered.

[Is there any left in your pocket?]

A uniformed military officer could be seen jumping up and down while other such officers surrounded him, looking as if he was some junior schooler being blackmailed out of his pocket money. Incidentally, the South Korean military officer approached every JSDF official in the vicinity and asked to be lent money. However, no matter how good-natured the Japanese were, they were not so good-natured as to believe that a foreigner they had just met would return money they borrowed, but it was already too late for the South Korean military officer to find people to form an alliance with.

Thus, the leading role went to the German military officer. After all, the deciding factor was the number of friends they have. When Imazu received the news, he rushed to the scene, gasping for breath, to find that the German military officer had already paid for the map with a smug look on his face. It was already too late.

Imazu sighed.

No one even thought how strange that a map, a valuable source of information, is being sold on a bookshelf in a bookstore. He was dismayed at the lack of sensibility about the concept of intelligence on the part of his colleagues, who simply stood by and watched while the observer team looked like a pride of lions upon seeing prey.

[If they've seen that happening from the side, they should've at least stopped them from selling it. Otherwise, they could've bought it themselves!]

In the end, it would be him who must take responsibility for the leakage of confidential information. Incidentally, there was a sequel to this fiasco.

[They're selling dragon scales!]

Ever since the National Diet discussed the damage caused by the first-class vermin and their ability to fly was described as comparable to that of a flying main battle tank, interest in the creatures that inhabit the Special Region has increased enormously. In particular, the toughness of dragon scales has been widely publicized, and military officials from many countries have shown keen interest in what kind of material it is. Therefore, obtaining samples was a top priority. And yet, here they were, on display in the PX as souvenirs. Of course, all of these items were damaged, so-called "imperfect items".

They were too small to be sold wholesale to arms dealers, or had bullet holes or chips, and had to be discarded. When they were made into cell phone straps and key chains, the JSDF officers were delighted with them as souvenirs. Naturally, the members of the observer team's eyes lit up again, just as they had done with the map earlier. They could get a sample of a new material that could be used in secret weapons, information so important that a whole spy movie could be made about it, for about the same price as pocket change.

[H- Hey. I'd like to purchase this..... How much is it per piece?]

[500 yen.]

[I'll take everything you have.]

At that moment, a stack of crumbled 10,000 yen bills was piled up in front of the cash register where the cat-eared clerk waits. When everyone turns around, Imazu stands there, and behind him stands JSDF officers with teary-eyes, their wallets empty.

[We're going to take these as souvenirs, so don't leave any behind and wrap them all up.....]

Just like that, the information leak was prevented with minimal damage, thanks to the dedicated efforts of Imazu and other JSDF officers.

However, this sense of relief created an opening in Imazu's vigilance.

[Is something the matter, Diabo-sama?]

[No, it's nothing. It's just, they're making a massive deal of a single map. So, I just found it amusing, thinking how much they would pay for a prince of the Empire.]

Diabo, hiding in the woods on the outskirts of the town of Alnus, watched the observers as if he were price gouging them as they walked from place to place like a bunch of countryside bumpkins.

[That's an extremely bad taste of you, to compare yourself to a slave who is being auctioned off.]

[Don't say that, Metomes. In fact, I may as well be a slave right now. I can't even create my own destiny on my own. So why don't I sell myself to the highest bidder?]

[But that's dangerous. I am worried about how His Highness will be treated. What if you were used as a bargaining tool against Zorzal-sama?]

[I suppose you're right. Alright, here's what we'll do.]

Seemingly having thought of something, Diabo clapped his hand and began to undress.

[W- What are you doing?]

[Metomes, why don't you undress as well?]

[Telling me to take off my clothes, what in the world are you talking about? I'll say this in advance, but I'm not attracted to men.]

[Like hell I'm doing such behavior in this place. I'm telling you to swap clothing with me.][Swap clothing?]

[Yes, that's right. From now on you are Diabo, Prince of the Empire. I shall hereby call myself the servant, Metomes. That way, I'll be safe even if you become a bargaining tool.]

[Then what will happen to this Metomes?]

[You don't need to worry. Even if you are used as a bargaining tool with Zorzal, it is a fact that you are but a chamberlain. When the time comes, you can tell them that you are just a chamberlain, and not one of them will hurt you.]

[I see, so that's what you mean.]

Metomes was satisfied with that, and quickly took off his clothes and exchanged them.

[Your Highness. With that being the case, I recommend that you choose as your negotiating partner one who has failed in the struggle for the map.]

[Why is that?]

[Because those who made a mistake would loosen their purse strings more than usual in an attempt to gain back the disadvantage they incurred.]

[I see. What a keen insight.]

"

Diabo nodded at Metomes' words and turned his attention to the Chinese military officer, who was dejected because he had failed to buy the map.

[Alright, let's try negotiating with that guy.]

[The problem is that we don't speak the language to negotiate with them. What should we do?]

[We can leave the initial contact to one of Piña's underlings. As for the rest, we can take this easy.....
Puff out your chest, Metomes. Show your pride. From now on, you are the Imperial Prince Diabo.]

Having switched positions with his servant, Diabo headed for the town of Alnus, looking for an opportunity to make contact with an envoy.

Chapter 9

The landscape of the Jade Palace had drastically changed. The lush green forest had become a battlefield, and the blood staining the short-cropped lawn was clumping into a reddish-black mass. Piles of corpses gathered everywhere. The blood that has been spilled streamed in the ground, and arrows pierced here and there looking like thorns in a briar patch.

It has literally become a wilderness of dead mountains and rivers of blood.

The cause was an attack by the Oprichnina. Of course, there was no way they could have created such devastation on their own. The Oprichnina brought in a thousand or so Imperial soldiers who had been assigned to defend the Imperial City, and was ordered to charge in the direction pointed by the Oprichnina's broomsticks made from beast hair. The Imperial soldiers, who had been brought in without being informed of the reason, were perplexed. They were pointed in the direction of the Jade Palace, a place where no enemies could be found. Everyone involved in the defense of the Imperial Capital knows that foreign envoys stay here.

The Jade Palace was a place whose safety was guaranteed by the Emperor. Moreover, it is the Knights led by Princess Piña who are guarding it now, in other words, their allies. Where would you find anyone who wouldn't be puzzled when asked to attack an ally? However, there were those who haven't seen such a thing that should be obvious. The Oprichnina shouted hysterically.

[What are you doing!? Forward! Charge, you incompetent bastards!]

What kind of joke is this? Even as they wondered as such, the Oprichnina still said such a thing with serious expressions on their faces. If they were giving such an order in all seriousness, the Oprichnina must be a collective group of mentally-ill people. The Head of the Imperial Soldiers intuitively thought so. In fact, the Oprichnina were so mentally cornered that they had lost the ability to think properly.

They had been defeated in their first battle with the Knights, and had been greeted not with words of praise or treatment for the wounded, but with a reprimand from the incoming Praetor and the fear that followed. Luflus punished Gimlet, whom he had just appointed as Committee Head, without giving him time for excuses. He then made his death visible to everyone and asked each member of the Oprichnina to give a masochistic confession, a summary of their performance of their duties, and sentenced those

who were accused of fleeing from the enemy or not crossing swords with the enemy to one-tenth of that sentence.

That one-tenth of a punishment consists of having one of the ten people who committed such an act be chosen and have that one beaten to death by the remaining nine. Those who were forced to beat their comrades to their death were terrified by this. When would be the time where they would be on the receiving end of such a beating? Within such a situation, the line separating the assailant and the victim was very hazy.

A cold atmosphere filled the area around the Oprichnina, as if someone could be sent to the side of those being blamed for even having their names whispered. Everyone greatly regretted their situation, thinking if only the Oprichnina didn't exist..... However, if their regrets were made known, they would be killed. The only way they could escape this fear is to show those around them that they are single-mindedly devoted to their duties with a fiercer, more intense, and almost insane zeal.

[What are you doing, incoming Praetor Luflus o'Raines?]

The Oprichnina froze in fear, unable to blink an eye when they heard that voice. Only Luflus however, turned with glee when he heard Tyuule's voice.

[T- Tyuule-sama! Why have you come here?]

[I was curious why you were late in your reports, so I came here to see why. Prince Zorzal is expecting much of you, so please don't disappoint him.]

[B- But.....]

[That won't do. No "buts". We don't want to hear those words from you.]

Tyuule walked up to Luflus and spoke to him, her voice tickling his earlobe.

[All you need to say is "yes". Do you understand?]

[Y- Yes!]

[This is quite unusual though. Why are you chosen ones losing to a gathering of girls and old men? Are you perhaps..... incompetent?]

Asking this, Tyuule curiously tilted her head. Luflus almost wanted to say “that isn’t the case at all”, but he was frustrated that he could only answer with “yes”. However, Tyuule paid no attention to his thoughts as she continued.

[I must return to his Highness’ side soon. Luflus, you have done great deeds for establishing the Oprichnina. At least, that’s what I think.]

[Y- Yes!]

[However, I don’t know what his Highness will think when he hears my report. Perhaps, he may be very disappointed. However, we don’t want that to happen, do we? I personally don’t want to be the one to deliver the dagger to you. You do understand that, right?]

[Y- Yes.]

[In that case, I’m hoping that the good news will be delivered as soon as possible. With the situation like this, pushing yourself or being hurt is something that can’t be helped. Isn’t that right? After all, it’s all so that you could deliver us the good news. Isn’t that right?]

[Y- Yes.]

[Hearing such a good response makes me happy. Well then, we will be waiting for nothing but the good news.]

Leaving with those words, Tyuule gently brushed Luflus’ chin before departing. As he saw her off, Luflus madly shivered. He scratched his head, he snarled like a beast.

In front of them was the Jade Palace, and behind them was the Oprichnina who was decisively pushing them towards a despairing battle. They would either be struck by an arrow from both sides or pierced by a spear, collapsing on the ground. It was too gruesome of a scene to be called a battle. A person of normal sensibilities wouldn't have wanted such a scene to be repeated. And yet, such a scene was being repeated over and over again.

The Knights had managed to ward off repeated attacks by the Imperial soldiers. However, it would be better to recognize this as a result of the Knights' good fortune rather than their own abilities. The measures the attackers only took were what they had been making use of before, pushing the soldiers forward, wanting to overwhelm the Knights with their superior numbers. They had no composure to devise tactics or strategies for soldiers who were only driven by fear and were only able to push them forward.

Even so, the attacks that continued day after day, night after night, left the Knights with a steady stream of wounded and their deaths weren't few at all. Not a single person, from the commanders to the soldiers, were unscathed. When they could no longer hold themselves up, a critical point in this situation would arrive. Everyone had a feeling that this was the case. And yet, the soldiers of the Knight Order continued to fight.

They had already lost all sense of time. Whenever they found even a small space to lay their bodies down, they would lay down and fall asleep, no matter if it was day or night. Exhausted and unable to get a good night's sleep due to the continuous attacks day and night, they would lie down if they had even a little time. When there was no battle going on, the battlefield was strangely quiet, and the only people moving were the soldiers on guard or the young girls who were still gathering up the usable arrows. It was a brief respite until the Oprichnina brought the next group of Imperial soldiers to be sacrificed for their cause.

Looking out from her command tent into the sunset outside, Bozes asked her colleague who had been supporting her.

[Beefeater. How are the soldiers?]

[I'd like to say that everyone's morale is high, but I'm afraid the situation is just bad.]

With the low visibility around them, Beefeater calls for the squires to increase the light in the area. However, the Apprentice Knights were sleeping in a corner of the command center, hugging each other. They must have been tired after working hard to care for the wounded and preparing everyone's meals. Feeling sorry for waking them up, Beefeater opted to light the area around them herself.

[D*mn it, we're out of oil for the light.]

"Is that so.....", muttering such, Bozes hangs her head, hiding the distress she's feeling. However, this only served to make her depressed state of mind known to those around her. Of course, she was unaware of this. Bozes turned a reproachful gaze on Beefeater, regretting that she had opened the war against the Oprichnina. Many times, she wanted to ask her "Why did you go ahead on your own?". However, it is the commander's position not to do so.

As the Commander, she had to give clear instructions that even if the sweepers broke the diplomatic agreement and raided the Jade Palace grounds, there would be no fighting. However, she hasn't given such a command. That is Bozes' regret. And now, she worries about what such an action will bring to Piña. That was what had been bothering her. Beefeater, who did not know what Bozes was struggling with, insensitively interrupted her by talking about something else.

[What makes it worse is that we are running out of food and fodder. No one expected this. We don't have that much in stockpile.]

Bozes was tempted to say sarcastically that it was because she opened hostilities at the spur of the moment, but the words that came out of her mouth was "Do we have enough water?".

[Yeah. We can use the well at the Jade Palace. As for food, it seemed like the Japanese had some stockpiled. For example, this.]

Beefeater tossed a plastic bag to Bozes.

[What is this?]

[They're called "dried plums". We ran out of citrus fruits. I thought you might want something sour, so I asked him if they had any, and he gave me this.]

Taking out the red fruit that was filled with a sour aroma from inside the bag, Bozes put it in her mouth. Thereupon, she held her cheeks as her lips puckered.

[Mhmmmmm, s- sour! It's really sour!]

The sharp acidity, somewhat different from that of citrus fruits, seemed to have a strong impact on Bozes. Seeing Bozes puckering her lips so much, Beefeater guffawed.

[Ahaha. They sure have some weird stuff on that side.]

[You keep talking about them being the other side, but we're already on the Japanese side of the property, you know?]



[Now that you mentioned it, you're right. I feel like an idiot for adhering to boundaries that may or may not exist. In the first place, why are we doing this again?]

[Of course, what we are defending are our diplomatic agreements, his Majesty's will, and the honor of the Empire. Isn't that right?]

[That's right. It was as you said.]

Seemingly relieved, Beefeater nodded. It seems like she had seen through what's within Bozes' mind. "If you understand the purpose and significance of this battle, then you should be alright", Beefeater said. However, Bozes merely slapped that aside, saying "What are you saying? I don't know what you're talking about.", and turned the subject back to food.

[What should we do though. If we ask the Japanese, they will give us some food, but I don't think there will be enough for all of us.]

[I'm thinking of killing the injured horses. We don't have much fodder, so it will reduce the mouths to feed.]

[The horses!?]

"Yeah", Beefeater nodded, to which Bozes' brows creased, looking troubled. Within the Special Region, horses are a means of transportation, a tool for production and a valuable weapon. Furthermore, within the Knight Order, the horses are the reason why the Knights are considered Knights, and are loved and cherished on a daily basis. For the Knights, they aren't mere weapons, but are precious companions and comrades-in-arms. A Knight in their order would have been greatly shaken if someone were to suggest eating them. And yet, the fact that she dared to say that means that the situation was that dire.

After a moment's hesitation, ".....Alright. Do it.", Bozes gave her permission.

[That's great. With this, we've postponed one of our problems.]

[That's easy for you to say, but I think it will be hard to get everyone to eat the horses.]

In their Knight Order, when a horse dies, they would even hold a funeral for them. They're sure everyone wouldn't be pleased having to eat a horse. There would definitely be some of them who will not even touch their food.

[You don't have to worry about that, I'll handle it myself. The next question is what to do after this. Acting Commander, do you have a plan?]

After her lips pursed upon the second plum she threw into her mouth, Bozes spoke.

[We would need to talk about this to the Japanese, but when the time is right, I'm thinking of taking everyone with me and forcing our way through.]

[And where in the world are we going to go once we get through this siege? In the first place, if we leave this place, won't we have no legal basis for fighting?]

[It's alright. We will be pushing through for the sake of the safety of the Japanese people. After all, this battle was triggered by the breach of agreement by the Oprichnina. Also, our destination will be Italica. Most of the Red Rose Knights and the majority of our infantry are still there, so we'll join them and rebuild.]

It wouldn't make Piña's position any better, but at least, it seemed better than staying holed up here and continuing to fight.

[That place has completely become our base now. I feel kinda bad for House Formal though.]

[The problem is that Princess Piña is in the Imperial Palace. I wonder if she's alright there.]

[Come on, even if it's them we're talking about here, even they wouldn't go so far as to harm royalty.]

Upon this brazen statement, Bozes was astonished as she looked up towards the skies.

[Just because they can't do anything directly doesn't mean they don't have ways of tormenting her.]

[T- That might be the case, but there's no way they would do that, right? I mean, we're talking about the Princess here.]

To Beefeater, who said that wouldn't be possible, Bozes said "No, I'm just thinking of the worst case scenario. Which is why we'll need to take her with us when we leave. If possible, won't you think of a way?".

[W- We'd first need to find out where she is and make contact with her. However, I think it would be a little difficult to sneak into the Imperial Palace.]

[This is troubling. I wonder what Hamilton is doing. She should have been able to deliver at least one letter. She's a sensible girl after all.]

Having thought of something, "Ahh, geez!" Bozes scratched her head.

[No, with how difficult it is for our side to head there, it would probably be just as difficult to get here.]

At that moment, the tent was vigorously opened, and the Knight keeping a lookout yelled.

[Enemy attack! It's a night attack!]

Shouts of "Enemy attack! Enemy attack!" resounded in various places, warning their allies of the danger. Everyone who had been sleeping jumped up and ran out with their weapons in hand. The girls who had been sleeping nearby also woke up, sleepily rubbing their eyes and hurriedly got up.

[Everyone, to your positions! Enemy night attack! Hurry!]

Bozes ran out to take command with Beefeater.

At the same time, in the Crown Prince's Office, as Bozes feared, Princess Piña was facing a storm of denunciations from the Senators, who had been reduced to less than half of their original numbers. This was because many of the Oprichnina who died in battle at the Jade Palace were the children and relatives of them who were advocates of war.

[Imperial Princess, how well do you know about the authority of the Senate?]

[That's right. You don't understand how much we have worked hard to pass the special Oprichnina Law.]

The Senate were yapping foul-mouthed yells at Piña, but Piña remained silent. Even though they were cursing at her in a way that made her want to cover her ears, she didn't even try to talk back. Her spirit had been wandering in the wilderness of despair, both because of the worsening situation that had begun with the Emperor's unscrupulous methods and because of Diabo's abandonment of her. Then, came this storm of abuse. Weakened as she was, Piña could do nothing but endure in silence. Of course. It wasn't that Piña did not have any allies. On her side was Hamilton, the only one who stood by her side and stood up to her.

[Please don't speak as if her Highness lacks understanding. Her Highness clearly understands it. She just doesn't tolerate it.]

After launching a desperate argument against the overwhelming majority of Senators in defense of Piña, Hamilton was being subjected to a barrage of criticism.

[I say she clearly lacks understanding. It isn't as if we passed this law because we wanted to. We ourselves have endured the pain in our hearts.]

Hearing this, Hamilton snorted.

[It's delusional of you to think that as long as we can understand it, we can tolerate it. There are many things that we can understand and sympathize with, but still not tolerate. It's only selfishness to try to blame the lack of understanding of the other party for the reason that your argument is not acceptable.]

Thereupon, the Senators cursed Hamilton in unison. When Hamilton closed her mouth under the pressure, Count Woody, the spearhead of those who advocate war, makes his entry.

[Anyhow, I hope her Highness will consent to have the Oprichnina seize those who have fled to the Jade Palace.]

[I have already told you multiple times, but that is not possible. The Jade Palace is a place of sojourn for the envoys who are granted diplomatic privileges by the Imperial Decree. It's a place beyond the reach of Imperial Law, and we are the shield that protects it. We are the ones who should be pressing questions on you Senators. Do you really approve of the actions of the Oprichnina that threaten the safety of the envoys? Do you not understand that it is exactly their deeds that undermines the authority of his Majesty, the Emperor and the honor of the Empire!?!]

[They are not trying to undermine the will of the Emperor, nor are they trying to harm the envoys. All we ask is the handover of those who have fled to the Jade Palace. In the first place, seeing as they were guarding the Jade Palace, wasn't it the duty of her Knights to catch anyone who tried to break in?]

[That's certainly true. If someone tries to illegally break in, we will catch them. If it's someone the Oprichnina is after, we will naturally hand them over to them.]

Thereupon, voices rose up from everyone within the room.

[Then, why didn't you hand them over!?!]

Hamilton glared in the direction of those voices.

[We have no choice but to announce the arrival of a guest when they decently come to the doorsteps and ask us to announce their arrival for them.]

[Even if they are criminals!?!]

[Even if they are criminals. It is up to the Japanese envoys to decide who they will meet and who they will not.]

[And that's why I'm telling you to do something about it!]

[That wouldn't be possible. This is one of the things guaranteed by diplomatic immunity.]

[There's no such clause in the agreement!]

[It's all a matter of interpretation. The clause states that the activities of the envoys shall not be hindered.]

[You're just expanding the interpretation!]

[No, that's an indispensable term within the agreement.]

The discussion almost descended to an endless argument. However, Hamilton was more than happy to waste time discussing unimportant details of the matter. What she was trying to do here wasn't to win the argument, but to use herself as the decoy, turning the denunciations away from Piña. A mud-slinging match is exactly what she wants. However, there was someone on the other side who didn't like such a situation. Baron Clayton, a military person, stood up and changed the direction of the conversation.

[In that case, why don't we ask the Japanese to hand over those criminals?]

Hamilton inwardly clicked her tongue. She had sensed that the conversation was taking an unamusing turn. She had leaped onto the battlefield, stirred up the enemy, and somehow managed to make her enemies lose their composure and draw their attention to herself, but now there was a calm enemy about to push forward towards Piña's main camp.

[The Japanese responded that they would bring them under their protection.]

Thereupon, "There, see that?", the Senators looked at each other with such a look on their faces.

[I knew they were connected to the Japanese!]

[His Majesty Molt granted diplomatic immunity to the Jade Palace to facilitate the negotiation of a peace treaty with the envoy, not to harbor those defeatists!]

[Repeal the diplomatic immunity!]

[I say, cancel the peace conference itself. It's just a waste of time.]

[Attack Alnus! Launch a counteroffensive!]

The yelling rose to the level of rage and became uncontrollable. Thereupon, Count Woody held out his hands to calm them down. Of course, he wasn't trying to protect Hamilton, just expressing his desire to express his thoughts.

[Even we don't want to incur any more casualties. We wish to avoid bloodshed in pointless fighting. With her Highness' command, the Knights will stop protecting the Jade Palace. Your Highness, would you give us the permission?]

