

LENSTER'S FALL

THE NIGHT BEFORE SORTIE

Year 761 of the Jugdral calendar.

The prince of Lenster, Cuan, after learning that Sigurd of Chalphy, his wife's elder brother and his best friend, had been branded a rebel and was fighting, took with him the elite of Lenster's army – the Lanzenritter – and passed through the Yeid Desert in order to take part in the battle.

Knowing this, King Trabant, who had been looking for a chance to pay back for the repeated disgraceful invasions from the Manster district, at Northern Thracia, launched a rear attack and annihilated them. Trabant then returned to his country, taking their daughter, Althena, who was travelling together with Ethlin, and the Earth Lance Gae Bolg, held by Cuan, as spoils of war.

The four countries of the Manster district, Lenster, Alster, Manster and Conote, kept a military alliance. However, the king of Lenster didn't stop Prince Cuan when the other three countries opposed his actions, and, as a result, heavy losses were suffered, and the leading power of the Manster District fell from glory.

With the impetus from crushing Lenster's Lanzenritter, King Trabant, seeing that the neighboring country of Grandbell was in chaos and noticing the good opportunity, started the invasion of Manster, which he had considered an annoyance for a long time.

Manster, which had been belligerent against Thracia since before as well, closed the gates of its towns and castles firmly to prepare for the incoming siege battle.

To Trabant, the siege preparations were largely pointless, since his dragon knights could attack from above. However, being targeted and badly beaten by archers and mages didn't sound good. After this, there was still the battle against Conote and Lenster; the final objective was the unification of Thracia.

“Your Majesty, we have been informed that Manster is being besieged by Thracia. Moreover, they have requested reinforcements.”

After the news of Prince Cuan's death, the sorrow-filled castle was suddenly thrown into chaos.

While calming down the young soldiers who wanted to avenge Cuan and planning to corner Thracia diplomatically, they ended up losing the initiative, surely; Thracia's invasion had begun.

“So, what's the situation?”

“Aren't they attacking with almost their entire army? As far as dragons go, 30 were confirmed. 10 heavy cavalry divisions, and with regards to the infantry...”

“Why doesn’t Manster counterattack?”

“In the outset of battle, the dragon knights and archers attacked each other ferociously, and their main generals died. Since the troops that remain in the castle are mostly composed of the mages and archers, the dragon knights don’t approach but, meanwhile, they’ve been completely surrounded by infantry units.”

Ooh.

There was a commotion among the gathered generals. They had never faced a large-scale invasion before.

“30 dragon knights... damn that Trabant, he called back all those who were doing mercenary service!”

“What should we do, Your Majesty?”

“Since we have to fulfill our oath, we have no choice but to go. Moreover, this will be a battle of revenge for Cuan.”

After hearing King Calf’s words, the young generals that were there cheered.

“We’ll take down that damn Trabant for sure!”

“We’ll teach those Thracian clowns a lesson!”

“Do not make light of Trabant...!”

General Ranz, a lance knight taking charge of the education of the younger knights, scolded them for their excitement.

“Your Majesty... even if we join the siege battle, I can’t see Trabant slowing down his invasion. If we take our entire army and strike at them, we will have neither a chance nor means to turn back.”

Insightful as ever, Lurvin offered that counsel.

“Indeed. If we rise alongside Conote and Alster now, we have nothing to fear from Thracia... however, if one of these falls, it’ll be the other way around: we’ll be in trouble...”

“Your Majesty...”

Once King Calf said those serious words, the previously agitated room became quiet. “If only Lord Cuan were here...” – that’s what everyone thought.

“However, we cannot simply stand by and watch. There was a request for reinforcements, and it is Lenster’s, our duty to respond. Call the army. Organize the troops, we’re heading to Conote.

There, after joining forces with Conote’s army, we’ll take down Thracia at Manster.”

As King Calf made this decision, Lenster’s army’s morale was raised.

Leaving the throne, King Calf went to Leaf’s place instead of going back to his own room. There were the queen, Leaf’s nanny, and Finn, who had been designated as Leaf’s guard by Cuan.