[That's impossible. Protecting the Jade Palace is the responsibility of the Knights.]

[Hamilton-dono, we are not asking you. We are talking to Princess Piña.]

[That's right, that's right!]

[We would like an answer from Princess Piña!]

As if trying to hide Piña, Hamilton hurriedly stood in front of her. However, the senators were furious with her for her attitude.

[What makes you think a mere secretary can speak for the Princess? That's quite insolent of you.]

However, Hamilton kept on insisting.

[Her Highness is currently not well.....]

[Is it that bad that she had gone mute!?!]

[You've been silent for some time now and have only allowed your secretary to speak for you. Do you think we are fools?]

[That's right, that's right!]

[Y- Your Highness.....]

Dismayed as she wasn't able to cover for her anymore, Hamilton called out to Piña. Thereupon, Piña patted Hamilton on the back and answered her call.

[That's enough, Hamilton.]

[Y- Yes?]

[I said that's enough. There's no use for me to stay here. It's getting late, so I will return.]

[Eh, ahh, your Highness! H- However.....]

[They've been asking all those questions, but they don't want me to answer. What they want is for me to do what they say. If my answer is not one that validates their claims, they will not be satisfied with whatever I say.]

Saying this, the Princess sat up from her seat. Thereupon, all the senators closed their mouths at once, as if they thought that Piña was going to speak. They seemed to be curious to see what the Princess, who had remained silent for so long, would say.

[Gentlemen. I am in a depressed mood, so I will take my leave. I wish you all a good day.]

However, Piña's answer was different from what they had expected, provoking animosity and insults, rushing upon behind Piña as she departed.

[What in the world is that!?!]

[Even if you are royalty, you have gone too far to mock us!]

[Your Highness. How long does your Highness think that your Knights made up of women and old men can keep fighting?]

It sounded like a threat that if left unchecked, these women would be wiped out. Hearing these barrages of words though, Hamilton retorted.

[Whose hands are burning when faced against these women and old men again? Who is it that needlessly ordered an assault, unnecessarily squandering the lives of generals and soldiers and undermining the Emperor's army?]

[That is because the Knights are opposing them!]

[If you think that it was because they're going easy on them puts your mind at ease, then you're free to think as you please.]

[I'd rather cut the budget dedicated to them.]

[That's right, that's right! Vote for the dissolution of the Knight Order!]

Turning towards the others, Count Woody asked them to be quiet. Thereupon, he turned to Piña again and spoke.

[These voices has declared as such. With this being the case, we will not be able to maintain the Knight Order. The soldiers will end up losing their paths. Even we do not want to take such measures.]

An ultimatum has been declared. Faced with such a declaration though, Piña responded with a lazy snort.

[Do as you please.]

[What?]

[I said do as you please. The country is already in such a mess anyway. I don't care whatever happens next anymore.]

[What are you talking about? We are doing this to prevent that from happening?]

[The First Emperor had once said, the initial motive behind anything is great..... but most of the time, it would later turn out to have just been an excuse. Everyone will just say that things weren't meant to turn out that way. In the first place, even if the Imperial Senate is being rebuilt, what in the world is going on, to hold a meeting in a place like the Crown Prince's office? I can only think of it as a sign that the Senate has already fallen to an institution that merely follows up on my brother's decision.]

[I know your Highness has not been pleased with us in the past, but have you come to look down on us that much?]

[How extremely disrespectful!]

Unlike before, even without the yelling, the air feels heavy. It was a moment that made them realize that anger and animosity could still be conveyed even when not expressed in the open. At the slightest provocation, the senators immediately swept forward. Standing before such an atmosphere, Hamilton was pressured into stepping back.

[Piña..... Mind what you say.]

Crown Prince Zorzal, who had been silent until now, finally spoke.

[I have no intention of breaking off negotiations for a peace treaty with Japan. However, since the political situation is still unstable and security cannot be ensured, I would like to ask the envoys to leave the Imperial Capital for the time being. Of course, I will guarantee their safety on their way to and from the Capital in my name. Then, after the political situation has stabilized, they will be invited back to the Jade Palace. What do you think?]

Hearing his words, the senators verbally agreed.

[And when they are deported, they will be asked to hand over those who have escaped.]

[I see. If that's the case, it wouldn't be a violation of diplomatic immunity.]

Zorzal then turns to his younger sister with a triumphant smile on his lips.

[That's how it is, Piña. What you all have done is nothing more than a futile struggle.]

However, Piña only turned around and dismissed Zorzal's words as trivial, just as she did to the words she heard before.

[.....Just do as you wish, brother. That is what I have been telling you for some time now.]

As Hamilton clung upon her, pleading "Your Highness, please don't throw me away", Piña left the Crown Prince's office, abandoning everything, even Hamilton.

* * * * *

The Skies above the Imperial Capital.

A winged dragon was soaring in the sky as the eastern skies were being tinged with madder red and the sun revealed its reddish-bronze form. Ever since the bombing of the Senate building, the Imperial Army has been frantically taking measures to protect the Imperial Capital. In particular, Calasta, who had recently been appointed as General, was alarmed by the fact the enemy controlled a flying vehicle called “eiyakraft” at will and proposed strengthening their aerial defense system.

For this, the Dragon Riders, which had been stationed in the steep mountainous western regions of the country, had been summoned and were to monitor and warn of any attempts to approach the Imperial Capital. Thanks to their efforts, they were able to detect those attempting to enter the skies over the Imperial Capital and were able to issue an alarm. This morning, three Dragon Knights, which had taken off before sunrise, were slowly circling at just above the altitude limit in a triangular formation.

[The air feels heavy and viscous. The weather would probably get worse in the evening.]

The muttering of the Dragon Captain could be heard slightly along the wind.

[If it's gonna rain, I hope it will just descend already.]

If the weather turns bad, they could put an end to their formation and this surveillance flight. As Michael, the left-wing cavalryman, was thinking of this, he noticed what seemed to be a spot in the western sky, an area in which the remnants of the night still lingers, and he shouted out a warning.

[Dragon Captain. Over the western sky!Here they come.]

[You idiot, report to those on the ground immediately as soon as you spot an enemy! Release the signal flags!]

[Enemy attack! Enemy attack!]

Dropping red streamers from the sky is supposed to be an alarm of an enemy attack. Following his superior's command, Michael dropped the streamers they had prepared one after another.

[This is pointless though. I wonder if anyone was looking at us while we're up here. That doesn't sound like it's possible.....]

No matter how prominent the red colors of the streamers were, they were difficult to spot at their altitude. Even if someone with good eyesight were to look up from the ground, they would only be able to see a faint streak of red within the blue sky. Furthermore, even if they did spot the enemy, they still feel helpless to do anything about it. The size of the enemy which has recently begun to appear is on the level of Ancient Dragons. Moreover, the enemy's movements were not slow or heavy at all, and it was even capable of making a sharp turn by tilting its horizontally extended wings until they became vertical.

Because of its superior movement capability, the Dragon Riders couldn't even approach it. Even if they had been able to approach, the enemy soldiers they're fighting against don't have their bodies exposed to the outside world. It was as if the entire body of the dragon was covered with a huge armor and hidden inside. Against such an opponent, what would they do with a single Dragonic Lance?

[We'd have to take at least a newborn dragon to even have the hope to take it down.]

The enemy, taking advantage of their inability to touch them, invaded the skies of the Imperial Capital and easily flew away. They can do nothing but indignantly watch all of it go by. Even cursing at them wasn't possible.

[And yet, the higher-ups are reporting that the invasion towards the Imperial Capital was prevented.]

Apparently, General Calasta reported this to the Crown Prince as a victory for the Dragon Riders.

[It was a fact that we had repelled them. The enemy left for the Imperial Capital in fear of facing us. Am I mistaken? Besides, we'll show them this time. Third time's the charm!]

The Dragon Captain explained and issued the order. Michael and his group then made a steep descent toward the earth. The enemy had attempted to invade the Imperial Capital twice before. Both times, they went towards the course of dropping something on the plains on the outskirts of the capital before flying away. They think they would probably take the same route this time. The reason they always fail to catch up to them is because they were trying to track the enemy. That being the case, they should just head towards their path. Such a plan would definitely work. Encouraging his group, the Dragon Captain shouted. Indeed, it was as he said.

Regaining his composure, Michael readied his Dragonic Lance. The Dragonic Lance is four ren long, and if they charge head-on with it, against an opponent who's negligent enough to think that they're helpless, they should be able to inflict at least one wound against them. However, the enemy they were facing this time was different from the previous two times. The size of the enemy was also different. The number and speed too..... Two?

At that moment, he suddenly remembered a rumor he had just heard.

[Are those the flying swords that are said to have destroyed the Senate? Dragon Captain, this is bad!]

Michael warned, but by the time he realized it, it was too late. Something flew into the air, billowing a plume of smoke, and exploded right in front of them. Caught up in the intense pressure of the explosion, two of the Dragon Riders, including the Dragon Captain, were torn apart, including the winged dragon they're riding, and fell to the ground.

[Dragon Captain!]

Michael managed to survive only because he happened to be lagging behind the other two. He was lucky. However, it's doubtful how long that good fortune will last. He could see the circling enemy coming toward him, whom he had failed to defeat. He felt a killing intent that made every hair on my body stand on end. Michael pulled on the flying dragon's reins, had it beat its wings, and then swooped down again toward the ground, almost to the point of falling.

At that moment, a glistening trail of light came flying down like rain and grazed him, nearly knocking the flying dragon he was riding off balance. As he wonders what is going on, he finds that the carapace of his flying dragon has been wounded. He had heard rumors that the enemy had weapons capable of breaking even the scales of a flying dragon, but for them to actually have this much power.....

This astonishment made him loosen his grip on the reins, and that slight carelessness gave his flying dragon an opening to wriggle. This was something that a Dragon Rider would not normally allow. Even if it was injured, a full-fledged cavalryman is required not to let their flying dragon even scream. In order to do so, he first had to completely subdue his flying dragon. However, he was still young and did not have the ability to reach that point. The flying dragon writhed in pain and flew erratically, out of his control. However, one can never know what might turn out to be a blessing in disguise. With his extremely clumsy movements, his enemies were unable to foresee his next actions, allowing him to acquire the upper hand. As they passed each other, he saw his enemy riding the eiyakraft.

[There's two people riding in it!?]

Thereupon, Michael held up his spear with a pleased look on his face.

[This is revenge for everyone! I'm going to bring you down!]

He was prepared to take advantage of the moment when the enemy's unprotected flank was exposed. However, the speed of the enemy was far beyond his expectations. In the blink of an eye, they were out of sight. Where did they go? At the moment he turned around to find the enemy, a hail of bullets..... 20 mm Vulcan cannon rounds fired by the enemy who had circled around had struck him and his winged dragon.

The stables of the Dragon Riders built on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital.

Disguised and concealed in the bushes, 3rd Lt. Kenzaki, a member of the Special Forces Group, adjusted the reticle of his laser guidance system to the hastily constructed stables. Here in the Special Region where GPS satellites don't exist in the skies, these old-fashioned weapons are more powerful. Yarita, Matogi, and the others were on the lookout for the area around the stables, protecting Kenzaki.

[This is Saber. Preparations ready.]

Thereupon, an F4 Phantom dropped a bomb as it passed overhead. The bomb fell into the stables, as if trying to catch it, crushing the flying dragons' stables in a mass of flames.

『Enemy Air Defense Facility destroyed.』

『No airborne entities in the skies over the Capital confirmed.』

『Roger. We will now move to Phase 2.』

On the ground, everyone was looking up at the sky. Oddly enough, the explosion of the AAM signaled the approach of something to the Imperial Capital. Along the blue skies, a white cloud of smoke from the explosion floated in the air. Only the roar of jets soaring through the sky echoed out of nowhere.

[What the hell was that!?!]

[What's going on!? Anyone report!]

The unusual event caught the ears of the imperial soldiers. If the Dragon Riders had not been shot down, the red streamers that were dropped might have gone unnoticed by anyone. The battle the Dragon Riders faced was at such a high altitude for the soldiers on the ground to notice. Moreover, the height brought about not only a physical distance between them. It was also a distance that created a mental gap. As the expression of the officer who had received the report from the sentry changed, he ran out of the guard station and was met with the soldiers, watching the scene in a daze. Unlike the soldiers though, the officer immediately decided to run to report to the command post that something had happened and to receive instructions on how to respond. However, whatever it may have been that happened, it would take a while for him to run, get his instructions and come back. From the soldiers' point of view, something is certainly happening now, but they could do nothing until he returns. Therefore, a sense of urgency did not arise at all. For each soldier, the progress of the situation seems surprisingly tranquil and leisurely.

Fwoosh!

The sound of the wind breaking through the air involuntarily made them duck their heads. Immediately afterward, there was an explosion that sounded like a heavy tremor, as if it was coming from the bottom part of the earth.

[Oi, what happened this time?]

[O- Over there. There's something over there.]

Black smoke was rising from the newly established Dragon Riders base on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital. Seeing the facility on the ground had been destroyed, the awareness of the danger around them had been raised and the vigilance of the soldiers peaked.

[Oi, someone go report it immediately!]

However, the sense of relief the soldiers felt exceeds their sense of crisis. With what had occurred at this moment, they wouldn't need to be brought away by the Oprichnina for the attack on the Jade Palace. Their immediate concern was which of their units would next be brought to the attention of the Oprichnina.

[If they are too disciplined and strong, the sweepers will bring them away.]

Rumors like this were flying around among the Imperial Guards, so much that it became prevalent among the soldiers to deliberately dress sloppily or look unmotivated. The Oprichnina have the habit of forcing their soldiers to fight battles that will cost the soldiers' lives, but they refuse to take responsibility for their failures. They are soldiers and will fight as long as they are ordered to, but they really don't want to fight for such people.

[With this, General, you will reject the demands of the sweepers, right?]

[I don't think rejecting would be possible. They're Hira Moguras after all.]

Hira Moguras are small flat-shaped animals that dive in the sand and only look upward.

[However, if we have to be on high alert, we won't be able to afford to send our soldiers anywhere else, will we?]

[I don't think just us needing to be on high alert is enough. It would be perfect if the enemy surrounded the Imperial Capital.]

While having such a conversation, the soldiers' attention was always directed outside the city walls. Perhaps, that was why they were completely oblivious to the danger looming behind them. All of a sudden, their mouths were covered from behind. Startled by the suddenness of the situation, a knife was inserted deeply through the sternocleidomastoid muscle of their necks, three lateral fingers to the right of the Adam's apple, before being pushed outward. In doing so, vital organ tissues such as the carotid artery, trachea and phrenic nerves were torn apart, and something red and warm gushed from the wound, drenching their lower jaws. It was also then that they felt an intense pain in their neck, as if a burning tongs were being pressed against it.

It hurts! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!

They screamed as hard as they could, but his diaphragm, which had its nerves necessary for such an act severed, did little to even help them breathe, and now that they had lost their throat, they could not speak. With their mind still awake, nearby, they heard the sound of their comrades falling, before suddenly, they realized that they too had fallen before they knew it. They had lost all strength in their body. The right half of their field of vision was covered by the floor of the rampart, looking as if it was a wall. Unable to move their head, they could only use their eyes to observe the surroundings, but the scenery that should have been familiar to them suddenly tilted at what they can only describe as an odd angle.

Eh? Ehhhh!? What kind of joke is this!? What in the world had just happened? As such questions popped into their mind, they could see someone's foot behind him. It was someone dressed in speckled green, talking to someone and trying to step across them.

[West Gate, secured. This is Assassin, West Gate has been secured. We will remain on standby.]

The next thing they know, their vision faded. Something had gone wrong with their eyes, and their ears became deaf. The Imperial soldiers could only be puzzled at their situation, and until the very end, they could not understand what had happened to them.

On the west side of the Imperial Capital, facing the ramparts, is the Basson Prison. It used to be a place to imprison convicts whose trials had not yet been completed, but it was now a stronghold for the Oprichnina, where senators, nobles, and other members of the pro-peace faction were gathered. On the outside of the high walls of the building, members of the JGSDF, dressed in camouflage uniforms, appeared. They slowly advanced from the narrow alleyway to surround the closed gate, as if their backs were against the high outer wall.

Looking up, Kuribayashi and Tomita waved their hands atop a spire attached to the outer wall. It was a signal that the guards had been neutralized. With a hand sign, Sergeant Major Kuwabara instructed his subordinates to approach the side entrance by the main gate. At his feet was a man fallen on the ground who, unbeknownst to Kuwabara, was the incoming Praetor Luflus. He had just come out of the side entrance when he encountered them and was knocked down. The fact that he was prepared for it gave Kuwabara the advantage, and the matter was cleared up in an instant.

"

"

[Let's go.]

At Kuwabara's command, the thick doors of the side entrance were opened and the Third Recon Team quickly entered inside. Even without Itami, Furuta and Kurokawa, they moved with machine-like precision and swiftness under Kuwabara's command. Of course, they aren't trying to liberate the Basson Prison by themselves. It's a cooperative operation with other units and the Special Forces Group, and their attack began almost simultaneously. At that moment, Kuwabara glances at his watch.

[Don't move too far ahead. We'll time our attack with the Special Forces and Fourth Rec!]

Kuwabara and his group approached the prison's guard station without a sound. Inside, there are signs of humans making noise as they talked to each other. Any guards standing in the middle of the way or anyone coming out of the room for any reason were quietly neutralized on the spot. Eventually, after confirming that everyone was in their planned positions, Kuwabara ordered the attack to begin.

MK3A2 grenades, which resembled spray cans, were simultaneously thrown in from the windows and doorways of the room, and the impact and explosion spilled out from the windows and doorways. The personnel took this as a signal to vigorously rush in and smash through the windows and doorways. Shots rang out, sweeping away the enemy.

This occurrence wasn't just in this room, as chaos ensued all over the place, gunshots and grenade explosions roared out, creating a loud commotion. Normally, this commotion would attract the attention of the Imperial soldiers stationed on the adjacent walls and invite enemy reinforcements. Today, however, there was no need to worry. After all, the imperial soldiers themselves had no time to worry about others.

The roar of the jets crossing the sky told them that.

Looking up, a formation of five C1 transport planes was flying over the capital, with countless pale green flowers blooming against the sky. The Imperial soldiers pointed to the confused sky and only asked “What is that?”. The only thing they could do was to look up at something they have no knowledge about.

Paratroopers, abbreviated for troops that use parachutes (some books refer to them as airborne infantry), just as their name suggests, were simply units that jump out of an airplane with parachutes on their back. Some people skydive for sport, and some may think it sounds like fun since there are bungee jumping attractions at amusement parks where people jump from high places with thigh rubber straps tied to their bodies. However, most generals feel that the act of parachuting is scary.

Furthermore, because they aren't just doing it for fun, the paratroopers are equipped with weapons and ammunition to fight once they descend to the ground. That is why those who seek the parachutist badge are trained to overcome this fear. Such training doesn't mean they're no longer afraid of this though. Fear is like an alarm system that triggers the actions necessary for survival, so it is something that must not be lost or dulled. One can only cultivate their courage to overcome fear.

For this purpose, just like Pavlov's dog study, equipped with fall-arrest harnesses, the participants are trained to jump out of an 11-meter tower above the ground, which is the height at which humans first feel fear, over and over again to imprint the necessary movements and actions on their conditioned reflexes. This isn't the only way to overcome fear. The entire process leading up to the descent is thoroughly systematized and repeated even before the descent crew attempts to board the transport.

[Rucksack check, V-shaped pipe check, quick injector check, belt check, rucksack carrying procedure check, rifle carrying procedure check.....]

"

"

Before boarding the plane, the paratroopers undergo a thorough inspection by their Captain, rummaging through their bodies. With a helmet on their head, they carry a rucksack-like bag containing a 12m umbrella, the paratrooper's 15.7 kg parachute. In addition, they also carry a spare parachute in front of his stomach in case of emergency. Underneath, they hung their combat gear, as if it were a placket or a makeshift apron.

[Main umbrella check, automatic cable ring check, safety pin check, closed loop system check, branch cable check, back belt check, shoulder detachment system check, V-shaped regulator tube check, chest belt check, carrying bag check, detachment system safety plug check, bellyband hanging hook check, spare parachute check, spare parachute seal check!]

By going through these inspections, the elements of danger are eliminated as much as possible, and the paratroopers can tell themselves that parachuting would be safe. All that remains is to do what they repeated in training as a conditioned reflex. After inspecting their equipment, they laid on the side of the runway on standby, waiting for the time to board. It was them who had been standby, waiting with their 60kg equipment behind them, that Komurazaki criticized as a lazy lot. The transport plane approached over the target.

[Approximately 10 minutes to the target!]

As the drop-off point drew near, the load master (airborne infantry transporter) lifted the door open. The outside air blew into the plane and filled the plane with a tremendous roar.

[Get ready to jump! Stand!]

At the drop-off leader's signal, the troopers stood up and vacated their seats. From now on, each of their movements is performed in accordance with instructions. Not even a sniffle is performed without instruction.

[Hook up!]

At the order of the drop-off leader, the troopers hooked their fingers and held the automatic cable rings extending from their parachutes to the rope that felt like a clothesline attached to the ceiling of the plane. This cord would pull the parachutes out of the paratroopers' rucksacks.

[Inspect your equipment!]

Equipment inspection. Inspecting the automatic cable ring, the chinstrap on their iron helmet, the shoulder detachment system, the chest detachment system, the bellyband and the waist belt, the troopers started counting out. They also turned around and inspected the equipment of their colleague standing behind them. If all is well, they would slap the butt of the person in front of them to inform them.

[All clear.]

With the signal transmitted to the front, it was then reported to the drop-off leader.

[Get in position.]

The moment the order was given, the troopers approached the door like businessmen before a train approaching a terminal station. With their heavy bags in their arms, they packed in front of the door with no time to flinch, and instead, they slumped down with their crabby legs and shuffled forward. Everyone is staring with bated breath at the drop-off light, the signal telling them to descend, which is still red at the moment.

Within such a situation, the drop-off leader checked the last passing point from the scenery outside and gave the order "Get into position!". The first paratrooper stands in front of the door overlooking the sky and receives the fierce wind blowing in with all their body. Just a few distance away from their toes is nothing but empty sky. The ground he looks down on is unrealistically far away.

[Green!]

As the drop-off light turned from red to green, the sound of a bell resounded.

[Go! Go! Go!]

From stillness to movement. From waiting to mobilizing. From bending to leaping. Just as Pavlov's dogs are conditioned to salivate at the sound of a bell, the paratroopers are conditioned to leap into the sky on this cue. One after another, the paratroopers leaped from dizzying heights and pulled by gravity into a descending position with their legs aligned and outstretched they screamed "First descent~~ Second descent~~ Third descent~~" in a loud, throat-splitting voice.



With the parachute dragged out of their backpacks on their descent, their parachutes were opened. And thus, looking around at the magnificent scenery around them, they waited for the time they got close to the ground.

[Your Highness, it's the enemy! Enemies are raining down from the sky!]

Upon receiving this report, the office of the Crown Prince Zorzal was in an uproar. The Imperial Palace, including the Crown Prince's office, is located on a hillside from which one can see almost the entire imperial city. So, just by looking out the window, one could see five transport planes in a formation, dropping countless paratroopers like flowers floating on a pond.

[What in the world is that!?!]

The senators, who had gathered early in the morning to discuss how to distribute the assets they had taken out of the Knights' budget and the captured pro-peace nobles, looked up at the sky at the roar from overhead and were astonished at the unfamiliar sight that unfolded there. When they learned that it was the enemy, they were horrified. The enemy was about to descend directly toward the castle. The enemy was about to appear before their very eyes. It felt like they were caught in such an illusion. Of course, this was not true. Operations that make use of paratroopers are based on a thorough selection of the terrain and weather conditions of the drop site.

[It was completely beyond common sense that the enemy would come down from the sky.]

[Japan can scatter their soldiers from the sky!?!]

[This makes no sense. They aren't winged humanoids, so they shouldn't be able to survive through such an action. There must be some mistake, make them check again!]

[The enemy may have a unit composed of winged humanoids!]

[What!? D*mn it, so that was also possible!]

Zorzal and his entourage were also caught up in the chaos of the Senate members. However, one of them spoke.

[No, that kite-like thing they are hanging from might be a tool for them to jump off. Anyway, get ready to intercept them immediately! The enemy has finally come directly into the capital. Your Highness, let us quickly prepare ourselves.]

As if he had just realized what his aide had advised him, Zorzal nodded greatly.

[Unnn, that's right. If that is the enemy, dispatch the troops and crush them. They may be raining down from the heavens, but there are only a few of them! Bring out the numbers and set them out!]

[We can't! We don't have enough time!]

However, the next report that came in told Zorzal that his orders were too late.

[A squad of the enemy has already taken over the west gate! The gate had been opened and the enemy was coming in from the outside. It seems that the enemy has already entered the Imperial Capital!]

[W- What!? How can they be that fast!?]

In reality, the attack was merely the result of troops hiding in the Imperial Capital at that time. Looking out the window, some of the paratroopers were still floating in the sky. It was only about time that the first group had descended and gathered, finally beginning to act as a group. However, the time lag in reporting made them feel that the descending enemy had attacked and conquered the West Gate and started to invade the Imperial Capital. The speed was astonishing, but the insanity of the situation also made them believe that this isn't strange if it's this enemy they're fighting against.

[What were the guards at the gates doing!?!]

[The enemy is headed straight this way!]

As he heard this voice shout such a thing, a shiver ran down Zorzal's spine. What would happen if the Imperial Capital were to be occupied at this rate? He was sure he would be captured. If he was captured by the enemy, he would be subjected to the humiliation and fear of that time again. No, he might be tortured to death this time. The events of the night of the earthquake flashed through Zorzal's mind like a flashback. As the pain and terror of that night came flooding back to Zorzal's mind, cold sweat poured out of every pore in his body like a waterfall.

[G- G- Gather all forces and immediately fortify the castle!]

Zorzal shouted. No, it was more like he screamed. But to his entourage, it seemed like a ray of light within the chaotic darkness around them. Yes, the Imperial Palace must be protected. It was just as he said. Their minds could only concentrate upon such a thought.

[Y- Yes!]

The entourage immediately started running. Even so, to Zorzal's bloodshot eyes, their movements seemed endlessly sluggish. The aides were speaking to the messengers, telling them the orders they were to pass on. Thereupon, the messenger started running. They seemed to be doing their best to run, but how long will it take them to reach their destination? It would also take some time for the soldiers who received the order to begin their actions. Moreover, how long will it take them to reach the Imperial Palace and fortify its defense? The more he thought about it, the more everything seemed so damned slow.

Every few seconds, in his frustration, he would ask his entourage if the soldiers had already assembled, but they could only ask him to wait.

[They're slow! Too slow!]

Zorzal yelled. Zorzal's mind is filled with the thought that the enemy would be here before they could arrive.

[Oi! Gather all the soldiers! Assemble all the troops in the Capital!]

[H- However, if we call in the guards assigned on the gates, it will still take quite some time to assemble them. It will also leave the Imperial Capital unprotected.]

[I don't care! The enemy has already invaded the Capital! What's the point of protecting the outer walls now!? Just gather the soldiers now! Hurry!]

The enemy is coming. They are already here. And they are coming towards them. The sound of the enemies' shoes were clearly resounding in Zorzal's ears, even though this should be something she wasn't able to hear. That being the case, he could no longer stand still. He couldn't just sit still and wait for the enemy to come in such an unmanned place, and without thinking, he sat up from his seat.

[That won't do.]

However, a surprisingly resonant voice condemned Zorzal's action.

[T- Tyuule.]

Before he knew it, Tyuule stood behind him.

[Your Highness, are you perhaps thinking of running away by yourself? You wouldn't do that, would you?]

What did she just say!? Him, the Crown Prince Zorzal, was trying to escape!? Zorzal's hair stood on end at her remark. Tyuule's words were trampling on his pride as a monarch. However, the words Tyuule said next, filled with a frigid coldness, instantly dissipated Zorzal's anger.

[Your Highness is currently the cornerstone of the Empire. If you were to run away, the Empire wouldn't be able to keep standing. Of course, if you don't mind abandoning your position as the next Emperor, your pride as the Crown Prince and everything else, you wouldn't need to sit in this terrifying and solitary seat, though I can't imagine someone as proud as your Highness choosing to do that. Ufufu.]

[I- I know. I only got up to check on the enemy.]

Waving his hand away, Zorzal spoke in a tone that seemed to question what Tyuule was saying, before walking to the window. However, Zorzal was inwardly grinding his teeth. His arms and legs were tense, and he felt as if he were about to lose the strength in his knees. Tyuule, who was following behind him, continued with a blank expression on her face.

[All of this reminds me of something from long ago. The people of my homeland were fervently fighting the enemy, yet those supposedly fierce allies seemed so slow. Ufufufu, thinking about it again, it was quite ridiculous of me. Everyone was fighting so hard, but only I, who was in a safe place, was so afraid, so insecure, that I slipped out of the fort with the excuse of sacrificing myself for my tribe.]

[I- I see. So that happened.]

[Yes. I wonder how they're all doing now? Are they healthy and well?]

[I don't know.....]

[In any case, your Highness must not move without reason. Everything in this country moves at your Highness' will. Even if the enemy comes here, your Highness should stay here. You may think that you must do something about it, but such thoughts are just means to get out of the situation. Following them usually leads to bad results.]

[I- I know that much. How dare you talk with such a haughty tone with me!?!]

Zorzal turned around and slapped Tyuule away. The instrument which should have been playing pleasant sounds suddenly started making unpleasant sounds, making him feel as if he's hearing fingernails scraping a steel plate. He wanted to get rid of such discomfort. Falling on her buttocks with a scream, Tyuule rubbed her head against the floor.

[Ufufufufu, my apologies. I have spoken out of line. Your Highness would obviously be aware of that. Fufufu. A foolish precedent that I am standing by your side after all.]

Zorzal was puzzled by Tyuule's transformation. What was the matter with her? If he had enough composure to think about this matter, he might have paid more attention to Tyuule. However, Zorzal didn't have the composure to think that far ahead. He just felt a bad aftertaste, a queasy feeling in his mind, but he decided to leave it at that.

[A- Anyway, I'll take your advice. That's right, I should not have been upset over something like this.]

[You're right, your Highness.]

[I know. That's right, it was as you said..... However, d*mn it!]

Somehow managing to steady his trembling legs, Zorzal seemingly glared at the oncoming enemy. However, when more enemies came into view across the open sky, the fountain of courage that Zorzal had so desperately pumped up seemed to die at once. As if he lost all strength on his legs, he sat down and pointed outside the window.

[W- What in the world are those?]

Led by a large helicopter called a Chinook, a large group of helicopters have arrived.

* * * * *

At the Basson Prison, the pro-peace nobles who had been released from prison were about to board the wagons that would pick them up. These wagons had been scavenged by the outlaws of Akusho by distributing gold coins to them. Because of this, the wagons gathered were all the same as those used to transport earth and sand, vegetables, and so on. Some of them even had a stench that clearly indicated that they had been used for transporting excrement, and the nobles of high rank were very reluctant to use them.

[What, it's much better than being in this prison. Having been living in this place, I know what I'm talking about.]

The Volralden , who was acting as the coachman, shrugged his shoulders. Just by looking at him, one could tell that he was a hoodlum or living a life similar to one. Still, he was dressed more neatly than those who had been imprisoned here. There were 300 rescued people, including the pro-peace senators and their family and relatives, but most of them were tragically dirty. The fact that most of them were so filthy shows how badly they had been treated here.

(T/N: Volralden are those werewolf-like beastkin.)

[The you right now suits it pretty well.]

[I understand. It can't be helped. We don't really have a choice.]

Thus, everyone got into the wagons.

"

"

[There is enough room for everyone. Don't panic, don't push those in front of you, but please hurry.]

Kurata, Tomita and the other members of the Third Recon Team were leading the people, shouting instructions. All of them were very skillful, as if their experience in Coda village had been put to good use. The winged person Mizari and her fellow prostitutes seems to have been recruited to help out, and they were on the coachman's seat. The Harpy Tyuwal, who had played an active role in predicting the earthquake, was also there.

[Come on, Mister over there. Don't just be relieved there just because you already got on the carriage, scoot over. That fat stomach of yours is preventing others from getting on! No one else can get on!]

[Ahh, no~!]

Mizari raised one of her beautiful eyebrows upon hearing Tyuwal's scream.

[Hey, you there! Where do you think you're touching!? Good grief.]

Some men seemed to take advantage of how crowded they're seated to reach out and touch the girls' bodies. It may be that they're originally like that, or perhaps, it may just be the recoil of their abstinence in the prison.

[If that's what you want, leave that when it's business hours! Eh? Where? It's in the town of Melno. If you're really going to come, I'll give you a service.Ara, Madam? Please scowl at me like that.....]

Thinking "Don't advertise our prostitution business here", Kuribayashi turned around to see if anyone was having trouble getting on the wagon. Thereupon, she saw a familiar lady standing there with a smile on her face.

[Ahh, Mrs. Cicero!]

[My, my, my! Kuribayashi! So you're the one who came for us!]

Mrs. Cicero hugged Kuribayashi with a big smile on her face. The two had talked relatively often since the garden party on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital. When embraced by the stout Mrs. Cicero, it looked as if the petite Kuribayashi would be knocked down by her embrace. However, the thickness of Kuribayashi's muscles were on a different level as Mrs. Cicero, so she stood firm on her feet and held herself firmly in place.

[Thanks to you, we're saved. Thank you.]

[No, no, we're just doing our mission. Is your husband alright?]

[Yes. He's over there.]

Mrs. Cicero pointed to her husband, who was talking to Tyuwal with a lewd smile on his face.

[You know how our nephew joined the Crown Prince's government after returning from Japan, right? That's why, even over here, we were accommodated a bit better. Food, for example. I guess we're a little better off than others. However, I think that's why he's a little too energetic. I'll strangle him later.]

[W- We've made sure to save your life, so it would be great if you go easy on him.]

With these words, Kurabayashi led Mrs. Cicero to one of the wagons. Kuribayashi easily lifted the stout Mrs. Cicero and sat her down in the back of a wagon. She held Mrs. Cicero in her arms and carried her into the wagon..... No, it's more like she hauled her up there.

[Since you guys reached the prison, should I assume the Empire lost?]

[No, we just came here to rescue you all.]

[Rescue, you say, but where are you bringing us? Perhaps, towards Japan?]

[It will be troublesome if we bring you towards Japan, so for the time being, we will evacuate you first. After that, we will decide what to do after hearing your wishes.]

[That's unfortunate. If there's an opportunity, I would have liked to visit Japan.]

[I would welcome you then. When the time you can visit comes, I'll show you around. There are many interesting places we could go to.]

[Yes, I'm counting on that. I look forward to it.]

With a signal from Kuribayashi, the wagon started moving. As their wagon departed, Mrs. Cicero kept waving her hand until Kuribayashi was out of sight. The line of wagons leaving the Basson Prison headed out of the Imperial Capital through the West Gate. Most of the intersections along their route were fortified by camouflaged JSDF, and not a shadow of an Imperial soldier was to be seen. The Paratrooper Captain, Major General Sabae, was on foot through the streets of the Imperial City, escorted by Colonel Kengun and a rifle squad. Seeing the shabby appearance of the line of wagons carrying the pro-peace faction and their family, he frowned.

[Some of the wagons look pretty rickety. Will they make it to the rendezvous point?]

[I don't know if they will make it to the rendezvous point, but it should be alright. There seems to be plenty of spare parts we could use.]

Checking his memo pad, Kengun answered.

[So, how's the situation?]

In response to Sabae's question, Kengun began his report on the situation with a map in hand.

[The DZ will be secured as the rally point by the 401st Company. Everything is going according to schedule, including the suppression of the Imperial City's entry route and the means of transportation. By now, the 11th Company should have reached the Jade Palace.]

Kengun was given command of the operation. The Paratrooper Captain, Major General Sabe, also entrusted all field command to Kengun, who was familiar with the situation in the Special Region and had

actual combat experience. He was merely a “flag” commander and left the details to his subordinates. The fact that Kengun used to be the Paratrooper Captain of the 4th Airborne Brigade was another reason for his trust.

The objective of this operation was to rescue the pro-peace faction in the Imperial Capital. If they were planning to occupy the Capital, they could have mobilized all available aircrafts, helicopters and vehicles, and simultaneously attacked the Imperial Capital. But for political reasons, this was not possible at the moment. The government had restricted the operation on the temporary and limited control of the area for the purpose of rescue, and they had to evacuate as quickly as possible. Furthermore, in order to prevent civilian casualties, air and artillery bombardment of urban areas is forbidden. Moreover, they have more than 300 people to rescue. The ten large helicopters that are currently available will only be able to carry the civilians out.

[What is important in this operation isn't the numbers, but speed. And I know of only one unit that can fulfill this request.]

The Supreme Commander of the Special Region Dispatch Unit, Hazama, stated as much. And thus, the 1st Airborne Brigade and the 4th Airborne Brigade have been mobilized.

[We are ready to go whenever the signal is raised. But as we're fighting in a place we have never been, against an opponent we have never seen, we must keep our eyes towards the unexpected. To prevent this, we needed someone who is familiar with the local situation. Preferably someone with firsthand knowledge about the ebbs and flows of the actual site.]

The Paratrooper Captain Sabae made this request, and Kengun was called up to respond to it. “You will do it, right?” asked Sabae, to which Kengun responded with “I'm so happy, I'm in tears”. In addition to the paratroopers, the 41st Company of the 4th Combat Regiment, led by Kengun, and members of the Special Forces Group, and the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Recon Teams, who were hiding in the Capital, were also involved in this operation.

The procedure involved two Companies of paratroopers (excluding the mortar platoon) descending on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital. At about the same time, the paratroopers who had been hiding in the Imperial Capital would secure them an entry route. Then, from there, paratroopers would raid the Imperial Capital and liberate the Jade Palace and the Basson Prison. In the meantime, medium-sized helicopters of the 401st Company, led by Lt Col Youga and Chinooks, a large helicopter, would secure the rally point

and bring in vehicles, including the high-mobility ones. The rescued civilians would escape to the outskirts of the Imperial City in the Chinooks and helicopters that were emptied after dropping off those vehicles, which would be ridden by the paratroopers as they return back to base through land.

[Reporting. Fighting has started at the Jade Palace. Other than that, there is no enemy resistance at all. It's so quiet that it's almost unsettling.]

1st Lt. Yufuin, who was in charge of information, added to 1st Lt. Toyohira's report, pointing to the skies.

[According to the information coming in from the observation helicopters overhead, the Imperial army seems to be moving all of their defensive forces towards the Imperial Palace. They must have thought we were going to directly attack the castle.]

[I see. So they were so surprised that they ran into their dens huh.]

Kengun nodded. When you are attacked by an enemy of unknown strength and unknown purpose, it's not wrong to run away and preserve your forces. The question is whether this was done based on rational judgment or emotional and reflexive action. A commander who is able to make a quick decision to retreat based on a rational judgment will be quicker to launch a counterattack. Kengun wouldn't expect the enemy to be some fool.

[When the enemy realizes what we're after, they're definitely going to simultaneously leap out. Make them hurry up.]

Kengun shouted this to 1st Lt. Toyohira, who then looked towards Major General Sabae.

[Captain, I'm going to head for the Jade Palace. I expect considerable resistance from that side.]

[I understand. Then, I will take command of the evacuation of the refugees towards the rally point. Kengun, don't misjudge the time to pull out, okay?]

After Sabae told Kengun this while patting him on the shoulder, he jumped on a wagon full of civilians heading out of the Imperial Capital.

A fierce battle was taking place in the forests around the Jade Palace. The 1,200 Imperial Guards that had been pulled in to attack the Jade Palace had surrounded the 300 Knights guarding the Jade Palace, and were therefore caught in the rear by a single paratrooper unit that had gone to liberate the Jade Palace. The battle became a one-sided bloodbath, with members of the 11th Company spraying 5.56 mm rounds from their refractor-barrelled Type-89 rifles at the Imperial troops, who had lined up their shields to form a wall from the beginning of the battle. The Imperial Guard's shields, which were merely thin steel plates stretched over a sheet of wood, were still incapable of blocking bullets that could penetrate 10-millimeter-thick steel plates. Even so, the Empire's officers and soldiers did not retreat even a single step, but instead advanced slowly and steadily, dying in a flurry of deaths. Seeing their enemies being so unconcerned about their casualties, the troops felt an eerie chill run down their spines.

[4th Team, go around from the right! Snipers, aim at those with the black uniforms! Once their political officers are gone, they will surely fall apart. We'll support them until then, so keep firing!]

Judging that it would take a lot of work to break through against the enemies' numbers, the 2nd Platoon Captain ordered his rifle squad, led by a young sergeant, to go around and make a flanking attack.

[Platoon Captain, you sure are very enthusiastic today.]

[It's his first actual battle after all. He must be very excited!]

As they exchanged such casual remarks, the Imperial Guards' arrows rained down on the heads of their troops. The Imperials had closed the distance for the attack, and before the troops knew it, they were well within the range of the Imperials' arrows. Several members of the troops were pierced by arrows and cried out for help. Their body armor was only strong enough to protect them from shrapnels, but it seemed to be enough to prevent fatal injuries.

[It hurts! It hurts!]

[D*mn it! Medic! Medic!]

In response to their calls, those who were in good shape pulled out the wounded behind a tree.

[Don't pull the arrow out. Keep it in place and bind the trunk side with a pressure bandage. If the arrow gets in the way when being moved, break it off in the middle and remove it later. Don't cut it off at the base though, leave enough for a person to grab!]

The Platoon Captain stopped a member who was about to pull the arrow out of his ally's body. The Imperial Guard's arrows usually have barbed arrowheads, so attempting to pull them out will only make the damage to the body tissues worse. Furthermore, the connection between the arrow's shaft and its arrowhead was too loose, so there was a risk of leaving the arrowhead inside the body if it was forcibly pulled out. Therefore, when an arrowhead pierced deeply into a limb, military doctors in the Special Region such as those within the Empire would strike the arrowhead with a hammer or the like to intentionally penetrate it and extract it from the body, and then treat it afterwards. Of course, there's no need for the JSDF to do such a thing. If the injured are sent back to an environment where incisional surgery can be performed, they don't need to do such a risky thing. Incidentally, tying up the shaft (the area near its core) is to stop bleeding, and also in case the arrowhead is coated with poison.

The medics rushed to the scene and dragged the wounded man out. The other members of the team also temporarily moved back to escape the range of the arrows. However, as if they had seen this as a sign of fear from the JSDF, the Imperial soldiers simultaneously rushed forward, closing the distance until they could clearly see each other's expressions. They were trying to get close enough to engage in melee combat. The troops, equipped with Type-89 rifles and aiming aids, matched their red reticles with those of the Imperial soldiers who had rushed forward, and sprayed them with bullets in burst mode.

However, the Imperial soldiers stepped over the corpses of their comrades. Seeing that merely shooting them wasn't going to get them anywhere, the troops attempted to discourage the Imperial Guard with hand grenades. However, they were only able to kill a few of them. Hand grenades are hardly an effective weapon against Imperial soldiers who are armed with shields and were even making use of the bodies of their comrades as shields. The images of several people being blown up by a single hand grenade in movies and other media outlets were mere exaggerations. Nevertheless, they succeeded in halting the advance of the Imperial Guards, and the impact of the explosions stopped them in their tracks.

[Use the grenade launcher.]

After a Type-06 rifle grenade was installed to the muzzle of their gun, they launched it one after another into the center of the crowd of Imperial soldiers. The explosion caused the people in the center of the enemy lines to fall over like dominoes. But even so, the Imperial Guards showed their will to fill the holes in the ranks and slowly move forward.

[These guys are amazing.]

As they swapped magazines, the paratroopers couldn't help but exclaim in amazement. At that moment, one of the snipers caught sight of a man in black between the eyes at the end of the line of Imperial troops in a prone position with his reticle. The anti-personnel sniper rifle opens fire, and scattering brain matter around, the Oprichnina member falls. Another one bites the dust.

Thereupon, the enemy, who until then had shown a steel-like will to fight and had been making it difficult for the JSDF, suddenly fell into disarray. They fled in the blink of an eye, like spiders scattering at the wave of a broom. How should one describe it..... The enemy disappeared before their eyes. Gone. Vanished without a trace.