“At the worst moment...”

“Ah, damn that Trabant... he really didn't waste his chance.”

The king's face and bitter smile showed his desolation.

“I wanted to see Leaf's growth, but I don't know how things will turn out in these troubled times.”

“Your Majesty, I shall accompany you...”

“You mustn't. Cuan entrusted Leaf to you. If we wish Lenster's royal family to continue existing, Leaf's safety is essential. I entrust that to you, Finn.”

King Calf's powerful tone made Finn cast down his eyes.

“I wonder if I'm fit for such an important mission...”

“It's alright, I am sure you'll have Crusader Noba's protection.”

Even the queen's gentle words were powerless in front of the heavy duty he had been given.

“He who has one who trusts him and whom he must protect, is strong against the adversities that appear before him.”

Leaf, who was sleeping in the nanny's arms, began to grumble, as if uncomfortable.

“Oh look, even Leaf has begun to feel uneasy. Finn, Leaf can feel your uneasiness, as you're the one always by his side.”

“Your Highness...”

“Therefore, please promise that you'll protect Leaf...”

“I swear it. I shall protect Lord Leaf, without fail.”

Leaf, who was thought to have woken up, went back to sleeping soundly.

“I'd really like to avoid a situation in which we much entrust everything to this young child. But perhaps we have no choice.”

“Finn... please protect Leaf... for Cuan and Ethlin, please protect this child...”

Probably shocked by their lieges' words, which revealed that they were prepared to die, Finn and the nanny were at a loss for words.

“We'll probably be in Conote by tomorrow. There won't be many soldiers left in the castle...”

“I am alright. Dear, do it full-heartedly. Finn, why don't you call over that person who is by your place?”

“Are you talking about... Lady Lachesis?”

Surprised by the queen's unexpected comment, he ended up giving a foolish reply.

“Yes – Lady Lachesis, Cuan’s friend and Eltoshan’s younger sister. I’ve heard she’s carrying a child in her arms, as well... Leaf won’t be lonely if he or she becomes his friend, don’t you think? Moreover, she came here to avoid that war...”

“... Yes.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“A mother who has conceived a child becomes even stronger than a regular woman... for her drive to live is much stronger than when she was alone...”

The queen’s smile was tarnished. King Calf embraced her shoulders and held her hands.

“Finn, this is enough for today. Retire.”

King Calf, staring at the silenced queen, directed his words only at Finn.

“Then, tomorrow...”

After gazing at Leaf, who was well asleep, Finn left the room.

The king was taking measures thinking of the worst; Finn couldn’t believe that. You could even think of that as a betrayal towards the knights, who were in high spirits. However, at the same time, that could only mean that Thracia was a strong enemy. He felt deeply the duty of assuring the continuity of Lenster’s royal family and keeping Noba’s lineage from being eradicated.

“It’s too heavy for me. Your Majesty, Lord Cuan...”

That’s what Finn murmured, alone in a corridor. That time, too, he thought he would go with Cuan, but ended up remaining in Lenster. Althena should have stayed back with him, but she cried endlessly when separated from Ethlin, so Finn could only keep Leaf with himself. And now, while hearing comments about a battle of revenge for Prince Cuan, he yet again has to stay back, bound by the order of his king to protect Leaf. That pained him.

“Why me, Lord Cuan?”

“Why the long face right before departure, Finn?”

His best friend, Glade, appeared from the shadows of the corridor. He was a hard worker, who would always practice daily at the designated hour, and they had been in good terms ever since they started their training for knighthood. Even in their youth, the knights who trained them would acknowledge Finn’s better perception and ability to notice a gap, but Glade’s enthusiasm was often noticed.

There were many times when Glade helped Finn when he was shunned by the other knights of their age. That was only until Finn went to Chalphy with Cuan; after that, they recognized his worth. His number of friends increased, but Glade was still the only he could call a close one.

“Tomorrow is near, are you going Finn?”

“... No, His Majesty told me to stay in the castle.”