Seeing such a situation, 4th Platoon Captain who had made a detour to attack the enemy from the side, "Arehh, where did the enemy go?", they radioed in. Fixing his posture, the 2nd Platoon Captain stood up and spoke.

[Let's go to the next one! There are still enemies out there! Stay on your guard!]

The corner of the Empire that had heavily sieged the Jade Palace was thus cut off.

[Knights, mount your horses! Gather!]

"

"

Seeing one of the enemy's corners collapsed, Bozes saw this as an opportunity to win the war. This hole in the encirclement was the enemy's weak point. Immediately after, more than a hundred cavalrymen lined up with their horses.

[Beefeater! Let's go!]

[Got it!]

Jumping out of position, Bozes mounted her horse and launched a cavalry charge, showing the true specialty of the Knights. The main task of a cavalry is to overrun the enemy by utilizing the horse's rushing power. The horses' hooves gouged the earth and let out a thunderous roar as they surged forward. The cavalry immediately entered the forest through the hole in the encircling net. The cavalry then made a wide detour and formed a wedge-shaped formation. Eventually, they broke out of the forest. With her luxurious golden hair fluttering in the wind, Bozes drew her sword and shouted.

[Charge!]

With herself as a golden arrowhead, they surged into the tender backs of the Imperial soldiers.

[Trample over them!]

With overwhelming momentum, the Knights struck the Imperials' officers and soldiers, like a tidal wave that swept over everything in their path. Assaulted from a direction they hadn't expected, the Imperial soldiers were sent flying, as if struck by a huge hammer.

[D- Don't run away! Hold your ground!]

The black-robed Oprichnina member continued to shout.

[Where do you think you're going!?!]

Seizing one of the Imperial soldiers by the collar as he tried to run away, he tried to bring him back to the front. However, while he was seizing one of them, more and more Imperial soldiers were escaping, spilling out from both sides. Thereupon, the horse-riding Knights attacked without slowing down.

After everything had passed, all that was left was a pile of corpses lying on the ground, crushed and unrecognizable. From the position of the Knights defending the Jade Palace, cheers shouting “Bozes! Bozes!” called out as the horse-riding Knights overran the enemy. The JGSDF and the Knights had unintentionally launched an exquisite coordinated attack. The paratroopers entered the wounds opened by the cavalry and gouged out the wounds. This allowed the cavalry to run freely through the midst of the Imperial soldiers without worrying about being surrounded.

The besieging Imperial troops were now in pieces like a folding fan that had its main screw removed, unable to continue organized combat. By the time Kengun's army and his subordinates reached the Jade Palace, the battle had already shifted to a sporadic sweep. The Imperial soldiers had lost their will to fight and had scattered around. There were some rare ones that still tried to fight against them, but their individual bravery was no longer enough to turn the situation around. Kengun ordered his subordinates to check the casualties and entered the Jade Palace, where Vice Minister Shirayuri and the other politicians were waiting. However, what he saw there wasn't the luxurious interior that welcomed foreign guests, but a field hospital where the wounded lay in cramped spaces and the smell of blood and medicine mingled.

[What is this?]

Kengun was shocked because most of the injured were old soldiers or young women. Since most of the male officers had been pulled out to rebuild the Imperial army, the Knight Order was composed of young female officers and middle-aged or older soldiers. The number of wounded reflected this ratio exactly.

[I can understand the old soldiers being here. That just means they had a lot of veterans. However, there are even girls who aren't old enough yet. What is with this Knight Order?]

[Is that perhaps a roundabout way of criticizing us?]

The voice calling out from behind Kengun made him turn around and answer.

[No, that wasn't meant to be criticism, we also have women in our ranks. It's just, I can't bear to see all these girls wounded lined up in rows. As a man, that is.]

The sight of so many women lying wounded in battle is too painful for a man to watch. A blonde woman who appeared to be the commander held out her ungloved hand to Kengun. Her arm and shoulder were bandaged and oozing blood. It was a sight that showed at a glance that she had been in the midst of a fierce battle.

[It's been a while, Colonel Kengun.]

[You were..... Bozes-san, right?]

Kengun shook Bozes' hand. He had met Bozes several times during his language training in Alnus. Her hand is very slender and very ladylike, but when he actually shook it, the palm was covered with thick calluses. Touching them, even Kengun had to admit that, despite appearances, these women were warriors.

[I'm Beefeater.]

He then shook hands with the beauty disguising herself as a man standing next to Bozes.

[Hmm? Have I met you in Alnus before?]

[.....]

Beefeater had never been to Alnus and could not understand Japanese at all. Because of her temperament, she couldn't understand this art that Piña and Bozes liked, so she hadn't seen the need for the language training program and didn't join, concentrating on her duties instead. Therefore, although she introduced herself, she was unable to exchange the accompanying greetings, and it was necessary for Bozes to translate and help her communicate.

[Beefeater said "It's an honor to meet you, Captain Kengun".]

[I see. It's an honor to meet you too. Now then, Bozes-san, I'll get straight to the point. We are now leaving the Capital with the civilians. What will your Knight Order do after this?]

Bozes' eyes widened, looking rather surprised.

[Does your team not have any intention of heading towards the Imperial Palace?]

[Yes. We came here solely for a rescue mission. We will leave immediately.]

Thereupon, Bozes softly muttered something in the local language of the Special Region.

[This isn't good. I was hoping they would just take the Imperial Palace.]

Hearing this, Beefeater's eyes widened in disbelief.

[No, no, no, no, no, isn't that bad, Bozes? That would mean a foreign occupation of the Empire.]

[True, but if it's for Princess Piña's safety, it can't be helped. Besides, we have already become enemies of the Empire. Haven't you realized that? As long as his Highness Zorzal rules the Empire, there's no place for us here.]

[Errr..... However, I didn't mean to.....]

[Even if you didn't mean to, that doesn't matter. The sweepers will now come arrest us, and we will have no legal grounds to oppose them. After all, the envoys had already left.]

[Oi, oi, oi, then, what? Are we going to be sent to Basson Prison?]

[I don't know..... After something like this though, they might not bother to arrest and allow us to stand in court. They might even execute us on the spot.]

[What!? But why!?]

[It can't be helped. We've defied his Highness Zorzal's will.]

[However, we were ordered by the Emperor.]

[Yes, that was the right thing for us to do. However, that has nothing to do with his Highness Zorzal.]

Kengun had no choice but to look on in bewilderment as the two suddenly began to argue. He thought of just leaving them arguing with something he couldn't understand, but soon, Bozes spoke up.

[Captain Kengun, is the way outside the Imperial City secured?]

[Yeah. The enemy has not made any major movements so far.]

[Then, I have a request. I would like you to accompany the Knights outside the Capital.]

[Yes, that's fine. That was what we had been planning all along. However, what will you do after that?]

[We are going to Count Formal's territory.]

[I see. To Italica huh.]

[Yes. I also have one more request.]

[What is it?]

[I would like you to take care of all the wounded here. We have no choice but to leave them here.]

Kengun looked over at the wounded soldiers lying on the ground and nodded.

[Indeed, I suppose so. With so many wounded, it will be difficult to move them. All right, I understand. We will take custody of all of them. We will take them to Alnus for treatment.]

[That would be very helpful.]

At that moment, 1st Lt. Toyohira asked.

[Colonel, would that be alright? We won't be able to carry all of them in the chinooks.]

[It's alright. The heavily injured can be transported by air and the relatively lightly injured can be transported by land. The cars will be a little crowded, but since it's women we're letting ride, I doubt the youngsters will complain.]

Thereupon, Beefeater, who seemed to have something to say to Kengun, started talking on and on.

[I just want to make sure, but these guys aren't going to be prisoners of war, right? Oi, Bozes. Translate for me.]

Even though she didn't feel like this is something that needs to be asked, Bozes just sighed and translated. As it reminds her of a mistake she made a while ago, she doesn't like bringing up this topic.

[As I told you before, our country treats prisoners of war humanely. Besides, all of you here were wounded fighting to protect the Japanese. You will not be considered as prisoners of war, and will be treated accordingly.]

Thereupon, saying “I’m relieved now, you seem like a nice guy!”, Beefeater patted Kengun on the shoulder. Kengun was at a loss whether to be offended or pleased by such an easygoing attitude from a girl so young that she could be described as his own child, but he just put that aside for the time being and turned to Bozes.

[Well then, let’s head for the rally point quickly.]

[Yes. Everyone is in your care. Beefeater, I’ll leave the rest to you.]

[The rest? Why?]

Bozes was talking as if she wasn’t going to go with them.

"

"

[You’re leaving things to me? What are you going to do?]

[I can’t leave Princess Piña here, so I’m going to fetch her.]

Hearing what Bozes was about to do, “A- Are you an idiot!?”, Beefeater shouted.

[I don’t care if you call me an idiot. What I want is for you to understand!]

[Don’t say the impossible, Bozes. We don’t even know where the Princess is.]

[In the Imperial Palace of course.]

[Then, the question is, where in the massive Imperial Palace is she? It’s not possible to easily rescue her!]

[Even if that's so, I can't just abandon the Princess.]

[Wait..... Then, what about the Knight Order? Are you just gonna abandon us!? What are we going to do after this!?!]

Beefeater pointed to the Knights' generals, whose numbers had been reduced to nearly half. The wounded had already been carried out by those who were still alive and well. As there weren't enough stretchers for everyone, when it came to transporting the women, the young JSDF officers fought against each other, shouting "Me! Me!" "No, I'll handle this girl!", and they would carry them out in a princess carry. Even those who could walk on their own were carried in their arms, saying things like "You must be tired". As for the old male soldiers, they were carried on stretchers, clearly showing the disparity in their treatment. However, this is something that cannot be helped as long as there are the variety of beings, men and women, exist. Perhaps convinced that there was nothing to worry about after seeing such a situation, Bozes spoke.

[I need to meet with the Princess in order to think about what we'll do after this. If things continue as they are, we truly will have no place left for us.]

[Then, who will be in charge of the reorganization?]

[I'll leave that to you.]

Walking out of the Jade Palace, Bozes mounted the horse she had hitched.

[Well then, I will be off! Colonel Kengun, I leave everyone to you!]

[Like I said, wait right there! What the heck are you doing, you idiot!?!]

Ignoring Beefeater's words, Bozes whipped the forward and they were gone in a flash.

[She's leaving the rest to me? Where is that woman going?]

Even though Kengun turned such a question to her, Beefeater wasn't able to understand him. Beefeater, who had been hesitating whether she should follow or not, straddled her horse, as if to escape Kengun's question and followed after Bozes.

[Hey! Where are you going?]

[Sorry. I'll go bring her back, so wait for us!]

Kengun, who didn't understand what was going on, could only watch in silence as the two women left.

* * * * *

The chaos that Zorzal and his entourage had fallen into began to calm down as reports began to arrive from various sources and they began to see the situation they were in.

[I've come to report. The Dragon Riders' camp on the outskirts of the city appears to have been wiped out. It's hopeless to think there were survivors.]

[Reporting. The enemy has invaded the Imperial Capital and attacked the Oprichnina. The Oprichnina's headquarters has been destroyed. Incoming Praetor Luflus is missing!]

[I've come to report. The enemy forces have engaged the Oprichnina surrounding the Jade Palace.]

On the model of the Imperial Capital placed in front of Zorzal, military units of both sides identified by the report were lined up. The blue pieces represent the 30,000 Imperial soldiers while the red pieces represent the JSDF. Most of the vast number of blue pieces were either in the Imperial Palace or moving towards it. In contrast, there were only a few red pieces. They are like red islands floating in the blue sea, standing around the Western Gate and Basson Prison. There were also a few placed around the Jade Palace, and some outside the Imperial Palace, staring at the Imperial Capital. Surrounding the map, Zorzal's entourage discussed what they could understand about the current situation.

[Is this all of the enemy soldiers? Counting all of them, weren't their numbers less than 500?]

[Is it possible that they've made a mistake in counting the soldiers? No matter how I see it, this is too few.]

[No, even considering the ones that fell from the sky, there aren't that many of them. There may indeed be some counting mistake, but the margin of error shouldn't be that large.]

[However, does that mean their objective wasn't this Palace?]

[Then, their objective really was the Jade Palace huh?]

[How foolish of them. They would have been allowed to leave even without doing this.]

[No, no. As this movement suggests, the enemy's objective also includes the rescue of the pro-peace faction. That is why they resorted to such strong-arm tactics.]

[Umumumu.]

Zorzal's pale complexion has now turned bright red. As soon as he felt relieved knowing that the enemy's goal wasn't him, his anger began to rise. He was also driven by the need to make up for the unsightly sight he had shown everyone.

[Send the whole army against the enemy at once!]

[Your Highness, that is not possible. The garrison officers and soldiers are currently on their way to the Imperial Palace. If you give them another order at this point, their paths might intercross and chaos might ensue.]

[What, so you're saying that we should let the enemy do whatever they want?]

[No. If we continue to sit by and watch without doing anything, the prestige of the Imperial army will be shaken. If the enemy's objective is to rescue the pro-peace faction, they will soon move to withdraw. With such a situation, I think it would be enough to send an elite force of 4000-5000 Imperial Guards to pursue the enemy.]

Understanding his point, Zorzal nodded.

[Very well, choose the soldiers that would be sent out and have them ready at once! Make haste!]

Escorted by the 11th Company of the 1st Airborne Brigade and the Knights, Casel and the others arrived safely at the rally point on the outskirts of the capital. There, they were instructed to board a large chinook helicopter prepared for civilian evacuations. Meanwhile, the injured people at the Jade Palace and the Japanese envoys boarded another helicopter. Sherry did not want to part with Sugawara though, so she remained with Shirayuri and the other envoys.

[So, we have to board these?]

Casel and the others followed the instructions of the troops and entered through the hatch at the rear of the aircraft. Thereupon, they found a number of familiar faces in the dimly lit fuselage and raised their hands.

[Lord Cicero? Is that you, Lord Cicero!?]

[Ohh! Marquis Casel! Is everyone alright?]

"

"

The senators were delighted upon everyone's safety.

[We somehow managed to take refuge in the Jade Palace. What about those who were captured?]

[The Oprichnina didn't immediately cut off the heads of those who remained obedient. However, those who disobeyed and ran away when they were captured were apparently.....]

[As I thought. How tragic.....]

[It never occurred to us that it would have been better off if we had just let ourselves be captured quietly.]

[No, that's just mere hindsight. If no help like this had been offered towards us, we would have ended up imprisoned at best, or executed at worst.]

[I suppose so. Even so, I think the world really is full of things that would fill us with the thought of "I would have done this if I had known about that".]

[Indeed. Only an optimist or a person who has nothing to lose can say that the future is interesting because it's uncertain. Such thoughts won't comfort others, especially those who have lost loved ones and family members.]

As if they had swallowed a bitter pill, the nobles' brows wrinkled upon his words.

[In any case, we are no longer in danger. We must seriously consider our future so that we don't have to go through something like this again. Especially after this incident, I think I've finally understood what Japan desires here. They want the Empire to be the stabilizing force on this world. To that end.....]

His words were abruptly ended as it was drowned out by the sound of the helicopter's engines, which suddenly increased in intensity.

[Ohh, we're floating!]

Feeling the lift of takeoff, Cicero and the others stuck to the window, peered out and exclaimed in amazement.

[Japan was in control of such a vehicle huh.]

The altitude of the aircraft soon reached a height at which they could look down on the Imperial Capital. It was the first time even for Casel, who had lived here for many years, had ever had a panoramic view of this city, which used to boast of being the largest in the world, from the sky. With the view burned into his eyes, he was determined to return to the city.

Meanwhile, the wagons they had ridden in on their escape from the capital had completed their task and were leaving the rally point. After receiving their reward in gold coins from the JSDF, the men from Akusho turned their empty wagons to the north.

[Arehh, where are they heading to?]

At Kuribayashi's question, Mizari smiled, showed her the gold coin she had received, and answered loudly enough to be heard over the roar of the helicopter as it took off.

[Even if we go back to the Capital now, business is slow and we won't have any food to eat. Since we managed to come out of the Capital, we're going to buy a bunch of food with this. I'm sure we'll make good money.]

If all of the pro-peace faction escaped, the blockade around the Imperial Capital would be meaningless. That being the case, the blockade would be lifted, and they would be able to confidently bring food into the capital. In the Capital, where food is in short supply, it will surely fetch a high price. The residents of Akusho, who are wise to take advantage of the situation, are thinking of killing two or three birds with one stone, even at a time like this. Kuribayashi, impressed by the resilience of Mizari and the others, boarded a high-mobility vehicle that had been unloaded from the Chinook with his comrades from the 3rd Recon Team. Kurata, Tomita, Kuwabara, and others were riding in one of the vehicles. After the high-mobility vehicles were unloaded, the pro-peace nobles and their families boarded the chinooks in a line, guided by

the troops. Holding down her hair, which was disheveled by the fierce winds created by the helicopter's rotors, Mizari looked up at the chinook as it took off and shouted.

[Aren't Kuribayashi and the others going to ride those?]

[Those are for the civilians in the Basson Prison. We're going to ride in this one and return overland at a leisurely pace.]

Saying this, Kuribayashi tapped on the hood of the high-mobility vehicle.

[You'll probably sneak back here one day again, right? At that time, let's talk about boys over alcohol again. Let's go, Tyuwal.]

With these words, Mizari and the others left the rally point.

Bozes is riding her horse through the streets of the Imperial Capital, on her way towards the Imperial Palace. Beefeater follows a short distance behind her. Soon the main gate of the Imperial Palace came into view in front of them, and Bozes thought about how to get inside. The area around the main gate is well protected by Imperial Guards and garrison soldiers, but the gate is not closed, so they could just jump in. With this in mind, Bozes pushed forward without slowing down.

[You on the horse! Halt!]

[Halt!]

However, the Imperial soldiers weren't so stupid as to let a person who wasn't clearly identified as an ally pass straight through. In accordance with the wartime principle of killing suspicious personnel, they immediately fired arrows at her. Bozes hurriedly pulled on the reins and stopped her horse. After she rode her horse around to avoid being the target of the arrows, she shouted.

[I am Bozes, a member of the Knight Order and its acting leader. I wish to see Princess Piña!]

With the situation like this, there was no room for tricks anymore. She had no choice but to announce her presence with dignity. Bozes thought that if the perception that the Knights were enemies of the empire hadn't spread, she could still get inside. But then, from behind the ramparts, an angry voice echoed, cursing the soldiers.

[What do you Knights want now!?!]

Bozes clicked her tongue at the sight of the black-robed men in Kobold helmets mingling with the Imperial Guards.

[That woman is a traitor! Never let her get close! Arrows! Let your arrows loose!]

Arrows scattered from all over the place. With arrows brimming with the confusion of their archers, they weren't able to even graze Bozes.

[Wait! I'm not your enemy!]

[What are you talking about!? After you've completely opposed us, don't act like you're our ally! Oi, capture her! Send out the infantry! What are you doing, archers!? Quickly let loose the next wave of arrows!]

Arrow after arrow came flying in. This time though, Bozes had to swing her sword hard to brush away the incoming arrows. However, she was still hit by several arrows in the shoulder and thigh.

[Ahh, ouch!]

Seemingly thrown off, Bozes fell from her horse. She was barely able to catch herself, but the shock of the fall prevented her from immediately raising her body. At that moment, one of the infantry jumped out and came at Bozes, trying to catch her. Bozes crawled backwards, but when she looked up, the infantry were right there, surrounding her.

[Ahh.....]

[Bozes!]

There, Beefeater rushed in. With her horse standing on two feet, Beefeater scattered the infantry away with her sword. The reason why the castle soldiers weren't shooting arrows at them was to avoid friendly fire. That was probably why the infantry surrounding the castle suddenly started to fall back. Realizing the enemy intended to let loose the arrows, Beefeater took advantage of the opportunity and pulled up Bozes, then turned the horse's head and sent it running. Arrow after arrow flew towards their direction, and as if burning tongs were suddenly pressed against it, she felt a sharp pain in her back.

[Beefeater. Please, to the castle!]

[You idiot! That's enough of your stupidity, you sh*tty woman! I told you it's impossible! Do you want to become a pincushion!?!]

Turning to look behind them, they saw a group of cavalymen following them. It was a cavalry that numbered not just in hundreds, but in thousands. This was the pursuit force that Zorzal had ordered to attack. However, Beefeater felt that this was a force sent out to pursue them.

[Who sends out this many soldiers to capture two people!? D*mn, Bozes, you're heavy! Haven't you been eating too much lately!?!]

[How rude! I may be pregnant, but my figure is still the same as before. If you're so upset, just throw me off. If it's just you, you would be able to get away.]

[Idiot! Like hell I would do that!]

However, they could certainly feel that her horse had become slow. The two of them together are only about the weight of an overweight man, so even though their pursuers haven't caught up to them right away, they are still closing the distance between them.

[Tsk..... This is bad.]

They somehow managed to get outside the Imperial Capital. But once outside the Imperial Capital, what would they do from there? Would the Japanese be waiting for them? What if they didn't wait for them? Will they be able to catch up with their allies headed for Italica? Seemingly raising a prayer, Beefeater pressed her forehead against her horse's neck.

By that time, the JSDF's withdrawal operation was almost over. The civilians and the wounded members of the Knights were already in the air. The slightly wounded and the various units that participated in the operation also used the vehicles brought by the helicopters to go overland to Alnus, using the vehicles brought by the helicopters. The Knights, under the command of Nikolaschka, have already departed for Count Formal's territory. Only the 1st Platoon of the 401st Company, acting as the rear guard for the others, remained at the rally point. One valuable chinook was left behind for the escape of their rifle platoon, remaining with them until the last minute.

Nevertheless, it was time for the allies to leave already. There should be no need for it to remain here any longer. Thinking it was about time the order to board was given, the troop members, including Lt Col Youga, glanced at Kengun's face and wondered what was going on.

[Lt Col Youga, what is Colonel Kengun thinking?]

[Don't ask me that. How the heck would I know?]