“Lord Leaf, huh? That’s because he’s becoming attached to you, I guess.”

As they exited the corridor and entered the courtyard, the other soldiers, who were starting to make preparations for the next day, lowered their heads to the two. Glade waved his hand lightly, while Finn returned the greeting with his eyes.

“Are you going to the front, Glade?”

“No, General Dorias appointed me to defend the castle, so I’ll remain here as well.”

“That’s reassuring. General Dorias is a loyal and kind individual, and if even you are going to stay then there’s no way this castle is going to fall.”

“Hey, hey! Aren’t you talking like His Majesty is going to lose? Are you saying that Thracia is going to come so far?”

Finn was apparently influenced by His Majesty’s pessimistic words. However, after being laughed at by his enthusiastic friend, he let the dark thoughts go.

“My bad. First I was told by Lord Cuan to protect Lord Leaf, and now His Majesty did the same thing... perhaps I saw Lord Cuan in His Majesty.”

“It can’t be helped, since they’re father and son. But more importantly, do you mean that His Majesty is going to die just like Lord Cuan? This is an insult, you know?”

As Glade’s grim face suddenly drew closer, Finn let out a laugh.

“What’s wrong?”

“... I...”

Finn’s legs stopped, as he couldn’t contain his laughter anymore.

“Hey, Finn.”

“... Sorry... it was like... I was the only one left behi...”

He tried to explain it to his friend, who should be already getting annoyed, while dealing with his own laughter.

“What’s this...”

Glade was shocked at Finn, who wouldn’t stop laughing. What was even odder was that Finn’s spasm of laughter became worse, and even his back was trembling.

After a while, Finn finally stopped laughing. He then apologized to Glade, who looked at him with a shocked face.

“I’m sorry. I was sulking because it seems like I am always the only one left behind when important battles happen. Even though I have the important mission of guarding Prince Leaf... no, perhaps I was trying to flee from it because it was too important.”

“Why so miserable? Isn’t it an honor, to be relied on like this?”

“That’s why I was a fool. Thinking of a mission that doesn’t require putting my life on the line as a mere load and feeling dissatisfied over it... I was indeed a fool.”

There were tears in the edges of his eyes from laughing too much. However, his expression was cheerful.

“What a weird guy...”

Following that smile, Glade ended up smiling as well. This friend of his had only been brooding ever since Cuan died, so seeing him smile once again was definitely refreshing.

“So, I should be going already... Glade must go back home as well, right?”

“Yeah... I’ll go back home after dropping by the weapon storehouse and checking the infantry’s weapons.”

The two went together until near the exit of the castle, and then followed their own ways.

SORTIE

Going through the castle’s plazas and looking at the gathered soldiers with a side glance, Finn went towards the king’s office, taking Lachesis with him.

Lachesis carried in her arms a one-month-old baby. The child was squirming uncomfortably, perhaps feeling the smell of battle in the air.

“I wonder what does His Majesty want from a foreigner like me?”

Walking at a fast pace, Lachesis repeated yet again the question she had been making ever since the previous day’s night.

“I don’t know either, but I believe it’s related to Lord Leaf.”

It was clear that Lachesis was feeling something in that tense situation, so they grew taciturn. Finn even thought of her as reliable.

In the office, lying in the innermost part of the castle, people were moving around hurriedly.

“Your Majesty, I’ve brought Lady Lachesis.”

In front of the open door, Finn asked King Calf, who was inside, for instructions.

“Enter.”

As he entered the room, he saw King Calf, wearing his body armor. Other protective items were being prepared.

“I heard Your Majesty called me, so I came. I thank you for your kindness and for allowing me to take shelter here... if there is anything I can do, please ask.”

Finn was standing in front of the door, in a way not to hinder those who went in and out of the room, and watching Lachesis. She greeted King Calf

gracefully, as the princess of Nodion – someone precious to King Eltosan, as he knew. She wore practical clothes like any knight, but, for an instant, it felt as if she was in a dress.

The image he had of her, built based on Prince Cuan's description of what he heard from King Eltosan, crumbled when they first met; however, her behavior full of grace and elegance fit the stories he had heard perfectly.