Similar conversations were taking place among the members of the troops. On the other hand, even as he was aware of everyone's eyes on him, Kengun kept his gaze in the direction of the Imperial Capital. He did not understand the language of the Special Region, but for some reason, Beefeater's last words to him sounded like she was asking to wait for them. These women had fought to protect the fellow

Japanese. If so, he was willing to wait for them until the last minute. However, when he saw thousands of cavalry troops emerging from the Imperial Capital and heading toward their direction, he could no longer wait for them. We must take off before that wave of cavalry fills this place. Thus, Kengun gave the order.

[Alright, that's enough. Start boarding!]

Hearing his command made the troops feel relieved. Thereupon, everyone rushed into the chinook with their equipment.

[Oi, look at that! I think they're chasing someone!]

But then, one of the troops noticed something and pointed it out. Kengun also hurriedly took out his binoculars, and there, he saw Beefeater and Bozes. They were being chased by a group of Imperial cavalymen. Four light cavalymen who had jumped out from the leading group of the Imperial soldiers were closing the distance rapidly and were about to catch up with them. Seeing this, "Sh*t! This is really bad", Kengun shouted, clutching his head.

[1st Platoon, halt boarding! Prepare to engage! The target is the approaching enemy lead cavalry! Distance 400, short bursts! Aim well! Don't hit the women!]

The enemy cavalry seemed to include archers among their ranks, as they were firing arrows at Beefeater and Bozes. However, it seemed like they're finding difficulty aiming at their targets from the turbulent horseback, as most of them missed and only struck the ground. The men hurriedly raised the bipods of their Type-64 rifles, assumed a prone firing position, and took aim. From among the four cavalymen, one rider managed to surpass the others, and probably a skilled one, as while he was in a midriff position, he drew his bow and firmly aimed at the back of the escaping Beefeater.

[Fire!]

Upon Kengun's order, all the troops' Type-64 rifles simultaneously opened fire. As if he had been struck by something, the cavalryman approaching Beefeater fell off his horse and rolled on the ground.

[Keep shooting! Fall back in turns!]

Following Kengun's commands, the 30 men continued to fire at those in the lead of the enemy cavalry. Raising their bodies to a kneeling posture, they then stood up and continued to fire, changing magazines as they fell back. However, the Imperial army has a lot of soldiers. They had too many numbers. The hordes of cavalymen surged towards them like a storm-driven tsunami, filling the land. First, the first wave of dozens of light cavalymen, the vanguards, attacked. Crashing head-on into the wall of gunfire, the Imperial soldiers fell from their horses one after another in a spray of blood, like waves crashing down a steep cliff. Yelling out angry bellows, the second wave of cavalry, stepping over the corpses of their allies, approached. The distance between the two sides had already been reduced to the extent that before they knew it, the JSDF were within the range of the Imperial soldiers' bows. Just as when they were within Kengun and the other's reach though, Beefeater's horse collapsed, as if it had felt relieved upon completing its task. It had already received a lot of arrows from the surge of enemies they had escaped.

[Alright! Start boarding! Leave no wounded behind! Stay calm and fall back!]

As they were thrown off their horse, Kengun firmly caught Beefeater's body. Meanwhile, Bozes fell on her back with several troop members cushioning her fall. Thereupon, carrying Beefeater on his left shoulder like a sandbag, Kengun commanded his men with a loud voice, inspiring their morale.

[Keep your gaze around and don't leave our allies behind! Match your timings with those next to you and fall back!]

The troops, with their rifles at the ready, were retreating in a tight circle, spraying bullets at the approaching enemy.

[D*mn it.....]

"

The troops, their hands shaking perhaps from nervousness or agitation, pulled out the magazine that he was about to swap out.

[The next wave is coming!]

A third wave of light cavalymen with spears at the ready rushed in with the same force of their horse's charge. The Imperial Guard would not stop even after taking a few bullets. Even when they fell from their horses, they charged with their weapons at the ready. A fierce melee battle ensued, sparks flying as bayonets and swords clashed fiercely. A member of the troops was pushed down and covered in mud. With the help of his comrades though, he quickly rose to his feet and letting out scream, he fired his rifle. Kengun fired his pistol, and a squad member with a Mini machine gun wrapped an ammunition belt around his left hand and opened heavy fire on the Imperial Guards.

It did not matter that the barrel was so hot that it seemed to singe his skin, he kept pulling the trigger and firing in rapid succession. In the blink of an eye, the cavalymen were swept away as if they were just sweeping away dead leaves. After wiping out the small group of light cavalry, there was a moment of silence, as if it was the calm before a storm. But soon after, the next wave of attack drew near. Some of the cavalry detoured at a distance to encircle the 1st Platoon.

[Hurry! Hurry! Leave no one behind!]

Holding their wounded comrades, the troops rode into the chinook, covering for each other. Seeing the Empire's cavalry coming at them from all the directions, the chinook pilot decided to lift the aircraft slightly off the ground even when the rear hatch was still open. Gaining a few inches of altitude, they changed the chinook's direction as it glided along.

[Everybody jumps in!]

The troops jumped aboard as soon as the hatch was pointed in their direction. The approaching enemy was met with heavy fire from inside the plane. Some imperial soldiers clung to the rear hatch, and the crew began to hit them with their gunstocks to push them off. An imperial soldier's swinging sword grazed the squad member's steel cap and went straight into his shoulder. The body armor blocked the deadly blade, but the kinetic energy went straight to the soldier's collarbone, snapping it off.

[Aghh!]

The thrust of a bayonet gouged out the chest of said Imperial soldier.

[Is everyone aboard!? We're not leaving anyone!]

Kengun shouted, and Youga, who was carrying a wounded soldier, answered.

[That's everyone!]

[Alright, let's go!]

The hatch is raised and slowly closed. The Imperial Guards, determined not to let them escape, tried rushing into the fuselage. However, the JSDF intercepted them. The hull of the aircraft was smashed violently, the outer surface dented, and the windows cracked. Seemingly thinking they could block their escape route if they went around the front of the plane, a few Imperial troops moved around the front of the Chinook, but the spinning front rotors ended up cutting off their head, spraying blood everywhere. Seeing this, the pilot let out a scream and launched a full throttle. The engines roared and the plane gained altitude in a violent maneuver.

Thereupon, seemingly spilling out, the Imperial soldiers fell. An imperial soldier, who had been hanging on to the rear hatch until the end, screamed as if frightened by the height. He shakes his leg and calls for help. However, the JSDF kept on banging their gunstocks against the desperate soldier's fingers, hoping to shatter them. Eventually, the Imperial soldier crashed down with a scream. Once they reached this altitude, there was no way to reach them even if they fired arrows from the ground. Below them, a large group of Imperial heavy cavalry covered the land they had just been holding like a tsunami. If they had been a few seconds later, they would have been swallowed up by the force of their enemies.

[Fuuu.....]

When they took off and finally out of reach of the enemy, Kengun sighed and sat down. The other troops also sat down, their shoulders relaxing. Some sat there as if their backs had been shattered, while there were others who leaned their backs on their seats.

[Kuuhhh.....]

One of the men, who was bleeding heavily from a slash across his cheek and neck, groaned. Everyone surrounded him, and the medics were doing their best to stop the bleeding while he screamed. But from the looks of it, everyone knew they might not be able to save him.

[His facial artery's been hit! His carotid artery too! Sh*t, the bleeding won't stop!]

In the blink of an eye, a small pile of white gauze was stained with the color of flesh blood.

[Do something!]

[In that case, why don't you help out!? Press on his wounds!]

Beefeater, who had been staring in amazement at the flurry of voices, timidly called out to Kengun.

[Ummm..... Could you..... let me down now?]

[Oh, sorry.]

Even though he didn't understand her words, he could somewhat understand what she was trying to say, so Kengun let Beefeater down.

[I must've been heavy.]

[Oh, it seems like you're injured. Medic! Check these two when you have the time.]

For some reason, the medic came over immediately. Apparently, the troop member earlier was no longer in need of medical attention. Following the battlefield principle of prioritizing the treatment of those who can be saved when it is clear that they cannot be saved, the medics examined the arrows in the backs of Bozes and Beefeater.

[It's better not to pull these out here. We'll stop the bleeding for the moment and give you some painkillers.]

After wiping away the greasy sweat on her face, Beefeater spoke.

[Perhaps, did you actually go out of your way to wait for us?]

Completely clueless about what she's saying though, Kengun could only nod his head.

[It doesn't matter if you can't understand me. I just want to say my thanks.]

Beefeater knew he didn't understand her words. But even so, she still bowed her head. She wanted to bow her head. Not only to Kengun, but also to all the troops present here. Seeing this, the troops remained expressionless. They were not angry, nor were they happy to be safe. They simply dressed up their dead comrades without hesitation. All of a sudden though, a scream broke the silence.

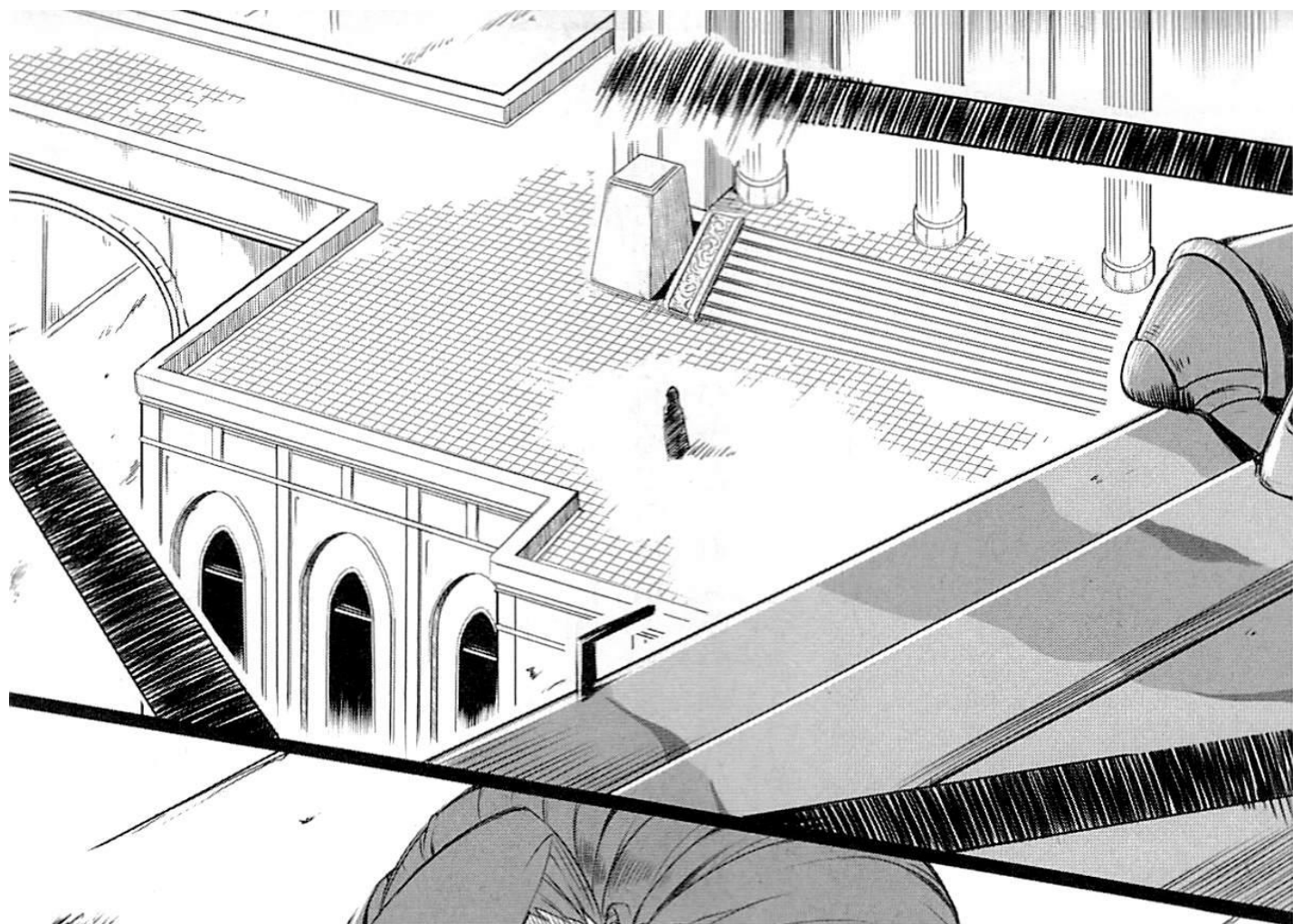
[P- Piña-sama!]

The one who screamed was Bozes, and it seemed she had spotted something in the scenery below. The chinook they were riding passed over the Imperial Palace, and the reason why Bozes screamed was because she saw the figure of Piña in the building of the Imperial Palace. She was standing on the terrace, and Kengun could see the wistful smile on her face as she looked up at them.

[Please! Save the Princess!]

Bozes turned and shouted to everyone. However, "We can't, we're just about out of fuel", the pilot replied. Aircrafts don't fly just by effort and perseverance. The distance that they can be flown is always determined by the amount of fuel they have remaining. If the pilot says it's not possible, then it definitely is impossible.

[Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do here.]



Kengan admonished her to give up. Upon hearing this, Bozes broke down in tears, while Beefeater could do nothing but gently pat her on the back.

* * * * *

The Chinook, a large helicopter, arrived at Alnus at midnight. First, the civilians rescued from the imperial capital and the envoys sent by the government alighted. When the wounded members of the Knights were also unloaded, there was a great commotion around the heliport. Flashes flashed and a barrage of cameras greeted them. The most conspicuous among them was the Japanese team covering the event.

[Shirayuri-san, what is the state of the Imperial Capital!? Have negotiations fallen through!?)

Kuribayashi Nanami, microphone in hand, was about to rush at Shirayuri when she got into a struggle with the security guards. The representative reporting teams from North America, EU, and the other emerging countries also saw this as a rare chance to report on the tense situation in the Special Region, and they were all shouting in their own languages. The media paid particular attention to the wounded members of the Knights who were being dismounted one after another. They were all unarmed, so they looked like civilians to the onlookers, and they were wounded with blood-stained bandages and the like. The sight of them provided the perfect material that reflected sensational clips.

[The JSDF seems to have conducted some kind of operation in the Imperial Capital. As you can see, a large number of women and elderly people were injured in the operation.]

Komurazaki shouted towards the camera.

[Is it really acceptable to conduct such a brutal operation that causes such a large number of casualties? We must pay stricter attention to the government and the JSDF. The watchful eyes of the citizens really are necessary. This time, we, the media, were allowed only very limited coverage in the form of representative interviews. However, if this is what happens when we are not around to watch them, perhaps the restrictions placed on us should be lifted. We would like to strongly urge the government to do so.]

Chapter 10

The refugees from Coda Village had scattered to various villages and towns to find work to fill their mouths. In the case of the Village Chief, he took a job as a temporarily hired farmer at a manor on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital. The owner of the manor had known him for a long time and considered him a friend. Therefore, even though he was a temporary hire, he wasn't treated that badly.

The job description involves the Demi-Human slaves who works in the fields. He would get up when the sun rises, put the powerful but mild-mannered Demi-Humans to work, and finish in the evening. Then, when the sun goes down, his friend would invite him to enjoy a few cheap, muddy drinks and idle chit chat, before returning to his bed of piled straw at midnight, when it's completely dark. Income was low and would soon be gone after using them to feed himself and his family and other expenses. Naturally, it was difficult to save money with such wages. Still, he considered himself happy that his family had enough to eat. His mind wasn't filled with youthful thoughts as to think about regaining his lost house and farm.

Living in a manor with almost no human traffic, they would naturally be in a closed environment. Information from the outside world rarely flows in. For this reason, he couldn't hear any rumors from the outside, about what was happening in the Empire and how the other refugees from Coda Village were living their lives.

The Village Chief had some vague ideas. The other refugees probably aren't as fortunate as he is, so they were probably living a harsh life. After all, most of the residents of Coda Village were just farmers and artisans you can find anywhere. Unless they have special skills or talents, they would have to live in a life of poverty, earning chump change as wages, a life worse than slavery. He wishes everyone is doing well. However, for him he could only earn enough for his family's livelihood, wishing for their well-being is all he could do for them.

Such a man, through a coincidence, heard the rumor that the Flame Dragon had been slain. The owner of the manor had gone to a town called Morrison with his wagons in order to ship the harvested crops. At that time, attracted by the scent of wine, he stopped by the taverna, where he heard a minstrel recite a poem. It was a poem in praise of "an old magician's disciple, Lelei and her comrades", who had slain the Flame Dragon.

[You're able to return to your village. Isn't that great?]

As the owner of the manor clapped him on his shoulder, delighted for his friend's good fortune, the Village Chief immediately began to prepare for his trip. However, he wasn't happy about this at all. After all, returning to Coda Village doesn't necessarily mean that he can immediately get the life he had back then. With people's absence, the fields would definitely be in ruins, and he doesn't even know what has happened to the houses. How many years and how much money would need to be spent to restore life to the way it was before? Just thinking about it makes him depressed.

However, once the Flame Dragon was exterminated, it was necessary to see what had happened to Coda Village. He must then assess the situation and formulate a plan for the future. That is his duties as Coda's Village Chief.

Fortunately, the manor was now in its off-season and he wasn't busy with his work. After entrusting his family to the owner of the manor, the Village Chief pulled out his wagon and departed for Coda Village. Along his trip, the Village Chief would stop by the villages and towns as he saw them. The main reason for this was to obtain news of the refugees from Coda Village, and to confirm the authenticity of the rumors that the Flame Dragon had been slain.

Soon however, he was astonished.

Most of the villages and towns he stopped by had lost all signs of life. Here and there lay the bodies of residents who had been slashed or hit by arrows, and smoke was rising from houses that had caught fire. Were they attacked by bandits? But even if that's so, there was no one left alive. An uninhabited village is nothing more than a ruin, so they would end up not having crops to take and no money to be made. The act of slaughtering isn't something a bandit by profession would ever do. However, in the next village, and even the town next to that, the scene remained the same.

And even in the next one.....

[Even here.....]

He found another ruin. Seeing a scene of carnage where Goblins were swarming and attacking people, he sighed. Looking around, he saw Kobolds and Orcs as well. They would normally carry only rusty weapons or broken armor pilfered from battlefields, but for some reason, they were all armed with

brand-new armor, swords and spears. In an alleyway, a large black Monster Dog was devouring the corpse of a child, and seeing such a scene, he couldn't help but turn away as pieces of blood and flesh splattered and stained the area. There were slender Shapeshifters with javelins in their hands, beings rarely seen in these areas. These women, whose ancestors were coyotes, were rousing the surviving old men, women and children to a run, as if to torment them.

Watching this scene, the Village Chief was frozen in place. The villages and towns he had passed through so far were in ruins, with the scars of the storm still visible. However, this place was still in the middle of that storm.

It's dangerous. He must run away now, turn back.

Alarm bells rang in the Village Chief's head. However, his body would not listen to him. Cowering in fear, or perhaps, his body having forgotten how to move, he couldn't even lift the reins. Eventually, an Imperial soldier entered his field of vision. Seeing this, the Village Chief felt relieved that the Imperial Soldiers had arrived. He thought that he might be saved if he called out to them and asked for their help.

[H- Help.....]

But then, he saw something he couldn't believe. Something that shouldn't be possible.

It's the sight of Goblins and Orcs setting fires and robbing goods..... under the direction of the Humans. This wasn't caused by Demi-Humans going berserk. This was the work of the Imperial army. The shock of learning this truth reminded the Village Chief's body how to move. Quietly turning his horse's head, he turned his wagon around so that he wouldn't be seen. It was a good thing he was frozen in place earlier and didn't call out to them, so no one had noticed his presence yet.

Gently..... Quietly..... It will be alright if he can quietly escape from this place.

Having this in mind, the Village Chief gripped the reins of his horse. But then, a girl and a boy came tumbling out of an alley and ran towards him, crying out loud.

[Village Chief! Village Chief! Please help us!]

[A- Aren't you from Dogaran's place!?!]

The boy, though dirty and clad in rags, was a face the Village Chief is familiar with; he's a child from Coda Village.

[Mom and Dad were——!]

The boy's voice, though one could feel his grief from it, eloquently conveyed the situation. At that same time however, the children's voice alerted the surrounding monsters to their location. The black Monster Dog had their gazes at them, while the Shapeshifters were pointed towards them. The Commanders of the Imperial army, consisting of young noblemen Viscount Helm, Baron Mudra and Marquis Calasta, had also turned towards them.

[Calasta, over there. Left-overs.....]

[Helm-dono, they have seen us. We can't let them escape.]

The Chief shouted to the children.

[Get on quick! Let's get out of here!]

With the children in the cart, the Village Chief shook the reins like a whip and had the cart started. The horse, which was powerful, but not suited to running fast, flinched and showed its displeasure. However, perhaps sensing the Village Chief's sense of crisis through the reins, eventually accepted the idea of running as fast as it could. But after a while..... the sound of horses' hooves could be heard from behind

them and the rough breathing of the sprinting beasts could be heard. Little by little, bit by bit. Slowly, the distance between them came closer and closer. The Village Chief hurried his horse to escape from the presences behind them.

Eagerly..... Earnestly.....

He must have been frightened by the pressure from behind them. The children on the back of the horse began to cry, hugging each other in fright. Seemingly getting irritated by the sound of the children crying, the Village Chief tried to get them to stop crying.

[It's alright, don't cry!]

With the sound of the wagon rattling at the speed they were running, they wouldn't be able to hear him if he spoke normally, so he shouted at them. When the children saw the Village Chief forcing a smile on his face, the children somehow managed to stop crying.

[Even if I look like this now, I have been to war in my youth. I'm quite strong.]

Steering his horse, the Village Chief shouted at them to peel back the floorboards. Doing as they were told, the children examined the floorboards on the violently shaking cart. Thereupon, the third board from the front could be easily removed, where they found a sword underneath. Taking the sword from the children, as if to make himself look dependable, the Village Chief tried to flex with his skinny arm.

Kissing the hilt of his sword, he prayed.

[Oh Emroy-sama, God of War. My own fate doesn't matter so long as these children are safe.]

The pressure that seemed to crush their souls was quickly closing in from behind them. The Village Chief turned around, where he saw a line of cavalymen. No, it wasn't a cavalry of humans, but centaurs. They were all wearing armor and dressed like bandits. In addition, a pack of black Monster Dogs followed together with them. In contrast, the Village Chief's horse is just a farm horse. Moreover, it's already panting heavily. Sweat dripping all over its body, the horse was already sticking out its tongue. It could collapse at any moment. However, as for what would happen if they were caught.....

As the scene of the piece of meat being devoured by the black Monster Dog came back to his mind, the Village Chief became impatient, screaming and howling.

[Come on, you can do it! Please do your best!!!!]

Spurring a horse to run until it dies, if one thinks about it, was quite an unreasonable abuse. If the horse could speak human language, it would have probably cursed at him for asking such a thing even after so many years of abuse it went through. However, this was for the sake of the lives of two children. He could only ask Emroy and ask for forgiveness. The Village Chief gripped the reins with a fierce heart, and even though he knew he was pushing it unreasonably, he whipped it running.

However, even though the horse was doing its best, the wagon can't hold up to its speed. Even after it had been used for years, the old wagon was still being used. With the creaking of the wagon's axle, the vibration increased in intensity. Even so, he couldn't stop whipping the horse. It was a situation of whether the horse would collapse or the wagon would break first. Eventually, the horse finally reached its limits.

The horse, having run out of strength, suddenly fell over, breaking all four of its limbs. The cart overturned with the sudden change in momentum, breaking its axle and sending up a huge cloud of dust, knocking the Village Chief and the children to the ground. The Village Chief, his entire body stained with dirt, mud and oozing blood, ignored the intense pain that ran through every part of his body, and staggering to his feet, he shielded the children behind him and drew his rusty sword. Even as the old man had lost all hope and energy, he was surprised to see how much power he had left in his body.

[Oh Emroy-sama, my horse has done well, and I hope you take care of it. I will follow it next. However, please bless my old bones so that I may fight with everything of my being.]

The old man pointed the tip of his sword at the black Monster Dog, which was coming towards them with its fangs bared, and prayed. At that moment.....

[Very well, I give you my blessings!]

At that moment, something like a gale rushed forth and suddenly chopped off the centaur's head. A swarm of black Monster Dogs shot off and scattered all over the place, letting out screams resembling shrieks.

It was at this moment when God answered the Village Chief's prayer.

* * * * *

Standing in the center of the uncovered high-mobility vehicle, Tuka had her arms outstretched wide and bathed in the wind. Catching the flowing wind with her whole body, she feels comfortable, as if she was flying in the air. Her hair, fluttering in the wind, glistened and shone golden in light. Behind Tuka, Rory is rummaging through their luggages. Peering into and pulling out the items that were loaded in the luggage carrier, she examined them and checked if they were weapons or equipment that could be used in preparation for the battle ahead. One of them is the 110mm Light Anti Armor Munition, LAM provided to

their team. Spotting a box-shaped object that resembled a signboard in a shopping arcade, Rory curiously brought it out.

[What is this?]

[That's a directional mine, a trap. It's an excellent tool to take out enemies in one fell swoop.]

[What about this then?]

[It's a flare. You launch it up at night and it lights up the area for a while.]

[Ahh. That one you used back in the Sea of Books inn huh.]

[The one I used then was a stun grenade. They should be stored over there.]

[There's a lot of stuff here. This box should be containing food. I wonder what this container is? A medicine bag?Then, what's this?]

"

"

[W- What the!? Why are those in there!?!]

Seeing the box Rory took out, Itami was at a loss for words. He had never checked the contents of the first aid kit before, so he didn't know what was inside.

[Itami-dono. If they're in the Medicine bag, are they some sort of medicine?]

At Yao's words, Itami was unable to find the words to respond. Certainly, those were things sold in pharmacies. Unable to get a clear answer from Itami, Rory proceeded to peel off the cellophane wrapping and opened the paper box. What came out of the box was a vacuum-sealed, rubber product that had been rolled up into a disk.

[Itami-dono. It appears you know how these things are used. If you don't mind, could you tell us their purpose?]

Yao said with a smile that seemed to prod for an answer. The Dark Elf's smile even seemed to reach her eyes, seemingly as if she asked this, knowing how awkward Itami feels to answer that. Itami could feel it, the situation he's in isn't good. If he were to explain the use of this rubber product, there was a big possibility that he would be asked why he had such a thing prepared. He could certainly say someone was just pranking him, but such an explanation wouldn't be understood by the women here. If that's so, could he say that these were prepared when the time comes? In that case, for whom were these prepared?

.....Answering that way has a risk of bringing him to a corner, so he decided that she should never tell them the true use of this thing.

[T- Those are..... for covering the tip of your gun to keep sand and water from getting in the barrel!]

Itami said, showing a movement of putting the disk-like rubber packet over the muzzle of his Type-64 rifle. He isn't technically telling a lie. During the Persian Gulf War, US generals did use this item for such a purpose when they went to the desert.

[I see. But I don't understand why they were in the medicine bag.]

[Well, someone must have put them there by accident. No wonder I couldn't find it, a, ha, ha, ha, ha.]

As Itami let out a despair-filled dry laugh, the "laugh of someone who's about to get the death penalty", It was Lelei, who was behind the wheel, who saved him.

[Something at 10 o'clock.]

At Lelei's words, Itami broke off the conversation and pointed the binoculars in the direction she had pointed. Yao and Tuka persistently tried to question Itami, but Lelei was staring in the same direction as Itami with a serious look in her eyes.

[Are they being chased? I suppose those would be bandits?]

[A battle prayer! I've certainly accepted it! An old person and some children. I'll come and save you!]

The hasty Rory licked her jet-black glossy lips and removed the leather coverings around her halberd's blade. This covering was requested by Itami, who was afraid that it might cause problems later after some of the small boys who tried to transport it at the Sea of Books Inn almost got injured.

[Those aren't bandits! They're 6 centaurs and 10 black Monster Dogs!]

Tuka, who had good eyes, shouted. Standing by the driver's seat, which is on the right side of the high-mobility vehicle, Rori set up her footing, and once she had her halberd propped up on the roll bar, she put on a pair of black leather gloves, fingerless gloves that cover only her palms. Meanwhile, Tuka takes out a compound bow and holds it up.

[Yao, can you use a bow? The LAM is too powerful against them.]

Affirming Itami's question, Yao lowered the she had in hand to the floor. Telling Itami that Dark Elves have a natural preference for archery, she began to draw the string of her bow.

[Lelei. Head towards their left!]

Rory shouted as she swung her halberd like a baseball bat. Tuka and Yao also nocked their arrows, drawing their bows. Nodding at Rory's request, Lelei lightly turned the steering wheel and pressed down on the accelerator. The high-mobility vehicle began to accelerate further, and the flowing wind they had before became like a surging storm.

[Lelei, hurry!!!]

"

"

Tuka shouted. In response, Lelei, whose driving principles is safety first, pressed down on the accelerator until it touched the floor, as if her limiters had been released. The centaurs closed on the fleeing wagon. Thereupon, the farm horse toppled over, and the wagon it's pulling violently broke down with a cloud of dust, throwing out the old man and the children. All the monsters were drawing near them at a vigorous speed. Following the sound of Tuka and Yao releasing their arrows, Lelei rammed the high-mobility vehicle into the pack of large Monster Dogs and sent them flying.

Holding up his sword, the old man raised a prayer. With a flash, Rory brandished her halberd, cutting off the head of a centaur, while Tuka and Yao riddled the black Monster Dogs with arrows. Lelei slammed on the brakes and sharply turned the steering wheel, causing the body of the high-mobility vehicle to change direction dramatically, sending up a cloud of dust.

[ROOORORORORORORORYYYY!]

Hearing Yao's rallying cry, Rory grandly collapsed on the back of the vehicle. It was a strange fall unlike the resulting force from drifting. It was as if something suddenly made her lose her strength.

[Hey, Yao! That's wrong, completely wrong!]

Rory crawled on the floor, her face flushed with embarrassment and cried out as if she's begging. As she nocked her next arrow, Yao tilted her head.

[Why is that? It's completely normal for a worshiper to shout your God's name in battle to boost morale. It's up to each worshiper to decide how they dedicate their prayers to their Gods.....]

[That just reduces my strength!]

Shouting in protest, Rory stood up, gripping onto the roll bar. As the car rocked and shook, Itami grinned and his eyes lit up. Winking towards Lelei, he pointed towards the right, before silently exchanging looks with Yao and Tuka. The high-mobility vehicle accelerates at a tremendous pace. Within the cloud of dust, Tuka's blonde hair danced, the hem of Rory's black gothic skirt fluttered, and Lelei's white disciple uniform with the words "Expert-title Conferment on Hold" fluttered.

And at Yao's signal, Lelei, Tuka, and Itami all raised their battle cries, shouting out Rory's name in unison.

[And, now!]

[ROOORORORORORORORORORORYYYY!]

"

"

* * * * *

When Lelei finished her presentation, the assembled sages were astonished. The audience did not yell at her, and the room was as quiet as if it had been drowned in silence. This meant that everyone agreed that she was worthy of the title "Expert". The usefulness of Lelei's report was obvious to everyone. Of course, it was also easy to predict that the secondary effects of this report would be more disastrous in magic-based battles. However, that alone is not the result of her report.

Even though wars could be a disastrous event, advances in knowledge, technique and all other fields are indirectly connected to it. If people deny technology and learning because it leads to war, then humanity should just go back to the time before fire was discovered and everyone still uses stone tools. Nevertheless, they had decided to put the awarding of the title of Expert to Lelei on hold. The reason wasn't the content of her presentation though, but the personal trouble she had brought that disrupted the academic conference.

Those who reached the title of Expert are obligated to open their doors to students and teach them their knowledge. Lelei's presentation was particularly attractive, and she was expected to attract a large number of students who wanted to learn from her. However, Lelei's life was in danger. In fact, an assassin was even seized in the middle of the conference. If they left the situation as it was, there's a possibility that she may get her students caught up. In short, she was told that if she wanted to call herself an Expert, she had to solve her personal problems first.

Because of this, although it was hard to tell from just a glance, Lelei had an extremely sour look on her face. Her pursed lips were slightly upturned while her brows were slightly frowning. It was subtle, but a clearly recognizable expression of dissatisfaction that only Itami and his colleagues, with whom she interacts on a daily basis, could see. Underneath her disciple uniform, she wears a white body armor made of woven winged dragon scales. One could get a glimpse of this armor underneath the opening on her collar and the fluttering hem of her clothing. This body armor protected her from Shandy's dagger.

[I was told to wear body armor in advance.]

When the sword she thrust at her made a high-pitched noise against the stiff resistance, Shanty, her face pale, asked how that happened. Then, Shanty's question of why she's wearing such a thing, was also meant to ask if she knew that she was plotting to assassinate Lelei. But for Lelei, this was only the result of a coincidence. She was only wearing body armor because the boys at the Sea of Books Inn asked her to do so. That's why, she couldn't exactly blame her for it. In the first place, Shandy herself should have known that.

[B- But, Norra is a subordinate of that Pied Piper, and the plan is that she would only pretend to.....]

It seems that she was trying to say that since they had decided that they had only planned for Norra to pretend to assassinate her, it should be normal for her not to make any preparations for it. Hearing that though, Lelei only responded with “That doesn’t mean that I couldn’t make any preparations”. No, even if it wasn’t Lelei, it would have been normal to think of doing so.

[That’s unfair!]

Shandy voiced her dissatisfaction as she was tied up by Grey, who had been looking at her with an astounded look on his face.

[You’re obviously one heck of a klutz.]

Tuka expressed her thoughts.

[This is just heartless!]

Shandy protested with tears in her eyes, but everyone’s attention had already turned to why Shandy had targeted Lelei.

[Well, she was probably entrapped by the Pied Piper.]

[Even when we understand their tricks and are wary of them, they’re still a frightening opponent to fight against. So, let’s hear your logic behind your decision to attack Lelei-sama.]

In response to Grey’s question, Shandy exclaimed that it was to save Piña, stating that she could save her if she took Lelei’s head. Why, how come? In the first place, why was Piña in such a situation? In response to everyone’s questions, Shandy told them about the situation in the Imperial Capital as told to her by the Pied Piper.

The assault on the Jade Palace. The actions of the Knight Order. This has caused Princess Piña to lose her position in the royal court and it can be said that she was driven to a corner.

[Even Prince Diabo has fled. The only reason why the Princess is safe at the moment is because she is Prince Zorzal's sister. Even her position is in jeopardy because of that incident.]

[And how does that lead you to go after Lelei?]

Itami's question was answered by Lelei.

[It was Prince Zorzal who ordered Lelei's assassination. If I were to bring him Lelei's head, it would prove Princess Piña's loyalty.]

Hearing the name of the culprit, Itami clicked his tongue.

[I knew it, so it really was him.]

[So that's how you were deceived.]

[No, you're wrong! I wasn't being deceived! After all, I rode my horse all the way to Elron to ascertain the rumors in the Imperial Capital! I wasn't deceived by the Pied Piper!]

[If that's true, that means we can't underestimate the Pied Pier's information-gathering ability. It's highly possible they have a lot of minions in hand, but they sure make excellent use of events taking place in the distant Imperial Capital. With the bridge no longer capable of being crossed, I wonder how they managed to transmit such information? Do they have some special way of communicating? Interesting.]

Grey snorted at the unfathomable abilities of the Pied Piper. Hearing Shandy's claim though, Tuka snorted, seemingly annoyed.

[And you've been missing for four days for something like that?You made us worry, just for something like that!? That's outrageously treacherous of you!]

[I don't care what you say! Auxiliary Knight Grey! For the sake of saving the Princess, I order you to strike Lelei down!]

[You say that, but what do you expect me to do in this situation?]

Astounded by her words, Grey looked around him. From their position, they don't have direct sight towards Lelei, and standing to Lelei's right was Itami, while on her left was Tuka. Behind Grey, diagonally to his left was Rory and Yao to his right. The two of them were completely surrounded. Furthermore, under the podium, there were Rondel students all around listening to their conversation. If they raised even a pinky to Lelei, they would be killed on the spot without leaving a speck of dust.

[If we were to save the Princess, instead of playing those tricks, wouldn't it be better if we ask them to save her? That is just my humble opinion though.....]

[And how does that accomplish anything? We need to gain Prince Zorzal's favor with our accomplishments!]

[At the moment, it's more difficult to get Lelei-dono's head. It would be more realistic to go into the Imperial Castle and rescue the Princess.]

[You do realize that the Imperial Castle is guarded by tens of thousands of soldiers and Imperial Guards, right?]

"No, no, you can't just look at the situation as simply as that.", said Grey as he gave Itami and the others a wry smile.

[What do you think? The only way to stop the Pied Piper and the other assassins coming her way is to cut off the main source of the problem. How about going to the Imperial Castle to extinguish the source of all these flames? And while you're at it, please save the Princess.....]

[I can't believe you! You intend to rebel against the Crown Prince!?!]

[I guess this would be the difference between those born among the nobles and a commoner who has risen ranks as a soldier. The thought of doing this doesn't even seem to cross her mind. Anyhow, if we are going to save Princess Piña, this is the most efficient way.]

Saying this, Grey bowed to Itami and the others again.

[I hope you will do me the favor of listening to my request.]

* * * * *

The central streets of the Imperial Capital, lined with many stores, had come back to life. The blockade of the city that had been in place to keep the pro-peace faction confined within the Capital had finally been lifted. As if a dam had been burst, merchants began to bring in large quantities of food, and food prices, which had skyrocketed, started dropping to normal levels within a few days or so.

With this, people finally breathed a sigh of relief. The blockade around the Imperial Capital and the Oprichnina riots that had shaken the citizens of the Imperial Capital had thus come to an end. The residents of the Akusho district greatly benefited from this special demand for food, and they were grateful for it.

[So, where are you going?]

In response to Mizari's question, Tyuwal, who was carrying a handful of hoods, answered with a blush on her cheeks.

[Prairies asked me if I would like to start a family with the money we made this time..... He said he was going to cultivate a field and start a farm. He asked me to help him.]

[Oiiii, Tyuwal. Put your luggage over here.]

A good-natured young man was loading his luggage onto a cart and getting ready for a trip. Seeing them like that, Mizari scratched her head. Jealousy, blessing, envy, admiration, skepticism, resignation..... She was feeling a mixture of good and bad feelings.

[Well, this isn't a place you would like to stay forever, so if you can leave, that would be better. Moreover, he invited you despite your previous job, so isn't that something you should be happy about? Well, you will still have hard times ahead of you, but you yourself know that, right?]

After saying this, Mizari regretted it and smacked herself on the head. Warning her of the hard times ahead of her..... Even if she said it just to warn her, depending on how you look at it, it may sound like she's cursing at her.

[I'm sorry, Sister Mizari.]

[You don't need to apologize to me, silly. You'll be happy when you leave here. That is something we should be happy about.]

[.....Unnn.]

[Then, take care of yourself.]

And so, Tyuwal left Akushu district, a place that everyone wants to get out from. Now that they have a decent amount of wealth, this may be their only and last chance. Looking around, Mizari could see people leaving the district here and there. However, them leaving doesn't necessarily make Akusho desolate.

Someone will soon fill the rooms they vacated. Replacements for those who left will soon arrive, for there will always be people who stand at the lowest in the society.

[Hey, Mizari. Aren't you gonna leave this place yourself? I'm sure you've earned enough for that.]

The young head of the Gonzolry family had come to see someone off, a man named Prairies who was apparently working for him. Being a man, there were people in this district who he was connected with who had come to see him off when he was about to turn over a new leaf.

[Even so, I've got a sinful lifestyle. Leaving this place won't be the least bit of good for me.]

[In that case, don't just waste your money then. Invest a bit in me.]

[Huh? You've got to be kidding. Don't come back here again!]

Mizari shook the man's hand away. Then, with the sway of her hips, she shuffled along the streets of Akusho. However, the man still followed him. Perhaps, seeing the man who used to be his subordinate getting a partner and leaving the district together, she felt some sort of impatience akin to loneliness from the man. Mizari could understand how he felt, but she wishes he properly looks at the person he's calling out to.

[Hey, come on, Mizari.]

[You're one persistent man. Cut that out else you'll be hated.]

It seems she had no other choice. In times like this, she just have to go there. Having decided that, Mizari headed for JGSDF's Akusho Headquarters. It's a place that a ruffian would hesitate to approach as long as they have no business there. Once Mizari arrived there, even the man who had been following her couldn't make any more advances.

[Tsk, d*mn it.]

Sure enough, the man stopped in front of the doorway.

[Mizari, I——]

[Yes, yes, I know what you're going to say, so just get lost already. You don't have that much free time, do you?]

However, just as Mizari was waving him away with her hand, the man grabbed that hand.

"

"

[Wait, what's the meaning of this!?!]

[Just listen to me already! Come with me!]

[Stop, you're hurting me! Let go! You think you can get away with this?]

[Don't be stupid! I'm not the least bit afraid of these people!]

Mizari took a deep breath, thinking about screaming. If she did, Kenzaki or someone else in the headquarters would come to her aid. However, before Mizari could shout, the man's rough actions stopped. The man, with a huge halberd thrust before his throat,

[You're in the way. Don't block the path.]

The man, who couldn't move his head, looked sideways with only his eyes, and with his trembling voice, "W- Who are you?", he asked. Mizari too, was puzzled. The people standing in front of her were obviously someone of different nature from the people who usually come in and out of this place. Neither priests nor students should have any reason to come to Akusho. It was also unusual to see an Elf and a Dark Elf standing together. In addition, there was a shabby old man who looked like a farmer and two children with

them. It was a very strange group. The only person Mizari recognized was the sole man in their group. She hadn't seen him lately, so he had almost faded from her memory.....

[If I remember correctly, aren't you Kurokawa's boss..... Itami, was it?]

Mizari said, pointing at Itami, to which he replied to her in a casual manner.

[Ahh, it's been a while.]

However, his companions, who seemed to be visiting Akusho for the first time, looked as if they had uncovered Itami's secret, approached him from all sides, sounding as if they were cross-examining him.

[Heehhh..... You know her, Father?]

[I wonder what you mean with that "it's been a while"?]

[.....This sort of stuff is prohibited.]

[Even though you need no such women when you have myself.....]

Mizari was very familiar with the expression Itami had at this time. It was very similar to that of a man who is scolded by his wife when she finds out about his nightlife in the red light district.

[I- I've never been in the red light district!]

Itami's heartfelt cry, however, seemed to be ignored.

* * * * *

[Under Prince Zorzal's lead, the Imperial Army repelled the Japanese' attack on the Imperial Capital!!!!]

That is the "fact" announced by the Crown Prince's office. For the lower-ranking soldiers and citizens who did not have enough information to objectively look at the situation, their perception was "Their words were a little suspicious, but since the top brass says so, then that must be the case". However, this was not the case for Zorzal and the others in the pro-war faction of the Senate. They knew the truth. No matter how many lies they tried to paint on it, the undeniable reality was that it was a complete defeat. For them, it meant the beginning of many sleepless nights of anger and frustration. In the first place, if they could stand having their capital overrun by the enemy, they would never have been in the pro-war faction.

[They completely defeated us!]

This battle reaffirmed the fact that the Imperial Capital's, or rather, the Empire's current strength and weaponry were completely outmatched. Of course, they understood that they were a formidable opponent. However, they had never expected that they would be overwhelmed this much.

[Next time, we will definitely show them!]

The Senate members shouted. As they stood before the wounded and the dead with their own eyes, they began to understand what kind of opponent they were up against and began to seriously consider how they could counteract in their own way.

[When we examined the bodies of the dead, we found lead arrowheads deep in their wounds. It appears that they used some kind of means to plunge these into the body, inflicting fatal wounds against them.]

So reported a representative of the medical team that treated the wounded and examined their bodies. They also laid out shields and armors with holes in them, and presented means to protect them from the enemies' weapons.

[On this point, it was just as Princess Piña and the pro-peace faction had reported. The enemy uses magic or some other method to fling these arrowheads with their hand-held crossbows.]

[How they do it doesn't matter! All we know is that the shields we are using now don't help against it, right? Our flimsy shields are no match against the enemy's arrowheads.]

[Then, what if we make our shields twice as thick?]

[Don't be ridiculous! Two pieces aren't enough against that. You would need at least three layers.]

The bullets penetrated the shields and armors of the Imperial Guards. They would at least need three layers if they want to block these.