"I have an important request to make, but please wait for an instant.

Everyone, this is enough. Go back to your own tasks."

King Calf instructed the servants to leave the room.

Finn was leaving as well, but the king called him.

"Finn, this concerns you as well. Stay and listen."

As King Calf, Lachesis and Finn were alone in the room, Finn closed the door. The king turned to the only open window and looked outside.

"My request couldn't be different... it's about Leaf."

"Prince Leaf's..."

"I will sortie now. By looking at our situation, you can tell that our chances of victory are fifty-fifty. So, I want to take all the measures I can... so that our Lenster keeps on existing..."

"Your Majesty..."

King Calf asked Lachesis to sit down, and then did the same himself, facing her. He also instructed Finn to sit down next to Lachesis.

"If Manster and Conote fall, they'll probably come for Lenster next. He's a man who won't let an opportunity slip... that's why we must repel him at Manster, without fail."

"If Your Majesty is going, then we are sure to be victorious."

"Finn, we are going to simply attack them. However, we don't have enough elites to drive Thracia's army from Manster. Cuan's death was a heavy blow to us."

King Calf quietly remonstrated Finn, who wanted to believe in victory.

"Are you asking me to help Prince Leaf escape if the worst happens?"

"You're sharp... I want to ask you to take care of Leaf alongside Finn. If news of our defeat reaches your ears, don't hesitate; leave this castle and go towards Alster. They might not be taking part in the battle, but I don't think they'll reject refugees..."

Finn didn't realize it, despite King Calf's gloomy face.

"Is there anything bothering..."

"No, it's just that the king of Alster won't take part in the battle.... But you should still be able to flee to Alster safely."

King Calf seemed to be lost in his memories, but Finn was unable to figure out what he was thinking.

"... I understand. If you believe I can be of use, then I shall do whatever I can."

"Lady Lachesis..."

"Finn, for Prince Leaf's sake, you cannot die. That's the mission your king gave to you... to live and protect Prince Leaf... an important task."

"I understand. Your Majesty, please depart without worries."

"You had a morbid expression yesterday... but regardless, I'm sincerely counting on you."

"Good luck, Your Majesty."

"I shall await for your safe return, Your Majesty the King Calf."

"Yes."

In order to take back the baby they left in the care of a servant along the way, Finn and Lachesis went to Prince Leaf's room, where she said she'd be.

That was in the floor below the office, in a room facing the courtyard, away from the soldiers' noise. Inside, the queen made Leaf company.

"Your Highness, I'm glad to see you in high spirits..."

"You've finished your business with His Majesty, right?"

"Yes, I am to go to Prince Leaf's place together with Finn."

"I know. You don't need to speak like this... what did he say...?"

The queen's smile disappeared, revealing a deep sorrow.

"This child is your daughter, am I correct? I wonder if you could kindly tell me her name?"

"Yes, I called her Nanna."

"Then, little Nanna... take care of Leaf, okay? Watch out for him so doesn't do rash things like Cuan did."

"Your Highness..."

"And Althena...ah, poor girl..."

"Her corpse wasn't found yet, Your Highness. There is a possibility that she is still alive."

"She was captured by that Trabant. We know well enough it is better to resignate."

The queen fell silent after that note, and resumed watching Prince Leaf's playful figure.

"Your Highness, it's time for His Majesty's departure."

A servant notified her of the time, from outside the room.

“Come, Leaf. Your grandfather is leaving for battle. You’re coming with us to see him off, right?”

“Is he going?”

“Yes.”

“Will he come back?”

“He probably will.”

Leaf grumbled in response, as if in understanding, possibly since his parents didn’t come back after all... when listening to that dialogue, Finn felt a pain inside his chest.

“Finn, hug me?”

Evading the servant who was going to take him, Prince Leaf rushed to Finn.

“Finn, you’re loved by both Althena and Leaf, aren’t you? I remember that even though Cuan assigned you as Althena’s guard, we always said you were becoming her playmate.”