[That would be difficult for the soldiers to carry with their strength. No matter how sturdy their shields are, it will lack practicality if it makes it difficult for the wielder to walk.]

Making their shields thicker and tougher. The demand for this isn't that new. However, the materials, size and weight of shields weren't just determined at random, and were instead taken on their current form as a result of the arm strength of the soldiers who carry them, the weapons they use, and the tactics they employ over the course of many battles. Even if the soldiers ask for their shields and armors to be doubled or tripled in thickness, that's something that isn't possible in just a short time. However, wondering why no one had realized something so simple, Zorzal proudly smiled.

[I just couldn't comprehend how none of you realized it yet. Even I had easily found the answer to this. Listen here, okay? If the shields are too heavy, just find someone capable of lifting them. Instead of having everyone equipped with shields of twice or thrice the layers, we should just have large, specially-made shields crafted. And then, line-up the monsters in the front ranks of the soldiers. I had these prepared as a trial. Behold.....]

At Zorzal's signal, two Giant Ogres that could easily be mistaken for Giants entered the hall of the Crown Prince's Office. They were so tall that their heads seemed to be able to reach the ceiling. Possessing arms as thick as Zorzal's girth, it took eight men to pull the chains attached to each of their limbs. In their hands, they held thick shields that might be better called walls, and they carried clubs that looked as if they had been brought from the pillars of some temple. Their helmet was shaped like a round bowl, and their body armor looked like angular boxes. If Itami were to see them, he might say "I want to paint one of their shoulders red". They had such an appearance.

(T/N: Armored Trooper Votoms: Red Shoulder reference.)

[Both the shield and the armor were made of iron plate one and a half klo (about 2 cm) thick.]

[Y- Your Highness. You don't mean to say that you're going to add these monsters to the ranks of the regular army?]

This surprised not only the Generals, but the Senate as well.

[That's right. Not just the Giant Ogres either, I'm going to add various species and fearsome beasts to the front line. If we don't do this, we will not be able to stand against the enemy.]

[A- As expected, that is just.....]

The Imperial Army has been using monsters in its wars. However, the reason for their inclusion was to have them run headfirst into the enemy immediately after opening the battle, disrupting enemy lines or releasing them in all directions to raid cities and villages in place of their hounds. The soldiers had never once considered them their equal. The term "fighting shoulder-to-shoulder" does exist, but for the Empire, it meant recognizing the existence and value of the other party as equal to their own. However, the monsters aren't of the same caliber as the soldiers. With their intellect, they are regarded as beasts inferior to them.

If these monsters were ordered to join the battle line, they would probably receive an emotional repulsion from the soldiers, asking them “Are you treating us the same as these beasts?”. Besides, Zorzal wasn’t the first to have such a strong-armed monster fight in a heavily armed battle. In the history of the world, armies based on such a concept have appeared from time to time. However, for one reason or another, most of them disappeared in the middle of the war.

[What then? Let the enemy with numbers less than five hundred overrun the capital again?]

[No, it’s just..... but.....]

[Certainly, the soldiers will be upset, but if we don’t do this, it will be the soldiers who will receive injuries and suffer casualties. In the end, this will only benefit the soldiers. Make them accept it.]

Zorzal, with his characteristic arrogance, forced his subordinates to solve the problem. He is a man of one point of view, and that is why he’s so intolerable. In the midst of this heavy atmosphere. In the midst of this heavy atmosphere, Absinthe, the newly inaugurated Praetor, stepped forward and bowed reverently, as if he couldn’t read the mood at all.

[As you wish, your Highness. We will explain that to the soldiers.]

Thereupon, Tyuule spoke.

[How about this then? Why don’t we assign Oprichnina members to every unit in the army and have them convey your Highness’ messages to the troops? I think it will be necessary to further increase the number of Oprichnina members, but unlike the late Praetor Luflus-sama, Absinthe-sama is a capable person. I’m sure that, for the sake of fulfilling your Highness’ political leadership, your Highness will be satisfied with their results.]

[As expected of Tyuule-sama.]

Absinthe immediately agreed. Not only that, but for the sake of realizing a government that would follow Zorzal's will, he also suggested that Oprichnina could be appointed not only towards the military, but towards the administrative organizations as well.

[No, that won't do. If such a thing is done poorly, we may end up having two chains of command. I am against it.]

Hearing this, the military personnel rushed to their feet and all of them objected to this idea. They immediately understood that the purpose of this measure was to monitor the Generals appointed by Emperor Molt and to interfere with the military chain of command. However, Absinthe calmly retorted at their words.

[Why do you worry that much? It was originally his Highness who issued the orders, so there's no way for the chain of command to be split in two. The only time a problem occurs is when you gentlemen issue orders that go against his Highness' will. In that case, there's no need to worry because such a thing will never happen.]

[H- However.....]

D*mned sycophant. The Generals were about to grind their teeth in animosity towards Absinthe. However, they could not reveal their dissatisfaction in front of Zorzal and had no choice but to remain silent. Thereupon, as if to conclude this topic, Absinthe announced.

[That settles this matter. The next issue is that of Princess Piña and her Knight Order. The actions of the Knight Order at the Jade Palace makes me suspect that Princess Piña is planning to rebel. Even though she is his Highness' younger sister, I don't think we can just leave what happened like that.]

The Senate members present at the meeting agreed with this opinion.

[Umu. But since then, Piña has been shutting herself in my father's bedroom under the guise of nursing him.]

[His Majesty?]

[That's right.]

[That's troubling then. That being the case, we couldn't just ask her for an explanation.]

The Inner Palace, including the Emperor's bedchamber, is his private space, guarded by the Imperial Guards. The Oprichnina may have had the greatest influence under Zorzal's reign, but even they aren't allowed to get close to its premises.

[Well, it's alright. As long as she's holed up together with Father, she can't do anything.]

Thereupon, Count Woody stepped forward.

[No, that shouldn't be the case. We suspect that the Knight Order is involved in the enemy's attack on the Capital.]

[The Knight Order was?]

[Otherwise, how could the enemy have managed to pull off such a deft maneuver? It's reasonable that they had someone helping them. The Knights had fled from the Imperial Capital along with the enemy. There's no doubt that they are at least cooperative with each other.]

Baron Clayton nodded his head in agreement.

[Indeed, the enemy moved quickly. Too quickly, in fact.]

[If that were the case, this is clearly a serious crime of collusion with foreign entities! Being royalty doesn't excuse her from this! In fact, that just makes it even worse!]

Count Woody shook his clenched fist. The Senate members' words of agreement also echoed with him. The intensity of this chorus was so powerful that Zorzal was overwhelmed. The pro-war faction of the

Senate were becoming even more radical than Zorzal because of the loss of their relatives who had been appointed as members of the Oprichnina and the attack on the Imperial Capital. And now, such people are looking for the scapegoat to bear the brunt of their fury. Zorzal, confronted with Clayton's and Woody's sharp eloquence, involuntarily clicked his tongue, and started talking in a tone in defense of Piña.

[However..... With Piña still confined here, such a thing is———]

Hearing Zorzal's words, Woody motioned the agitated senators to calm down before speaking.

[I understand. If that were the case, there is no way that Princess Piña would have remained in the capital. It was indeed strange that she had not escaped along with the enemy. However, we can also see it as a strategy to make us think this way. We must ask for an explanation from Princess Piña to clear up our suspicions.]

[Indeed, that may be so..... Hmmm.]

Letting out a sigh, Zorzal looked at Tyuule and his entourage. He was expecting any of them to object to their words, but no one said anything.

[No way around it.]

Rising from his seat, Zorzal gave his order to the Imperial Guard Chief standing at the side.

[Bring Piña here. You may use force if she resists.]

And thus, Piña was brought before everyone as the scapegoat to relieve the humiliation of defeat they've received.

With Lelei holding the wheel, Itami and his group drove the high-mobility vehicle in front of the Imperial Castle. Of course, if they had driven straight to the castle, the guards would have realized they were enemies and started shooting arrows at them, so the vehicle was disguised to look like a cart by surrounding the body with planks. It looked a little awkward, but it's still good enough that if a passerby were asked what they think they're riding, the answer they would have received would be "cart".

[Couldn't they have at least arranged for a horse or a cow?]

That was the problem Itami had been complaining about. Since he couldn't arrange for a domestic animal to pull their "cart", he had to pull it himself, disguised as a slave. The engine was actually running, so he didn't get tired, but the colors in the eyes of the excited Rory completely changed to a sadistic one. "Pull properly. Hey now~~ Go on~~ What's the matter? My little fool~~", or so she scolded, Itami almost awakened to a self-pitying pleasure like when he's reading those depressing novels, making him involuntarily mutter "Why me?".

Just like this, Lelei and Rory arrived at the gate of the Imperial Castle. Behind them, Itami was unloading a large box from the high-mobility vehicle disguised as a cart. The box was large enough to hold a small person. Wondering what they had come here for, the guards standing on either side of the gate looked at the three people with a questioning look.

Stepping forward first, Lelei, wearing her mage robe, stepped forward and gave them a bow.

[I am Lelei La Lelena, I have come because of a summons from his Majesty, the Emperor.]

The complexion of the guards changed when they saw the written invitation presented by Lelei. As if they were welcoming their idol, their wary gazes changed to joyful looks.

[Ohh! So you're——]

As one of the Guards told them to wait for a moment, the other guard dashed into the guardroom to report.

[Lelei-san has arrived.]

[Lelei? Who's that?]

[Idiot! She's the one who slayed the Flame Dragon!]

[Ahh!?!]

With such conversation being overheard, several guards immediately jumped out to greet Lelei. Itami, on the other hand, was instructed, “Hey, you, slave. Don’t leave your vehicle in front of the gate. Bring it inside.”. Lelei and Rory had already gone in with the guards on their own. However, with the guards watching him, he couldn’t just sit in the driver’s seat and start the engine while everyone was watching. Their vehicle is supposed to be a cart. Just as Itami had done up to this point, he had to pull it into the castle. Itami looked up to the heavens as if to say “I’m going to pull this!?”, he lamented, and ruminated on the procedures to be followed after entering the Imperial Castle.

Imazu’s voice could be heard from a small speaker on Nyutabaru’s desk.

“First off, the aforementioned matter regarding the fellows the Coda Village Chief saw. It matches the information we have. The Imperial Army is finally starting to show signs of not caring what means they use. Vicious their plan may be though, it’s certainly effective. If we don’t do something about it, the

situation will gradually get worse and worse, so we have to take action. Partly because of that though..... that we got the green light on the condition that we rescue the Princess.”

In the office, Nyutabaru and the three JSDF officers, Kenzaki, Matoi, and Yarita spread around a drawing of the Imperial Castle, which Itami and his group also peeked into. The structure and layout of the Imperial Castle has been studied from various angles and detailed drawings have been made.

“However, dealing with Zorzal is still a no go. Assassinating a member of the royal family, even if we’re in the middle of a war, is a very bad idea.”

[But if that’s the case, we won’t be able to ensure Lelei’s safety.]

Itami said as he patted Lelei’s shoulder.

“Itami. For someone who reads manga, you sure lack common sense huh. Normally, people who accept those jobs don’t stop even if their client is dead, right? Besides, even that Princess wouldn’t feel good about her own brother being assassinated, don’t you think?”

[Ah..... You’re right.]

“Go read Takao Saito-sensei’s Golgo 13. In situations like this, you need that client to make them stop. Therefore, we need Zorzal to live. It’s one of the requirements to get this rescue operation authorized.”

[What do we do then?]

“We have two options. One is to thoroughly threaten him. The sort of people that send out assassins break down pretty quickly when they end up targeted. The other is to spread rumors like in Rondel.”

He was implying about how they spread the rumor that an assassin is targeting Lelei, “adding the information of the client being Zorzal to that”.

Itami, with Lelei, Rory and the box in his arms, was led by Nei through the corridors of the Crown Prince's office. The reason why they are acting as if they are beneath them, even though Itami's group suddenly arrived at the Imperial Castle without warning, is probably because Lelei, whose name is well-known as a hero, and Rory, who is an apostle of Emroy, are all present.

[Your Holiness and Lelei-sama, please wait in this antechamber. I hope you will forgive us for only having this tiny, filthy room available.]

This is tiny and filth? Itami, strangely admiring the difference in how they felt, placed the box on the floor as he looked around the antechamber, which could have been the size of a tennis court full of sculptures and decorations. The cushions on the floor seemed to be quite soft, as when Lelei and Rory sat on them, half of their body was buried in it.

[We regret to inform you even after you took the trouble of coming to visit us, but you will not be able to see his Majesty, the Emperor. The Crown Prince would speak to you on his behalf. However, he's currently performing his duties and will see you as soon as he finishes.]

[What happened to Molt?]

Nei courteously answered Rory's question.

[His Majesty is afflicted with an illness and is currently under medical care.]

[That's worrying..... Can I visit him?]

[It pains me greatly to refuse your Holiness' great kindness, but I'm afraid there's an order prohibiting all visitations.]

[Sounds like it's really bad. I pray that he recovers soon.]

[I am sure his Majesty will get better with your Holiness' prayers. On behalf of all his subjects, I thank you very much. By the way, Lelei-sama, I'm sorry to be so impolite, but could you write your name here?]

Nei held out a piece of parchment and a quill pen. It's probably a substitute for colored paper. In other words, he was asking Lelei for her autograph. At moments like this, Lelei's normally blank expression was helpful. Itami and Rory could clearly see that she thinks what he's asking her was troublesome, but to a complete stranger, it didn't seem that way. Lelei signed it smoothly, and Nei rolled it up carefully, waiting for the ink to dry.

[Thank you very much. One more thing, may I ask what is the box your attendant is carrying?]

[A present for his Majesty.]

Lelei's explanation was simple. As Lelei looked as if she was refusing to give a detailed explanation, Nei hesitated to ask for more information. He was puzzled, but he accepted her answer.

[Understood. Please wait a moment while I bring you some tea.]

Thus, Itami and the others were left alone in the antechamber. Itami immediately opened the box and took out a rifle and radio from the hidden compartment under the box. Meanwhile, Rory slightly opened the door and looked outside. There, she saw two fully armed Imperial Guards standing in the corridor.

[There are two guards.]

Nodding, Itami put the earphones of the radiot he had taken from the box in his ear and whispered.

[This is Avenger, we're inside. Where are you?]

Tuka and Yao, dressed in camouflage, were quietly making their way through the forest inside the Imperial Castle, escorted by two members of the Special Forces Group, Kenzaki and Yarita. They made their way through the undergrowth, past the gaps in the security, and approached a large stone building.

“This is Avenger, we’re inside. Where are you?”

Kenzaki answered him.

[This is Saber. We’re about..... 3 minutes away from the objective.]

Matoi was on the roof of the highest temple in the Imperial Capital, holding a bipod anti-personnel sniper rifle in a prone position, peering through his personal Premier Reticles scopes.

[This is Archer. We’re in position. Ready to go at any time.]

“Roger. We’ll create a diversion in five minutes.”

At that time, Piña, who was being held under her arm by Imperial Guards, was being dragged out in front of the pro-war senators who were waiting with bated breath. Judging from the way she was dragged across the floor, her hair disheveled, it seems that Piña resisted as much as she could. However, in the end, she was unable to resist and was brought in by force.

[What in the world do you want from me?]

Absinthe, the new Praetor, began to ask as if she was a prosecutor trying to impress upon the jury that the defendant had committed a crime.

[We have summoned you here to ask your Highness a few questions. Since your impertinent secretary isn't here today, I was hoping that her Highness would give me an answer directly.]

[You're probably going to talk about the Knight Order, aren't you? The Knights' actions were merely in obedience to the Emperor's orders.]

Piña, who wasn't even given a chair and was made to sit directly on the floor, clutching on her knees. She was exposed to the accusing and tormenting stares of those around her and had to hold on to something to keep her mind at ease.

[So, you claim that it was also the Emperor's orders to bring the enemy into the Imperial Capital?]

Hearing the words she hadn't expected, Piña was surprised and asked back "Who did you say brought in the enemy?".

[Your Knights.]

[They're calling my Knights traitors as if it's obvious huh. How far we've fallen.]

Piña's face fell to her knees in sorrow. She was in a position completely retreating into her shell. Zorzal, who was being looked at by the senators who wanted him to do something about her, had an unpleasant look on his face and instructed an Imperial Guard to make Piña look up at him. Hearing his instructions, the Imperial Guard hesitated for a moment, and whispering "Your Highness, please forgive me", he grabbed a handful of Piña's crimson hair. While Piña's face twitched in pain as her hair was yanked up, Absinthe pursued further.

[Then, why did the Knights leave the Imperial Capital with the enemy?]

[Do you really not understand? It's because of what I am experiencing right now. They knew this would happen to them if they stayed here.]

[If they believe that their actions are right, they could have refuted these claims in an official place. The fact that they ran away just proves they were guilty.]

[By that logic, aren't I innocent?]

[That's just your plan to make us think like that!]

After one of the senators yelled this at her, Piña laughed dryly.

[Ahahahahahaha. In other words, those who run away are traitors, and the one who remains is a traitor with a plan?]

Absinthe shouted at Piña to cover her protests.

[If you all had just come together in an official place, you wouldn't have been suspected like this!]

[You call this an official place? Ahahahahahaha!]

[What's so funny?]

[Are you sure you didn't mistake it for a banquet and have me brought out here as part of some side show?]

[What absurdities are you saying!?!]

The senators cursed Piña.

[It's you senators who have slighted the authority of the Senate. As I have said before, the Senate is the pillar of the Empire alongside the Emperor. Its proceedings should not be held in the halls of the Crown Prince's office. So, why is it that this place has become some sort of assembly hall?]

Count Woody stepped forward.

[We are not senile enough to listen to what the Princess thinks what the Senate should be. The holding of the proceedings here is only temporary until the Senate building is rebuilt. It's a matter of convenience.]

Understanding that this question-and-answer session was just the epitome of "If you just had done this or did that", Piña was completely exhausted.

[I understand. Just do what you want.]

No matter how she answered, these people would contempt and criticize Piña. She already knew this, but confirming it again made her feel this thought even more.

[How disrespectful. We are doing these questions in order to clear up the doubts that have been cast on your Highness, so please answer us seriously.]

[No. I don't want to answer. I'm not obliged to answer.]

Astounded, Count Woody sighed and looked down at the sitting Piña. When Piña kept her gaze down, as if to reject everything around her, the senators' abusive remarks finally began to fly.

[Such an answer does not satisfy us.]

[The Princess really did betray the Empire!]

[How shameful. She was just a girl after all.]

[She always talks so bravely, but she's just like this when it really matters.]

Piña only covered her ears and shouted.

[I don't want to listen! I don't want to talk! I don't want to answer! I'm sick of it all!]

Thereupon, she closed herself on her shell again, not caring that her hair hurt from being grabbed. Worried, the Imperial Soldier whispered "Your Highness, please raise your head. If you keep on doing that, your hair will be badly damaged.". In his hand, Piña's crimson hair was quite tangled. From the way some hair has been pulled off, he could feel the pain as if it were his own. Seeing this happen, the young Imperial Guard looked as if he was about to cry.

[No, I don't want to. This empire is done for anyway!]

[Don't just decide that for yourself!]

The senators roared in anger.

[I worked so hard to end this war, and it's you who ruined everything! How in the world do you intend to deal with this!?!]

[It seems her Highness is quite the defeatist.]

[If I'm a defeatist, then you're all fools who can't see reality! Look at those Giant Ogres! Did you put that fancy armor on them thinking you could defeat the Japanese army with such a thing? Are you idiots? They possess iron rods that could penetrate the Flame Dragon's scales! No matter how many large shields you have, they will be of no use!]

His face bright red, Zorzal stood up. He seemed to have been reflexively offended when his idea was undermined.

[Enough of your nonsense, Piña! We won't know that until we face them in battle!]

[The time it's proven useless is when everything is truly over, Brother. Besides, how will you even control those armored Giant Ogres? There's no way that these monsters would have any loyalty to the Empire. They are just wild beasts that look like they've been tamed but are waiting to bear their fangs at you. With you scaring them with the whip and taming them with food, our Empire finally managed to make them follow our commands, but clad in armor that can't be pierced by sword or spear, who do you think would hold them back? Don't tell me, you seriously aren't thinking of including them in your formations, are you? I don't know who thought of this idea, but they must be a fool.]

This was the reason why heavily armed monsters disappeared from the history of the Special Region. Uncertain factors that can't be controlled by human power can even be the cause of defeat if taken advantage of on the battlefield. Weapons are always desired to have contradictory characteristics. They're dangerous for the target they're pointed to, but safe for the one who wields them. Fully armed Giant Ogres certainly are powerful, but they're also extremely dangerous to those who want to make use of them.

[Ei! Imperial Guards, silence Piña!]

This was an order from Zorzal, but the Imperial Guards didn't seem to have characters that feel happy about being violent to women, as their faces already looked grim. Still, they had to obey their instructions. Gritting his teeth, they tried to clamp down on Piña's mouth from behind. But fortunately, they soon had an excuse to pause.

The door to the hall was thrown open with the force of an explosion.

Tyuule was laughing to herself behind Zorzal. Her role on such a formal occasion is to wait on stand by with a cup and a jar of wine, so that when Zorzal wants to drink, she can serve it to him. Thus, she was able to watch the whole comedy happening in front of her from a special seat. Princess Piña wasn't being

protected by anyone and was being cursed by everyone. Seeing this, Tyuule became mildly excited. At last, the Imperial Princess was in the same circumstances as she was. Cheering for her achievement of breaking that arrogant nose of hers, she repeatedly celebrated within her mind.

Everyone should be misfortunate! Everyone should suffer, grief, be doubted and be abused! Let everything be a mess!

For Tyuule, who cursed at everything, she who wished for such a thing clenched her fists and was feeling the desire to express her joy with all her might at the moment. It felt as if all the bitterness and resentment that had been building up in her heart had been lifted, if only a little. But then, as if to put a damper on her mood, a thunderous roar sounded in the hall. As she looked to see what was going on, she saw that the thick doors of the hall had been broken open and a girl in a black priest's robe was standing in front of it, holding a huge halberd that looked like she had just swung. She could also see a mage girl and a man dressed in a speckled green pattern on either side of her.

[Well then, leave securing the exit to me.]

The girl clad in black priest's robe disappeared across the corridor, and soon after, the sound of clashing weapons resounded and the call to gather the Imperial Guards began to echo from the corridor. Meanwhile, the man and the mage girl entered the hall of the Crown Prince's office. Zorzal, upon seeing them, suddenly let out a cry that bordered on a scream.

[Uwaaaaaaaahhhhh!]

As his huge body slid off the chair, he struggled and flailed his limbs.

[Y- You're!?!]

[It has been a while, Prince Zorzal. It's an honor to see you again.]

Passing through the senators, the man dressed in a speckled green suit.

[Itami-dono!]

Piña called out his name in a voice that almost sounded like a shout of joy. “You have come to rescue me!” were words that she hadn’t said, but her joy can be expressed on her face and her whole body. Anyone who saw her face would have the impression that Piña was in contact with the enemy. Even that man responded to Piña with one eye closed. If Tyuule had been the juror, this alone would be enough to convict her. However, Zorzal doesn’t have the composure to think of that right now.

Tyuule herself knows this. That for Zorzal, this man’s very existence is his nightmare. On the night of the earth tremor, Zorzal was interrogated by this man and was driven half-dead on his orders. The pain and horror of that experience still haunted and tormented Zorzal’s mind. His physical wounds have been healed. His broken teeth were replaced with dentures. Outwardly, he was completely restored to his normal appearance. But the deep wound that had gouged out Zorzal’s psyche remained intact.

Tyuule has watched Zorzal wake up screaming again and again. She chuckled in secret. The man who had brought that fear and pain stood before Zorzal again. Knowing Zorzal’s psyche, it was easy for Tyuule to imagine what would happen next, so she clutched on her stomach. It was all she could do to keep from being noticed that she was laughing. Sure enough, Zorzal cowered. His mind strangled, he threw away all pretense and appearances, clung to his chair and cried out.

[Get back, don’t come near me! Tyuule, help me! Imperial Guards! What are you doing!? Release the Ogres!]

Humans, because of their fear, become brutal toward their targets. They need to bring down, destroy and thoroughly pulverize the object of their fear.

[Kill him! Kill him! Beat him down!]

The monster handlers immediately unleashed the Giant Ogres on their prey. The Giant Ogres themselves seemed to be enthusiastic, as if they were trying to overturn the fact that Piña had told them that they were useless. The ferocious gaze of the Giant Ogres, shining ferociously beyond the slit of their giant helmet, turned to Itami. It brandished their club similar to a temple pillar, the senators, unwilling to be drawn into the fray, scurried to the edge of the hall. The Imperial Guards were about to surround Itami and Lelei, but some of them got caught up and were slammed against the wall, while the others simultaneously leaped away.

[Ohh, they looked like Armored Troopers!]

The sight of the fully armed Giant Ogre touched Itami's otaku heart. Even as he pointed his rifle at it, Itami raised his admiration. Before he knew it, he held his gun up and pulled the trigger like a certain anime protagonist. However, the bullet hit Giant Ogre in the chest, but was bounced off.

[Geh, what thick armor. Guess it won't go like in anime huh.]

However, Itami's action was not completely meaningless. Behind Itami, the mage girl was using the little time he bought to throw several brass funnels on the floor and finish chanting her spell. With a high-pitched sound like an empty can being kicked, the funnels bounced across the floor, enveloped in light. They then swooped towards the Giant Ogres, coiling around them. The Giant Ogres swung their club and tried to fling the funnels away, but when Lelei snapped her fingers, the funnel simultaneously lunged at the Ogres from all directions. The conical "bottoms" stuck to their shield and various parts of their armor.

And once more, Lelei snapped her fingers, and numerous explosions occurred on the Giant Ogre's body. Thereupon, just like a robot whose power had stopped, they fell to their knees and slowly died on its back.



The thick armor is pierced in various places. With the brass funnels' conical shape, the explosion magic concentrated its impact on a single point. In addition, the Neumann effect had created holes in the steel plate, which was only about 2 cm thick. The sheer force of that blast astonished those who witnessed it, and even the Imperial Guards cowered in fear.

(T/N: Neumann/Monroe effect means that the greatly increased penetration of an explosive into a surface that is caused by shaping a conical or hemispherical hollow in the forward end of an explosive cartridge)

Zorzal's molars rattled. Whether it was out of anger or fear, he himself did not know. However, Zorza's red face had now become completely pale.

[W- What do you want now!?!]

He did splendidly well speaking, but it was somewhat comical seeing him trying so hard not to slip out of his chair.

[I have a girl I'd like you to meet. I brought her here.]

Saying this, Itami slightly pushed Lelei forward, as if to offer her to him.

[I am Lelei. Lelei La Helena.]

Zorzal's brows furrowed at the mention of her name, while all of the senators gasped at the same time. The mage was well-known as the one who slayed the Flame Dragon, so they could now understand how she had the strength to slaughter Giant Ogres with a single strike. Seemingly thinking that her fame precedes her, everyone nodded in understanding. However, Lelei's next words caused even more commotion among the senators within that hall.

[Prince Zorzal, I would like you to call off the assassins you hired to kill me.]

At the same moment, Piña shouted a sarcastic remark.

[Hmph, that's certainly like you, Brother. Were you that jealous of the one who has taken the glory over you?]

[R- Ridiculous. I never hired any assassins!]

[Oh really? She's here to tell us otherwise.]

[Don't say nonsense. The words of some random little girl aren't worth believing.]

[Little girl she may be, but she is the hero that killed the Flame Dragon. Her words have weight. I at least believe her. What about you all?]

Zorzal looked around for someone to back him up. However, not a few senators uncomfortably looked away. It may not have been all of them, but there were certainly those who thought that Zorzal would do such a thing. Meanwhile, while Piña and Zorzal were having such an exchange, Itami walked up to Tyuule and greeted her.

[Hey, it's been some time.]

At this moment, Tyuule held her breath, and even though she had no reason to think so, she thought Itami had come to save her. After Noriko, it was her turn. That's what she thought. If someone really had told her they were here to help her, holding out their hand towards her, she would have taken it without a second thought. However, her faint hopes were soon betrayed. The business Itami had wasn't Tyuule, but the golden cup she was holding as an offering. Taking it away, Itami put it in Zorzal's hand.

[W- What in the world.....]

With a smile on his face, he began pouring wine into the cup. Zorzal, meanwhile, was at Itami's mercy. Upon Lelei's shocking revelation, the senators in the hall are all in the middle of a commotion, saying "It

can't be.....", "But, perhaps....." and other things like that. After Itami finished getting ready in such a situation, he pointed out the window and told Zorzal.

[Can you see what's outside the window?]

Through the window, he could see the gardens of the Imperial Castle and the city. Glancing at what Itami was pointing at, Zorzal nodded.

[Then, Archer. Please.]

Holding a hand on his ear, Itami whispered. Suddenly, the cup in Zorzal's hand was pierced with a hole about 7 mm wide. The wine as red as blood spilled out of the hole, staining the floor. The suddenness of the incident caused Zorzal to throw the cup out of his hand, and sliding off his chair, he hit the floor with his lower back. Upon seeing this, Lelei spoke to him in a tone that lacked intonation.

[No matter where you go, we can always reach you. From wherever we are, we would always be someone aiming at you. I'll say this again. Do call off those assassins, or next time, just like this wine cup, you will have a hole in your head.]

Despite the flat tone of her words, her toes crushed the golden wine cup. Wincing at the freezing intensity of her words, Zorzal could only nod his head.

"

"

* * * * *

With their business done, there's no need for them to linger. There's no reason to stay around hostile territory. When Zorzal promised to withdraw the assassins, Itami began to retreat with Lelei, and Zorzal didn't hold the two of them back either. He was probably more inclined to ask them to get the hell out of here. He even stopped the Imperial Guards who tried to pursue them. It wasn't hard to understand that he was in fear of being sniped by an enemy he couldn't see. He didn't try to prevent Itami and Lelei from taking Piña away.

However, once they stepped out of the hall, they found themselves on the battlefield where Rory and the Imperial Guards were engaged in a fierce battle. Strong men in armor were swarming around the petite girl and attacking her. But every time her huge halberd spun like a windmill, a whirlwind of blood splattered, and the corridors, walls, and ceilings were decorated with avant-garde art in red. The corridors were littered with corpses, and the Imperial Guards were clearly intimidated by the sight of Rory. When the Demi-God dressed in a black gothic priest's robe lightly stepped forward, the Imperial Guards were so frightened that they fell back two or three steps, only to bump into their colleagues behind them and fall on their butts.

[You call yourselves the guards of the Imperial Palace? The quality has gone downhill, hasn't it?]

[Rory! We're outta here!]

[Eh, already? Even though it was just starting to get good!]

Rory stepped towards the guards and made it look as if she was about to pounce on them, causing the crowd surrounding her to back away, which she then took advantage to leap from the floor to the wall, kicking the wall and flying over the guards' heads. The guards hurriedly followed her. Whenever a guard appeared that seemed to be catching up with her, Rory stopped and turned around, fighting a retreating battle, striking them down with her weapon and driving them away, successfully playing the role of the

rearguard. Itami and his group ran safely through the corridor, which was now unoccupied due to Rory's diversion. They then ran out the front door and jumped into the high-mobility vehicle disguised as a cart that had been parked there.

Seated in the driver's seat, Lelei started the engine and stepped on the accelerator without a pause. The engine let out a high-pitched roar, and the vehicle sped backward at full speed, barreling through the thick, half-open door of the entrance hall. The guards who had been engaged in a battle against Rory were surprised by the sudden interruption of intruders, and they ran away like spiders. Rory, who was a moment too late to realize the danger approaching from behind here though, froze when she turned to see what was going on.

[Gotcha!]

But just before the vehicle collided with Rory, Itami, who was waiting in the back, scooped up Rory. Although they were able to avoid crashing into each other, Rory and Itami ended up rolling around wildly on the back of the truck, smashing into various places, and Rory, who was in a very awkward position, let out a scream. The high-mobility vehicle came to a halt in the entrance hall with a sudden braking sound, scattering plans and papier-mâché used to disguise the vehicle into a cart. With their bodies entangled, Itami and Rory ended up rolling around again.

The guards, perhaps seeing that their cart had been broken, sidled up around the perimeter, swords and spears in hand. However, when the sound of a volley of a Type-64 rifle defeated their ears, the guards retreated again. Itami, with one foot on the front passenger seat of the high-mobility vehicle that had revealed its true form, pointed the muzzle of his rifle toward the ceiling and sprayed bullets until the magazine was empty, and holding his dizzy head, uttered a warning under the crumbling mortar rain.

[Alright, back off! This thing hurts enough to kill you!]

The guards froze when the muzzle of the gun was pointed at them. Then, in a split second, Tuka and Yao, who had been hiding in a plantation by the entrance, climbed into the vehicle with Kenzaki and the others. In the blink of an eye, the high-mobility vehicle was filled to capacity.

[Alright, everyone's on board. Lelei!]

Lelei replied to Itami's voice as if she's shouting.

[Roger!]

Setting the automatic transmission lever forward, the accelerator pedal was pressed with such force that the floor would fall off. The high-mobility vehicle accelerated, bouncing along the path, and this time, it headed south down the main street of the Imperial Capital. However, they're still not scot-free yet. The central streets of the Imperial Capital are busy with people and wagons, and the intersections aren't marked by traffic signals or other traffic controlling systems. Because of the need to weave their way through the traffic, even their high-mobility vehicle couldn't go very fast. Moreover, they had to stop once to pick up Matoi.

As the south gate of the Imperial Capital came into view, a group of black-robed cavalrymen wearing Kobold helmets caught up with them. It was hard to believe though that Zorzal, trembling with fear of the sniper and shouted at them to get lost, had ordered this pursuit. Perhaps, his aides or those people in the pro-war faction had made a fuss about not letting them leave like that. Or perhaps, someone had belatedly noticed that the most important person in the Empire had disappeared from the castle.

[So that's the rumored sweepers huh. They're chasing after us with scary-looking faces.]

Itami, who had checked their rear, teasingly spoke.

[Those aren't their faces, they're just helmets, you know?]

[Should I shoot?]

[Wait, if you fire a shot in the street, a stray bullet might hit a civilian.]

Yarita, who found the targets to shoot, was about to raise his gun, but Kenzaki stopped him with his hand outstretched. The JSDF must avoid causing casualties to the civilians. Otherwise, the media will start saying things again. Thereupon, Lelei spoke.

[I don't think there's really a need to deal with them. With the performance of the high-mobility vehicle, it's not difficult to pull apart from them.]

If Itami just tells her to accelerate, she would be ready to step on the gas until the pedal hits the floor. Even now, Lelei maneuvers the high-mobility vehicle admirably, steering to the right and to the left, making it make slipping noises. As far as her driving skills are concerned, she could certainly pull it off. However, Lelei's way of driving seemed to push through various limits. In view of the physical and mental health of her passengers, this was something they didn't want her to do.

[Good grief, so even Father brought out as well. In other words, it wasn't to save me that Itami-dono had come. Saving me was clearly just an afterthought. No doubt about it.]

In the car, which was rocking like a mixer, Piña was softly complaining. Hamilton, Piña's secretary, apologized to her.

[My apologies, Princess. I was told that this was an operation that the Princess had approved of, and I believed them.]

[No, our first priority was saving you, Princess Piña. If anything, bringing out the Emperor was the real afterthought.]

Itami explained, trying to clear up her misunderstanding. If one looks behind the truck, one could see Emperor Molt laid down on a stretcher. Meanwhile, Count Marcus, who was probably abducted with him, was sitting uncomfortably by his side. Hearing Itami's excuses, Count Marcus was taken aback.

[How sad. You call abducting the Emperor just something you did because you had the spare time?]

[Yes. The top management's plan was that if we were going to save the Princess, we should bring the Emperor while we're at it. The Emperor, the Imperial Princess, and all of the senators in favor of peace. With all these, we can claim to be the legitimate government of the Empire, can't we?]

[I see..... So you'll push the dishonor of being a rebel onto Zorzal?]

The sudden voice startled everyone. The Emperor, who was supposed to be unconscious due to illness, opened his eyes and began to speak.

[Y- Your majesty. When did you.....]

Count Marcus checked the Emperor's face.

[Just a few while ago. I can't sleep well when you carry me around like a piece of baggage.]

Molt raised his body with the help of Piña and Hamilton. Seeing this, Rory muttered "How suspicious". She seemed to be suspecting that Molt was just feigning illness. However, Piña looked truly happy as she clung to her father.

[Father, I'm sorry for troubling you after you woke up, but please stop Brother Zorzal! Itami-dono, turn back to the Imperial Capital immediately.....]

However, Molt stopped his daughter.

[No, it would be useless to go back. Our words will not reach Zorzal anymore. It is best to follow Japan's plan now.]

[Their plan?]

[The plan of having you set up the legitimate government to oppose Zorzal.]

[However, that would divide the Empire. It could lead to a civil war.]

[It's already too late. A civil war is inevitable now.]

Saying this, the Emperor took Piña's hand.

[Piña, you will hereby become the Crown Princess. You may fight Zorzal head-on, or you may call for reconciliation. You may also divide the Empire into two and keep both sides alive. Determine the Empire's fate and lead us into the future.]

[I- I will!?!]

Hearing her father make the heartless decision of having his own son and daughter face each other as if it was some kind of great blessing, Piña was so surprised to answer positively or negatively. Hamilton, however, shouted with joy.

[Congratulations, Princess! Now all of the Knights can be absolved of the dishonor of being called traitors!]

At that moment, someone grabbed Piña's arm. While she was distracted by the Emperor's words, a horse-riding sweeper approached and grabbed her wrist. It became a contest of strength, but Piña's body was pulled back and she almost fell off the high-mobility vehicle. Hamilton, Tuka, Kenzaki, and Yarita, who were by her side, hurriedly supported Piña's body.

[Kyaaaa! Itami-dono!]

Itami responded to Piña's cry by pointing the muzzle of his rifle at the cavalryman, and with a few shots, the cavalryman fell on his back and hit the ground. Meanwhile, Rory pushed the hard tip of her halberd to push off the enemy, who was trying to ride over from the other side. The cavalryman, who fell to the ground from the push, was instantly trampled by the horses who were following behind the high-mobility vehicle.

Molt, seeing the atrocious situation, looked around and spoke.

[Well, that is, if we can escape from here. You call yourself Itami, no? Show me what you can do. I will see with my own eyes the skill that allowed the Man in Green to defeat the Flame Dragon.]

The Emperor ordered Itami as if he were his own subject. His words were so dignified that Itami involuntarily responded with “Don’t worry, leave it to us!”. Itami had intended to shake off the pursuit even if the Emperor hadn’t ordered him to do so, but as he reached for his gun, he tilted his head, wondering why he’s being obedient to him.

[Alright, we’re out of the gates! Get ‘em!]

At Kenzaki’s signal, Rory leaped out of the high-mobility vehicle and charged first. With her skirt swelled out like a parachute, she jumped onto the horses of the pursuing cavalymen and began a light exchange of weapons on the horses’ back. One by one, she made her enemies fall prey to her halberd. Meanwhile, Tuka fired her arrows at the enemy trying to flank Rory, and Yao fired the LAM at the main force of the cavalymen, blowing them and their horses to pieces with a flurry of fire. Supporting them is Itami and Yarita, raining down bullets in rapid succession.

[First Lieutenant Itami! Tell the driver to turn right at the next three-way intersection!]

Master Sergeant Matoi now has the antenna of the radio device in his hand. When Itami asked him what it was, he chuckled.

[I set some directional mines here. Isn’t it basic to have traps planted in our escape route?]

Hearing this, the expression on Itami’s face changed.

[Rory, come back!]

Hearing Itami's shout, Rory knocked one of the cavalymen off his horse and took the horse for herself, and jerking the reins, she broke off to the right. Meanwhile, Kenzaki was looking for something with his binoculars pointed forward. As the high-mobility vehicle turned right at the three-way intersection and approached a gentle curve, perhaps spotting his landmark, Kenzaki yelled.

[Alright, ignite!]

Matoi flipped the switch. Thereupon, an object that looked like a signboard set up the side of the road exploded. Countless projectiles hit the sweepers like a storm, knocking down horses and soldiers in the blink of an eye.

[How's that?]

Kenzaki had the high-mobility vehicle stop and checked the results of the battle. The only enemies remaining safe were a few horsemen. Moreover, they were looking around, not understanding what had just happened to them. After a while, however, they turned away their horses' heads and ran away, perhaps out of fear. "Alright. They gave up.", Kenzaki said. "No, no, it's an excursion until we get home, right?", Matoi responded. The men of the Special Forces Group exchanged such casual remarks. Confirming that everyone is safe, Itami chuckled. Rory also pulled her horse close to the high-mobility vehicle with an unbothered look on her face.

[Is that alright, Your Majesty?]

Itami asked the Emperor, to which the Emperor gave him a good-humored response.

[Splendid. I commend you.]

it would be ten days later when the legitimate government of the Empire was proclaimed in Count Formal's city, Italica.

* * * * *

A long line of soldiers stretching from the Imperial Castle was leaving the Imperial Capital and heading north. No, it wasn't only soldiers, but also bureaucrats, senators, nobles and their families, and it seemed as if the imperial court itself was about to undergo a great migration. Zorzal called this a "relocation of the capital", but to the eyes of the remaining citizens of the Imperial Capital, it was nothing more than skipping out by night.

Zorzal, who had become particularly fearful of snipers, had a curtain drawn around him wherever he moved. As it made it seem as if he was avoiding the attention directed at him, it made it hard for them to refute the people's assessment.

[Your Highness, where are we going?]

Zorzal answered Nei's question as if he were spitting in the face of the Chief Chamberlain.

[Somewhere that isn't here.]

[Even if you say that, where do you mean?]

[For the time being, just follow the road to the northeast. We'll see where it goes from there.]

[But if we leave the Imperial Capital, your reign will be shaken.]

It was natural for the Chief Chamberlain to ask such a question. However, Zorzal shouted at him as if he were screaming.

[Shut up! I don't want to be in a place that the enemy has already assaulted over and over again! I want to be out of their reach! We must put as many leagues as we can between us and Alnus!]

There were already rumors circulating among the citizens that Zorzal, driven by jealousy, had plotted to assassinate Lelei. When the citizens heard this, they all looked at Zorzal with cold, unwelcoming eyes. Zorzal's aides attempted to suppress that rumor, but Zorzal stopped them. In his eyes, it seemed as if the Imperial Capital itself was denouncing him and trying to attack him. He remembered how Lelei pointed at the Imperial Capital, and told him that "they are aiming at him from there".

It was an irrational thought, but this gave Zorzal the illusion that the Capital itself had the power to attack and kill him. If he tried to do anything by force against the city, he would be met with a painful counterattack. With such worries in mind, Zorzal can no longer even approach a window, and his only thought is to move to another city.

[Tyuule-san..... What's going to happen after this?]

Furuta, unable to ride a horse, sits in a slight gap in a cart, which is loaded with foodstuffs and a mountain of cooking utensils and ingredients. The reins are held by a group of apprentice cooks who are learning how to cook under him, so he doesn't need to worry. Tyuule, astride her horse, seemed like her mind was distracted when Furuta called out to him. Her horse's legs had stopped before she knew it, and she ended up being left behind.

[Tyuule-san?]

[Ah, Furuta-san..... Is something the matter?]

[It's not "is something the matter" here. It's not safe to ride a horse while in a daze.]

[R- Really?]

Noticing that her horse had stopped, Tyuule lightly kicked the stomach of her horse to get it to start walking.

[I heard a great man tell me this once. "I can't do anything for those who only worry, but don't consult others for help".]

[Really? Is there such a saying?]

[Yes. If you try talking to someone else about your problems, you may find it easier to solve than you think.]

[.....Can I really ask you about this?]

[Yes. There's a possibility I can't do anything about it, but I can at least listen to what you have to say.]

Thereupon, tears began spilling down Tyuule's cheeks.

[Then, tell me, why does no one extend a hand to me? Why won't anyone help me?]

What, why is she asking that? Help? Help who? Furuta, who did not understand the meaning of the question asked of him, did not know how to answer. He could only listen in silence to the words Tyuule spilled out.