Seeing Finn’s embarrassment, the queen laughed softly.

“Come with us, Finn. Please hold Leaf, yes?”

As asked by the queen, Finn held Prince Leaf in his arms and went to the front garden.

The soldiers announcing the king’s departure were gathered in the front garden. Those who would stay to defend the castle surrounded the plaza, while those who were going to the front were organized in ranks.

The queen, after spotting King Calf at the castle’s entranceway, went to his side.

“Good luck, Your Majesty.”

“I leave the castle in your hands.”

Those were brief words, but well enough for them, who looked fixedly into each other’s eyes.

As the door opened, the soldiers, who had been waiting so long, let out cheers.

“Long live Lenster!”

“Let’s take down Thracia!”

“This is the revenge for Lord Cuan!”

King Calf controlled the unanimously shouting soldiers with a gesture.

“Our sworn ally, Manster, has been surrounded by Thracia, and we’ve received a letter from them seeking reinforcements.”

We shall now depart, to help a long-time sworn friend and take down the detestable Thracia!"

There was a loud cheer, as the soldiers' morale raised.

"May the blessings of Noba be with you."

Following the queen's words, the soldiers' voltage raised, and their excitement reached the peak.

The king mounted on his horse, and brandished his lance over his head.

"Sortie!"

Accompanied by a loud cheer, the king and the royal guards who protected him ran through the castle gate. Afterwards, the lance and bow knights followed, making the earth rumble as they rode forward. Lastly, the infantry, composed of armor knights and low rank soldiers, began their march.

The sortie of Lenster's almost entire army was indeed spectacular. The knights who saw them off had no doubts that they would be victorious; only the king and his wife considered the worst.

Finn, who already knew of that, forgot the time and kept on staring at the castle gate even after the king had left.

"Finn, let's go back!"

Prince Leaf pulled Finn's hair.

"Yes, Lord Leaf."

Cradled in Finn's arms, Leaf was impatient, even though the knight was already going back.

"Let me off!"

Finn softly let Leaf off, in the now almost deserted corridor. As he did, Leaf started running.

"Lord Leaf, please don't run. It's dangerous!"

Finn chased him nervously. This happened often back when he was taking care of Althena as well, but she would always soon return to Finn. Leaf, however, ran to his destination without looking around. Because of that, chasing him while paying attention to the surroundings was a pain.

In the end, he wasn't able to catch up with Leaf until the bottom of the nearest stairs going to the prince's room. Leaf was waiting for him there, and laughed.

"There is no need for me to remain in this castle, right?"

That was Lachesis's rebuttal to Finn, when he found out she was going to leave and tried to prevent it.

"But..."

"It should be enough if you notify me in case something happens. There's also Nanna, and there's nothing I can do here right now..."

Her expression when looking at Nanna was the same as Ethlin's when looking at Leaf, so Finn was unable to detain her any further.

"Why the brooding face? I do want to do what I can for Lenster, who accepted me even though I was part of Lord Sigurd's so-called rebel army. However, that might not even happen. I'd better stay home, like I have until now."

"... to go so far..."

"My, I'm lord brother Elto's younger sister, didn't you know that already?"

Lachesis giggled and let out a smile. Nanna, who was sleeping soundly, seemed to be opening her eyes.

"Oh, no! If she wakes up now, she won't be able to fall asleep again tonight. Good night, Finn."

"... Good night, Lady Lachesis."

Finn saw the hurried Lachesis off, and then went to Leaf's room.

After the departure to the front, Finn was called by the queen and told to stay in the castle. Since he lost his parents early and was entrusted to the castle, this castle used to feel like his home, but when he reached the status of knight he obtained a house outside. Although it was right outside of the castle...

Even though he was Prince Cuan's favorite servant and ended up serving his children as well, he couldn't keep on living in the castle forever. Therefore, he asked Cuan for permission to buy that house.

"I must go get something urgently, as well..."

While going towards where Finn stood alone, General Dorias and Glade were talking about something.

"... Is that so?"

"Even if we're talking about Thracia, they aren't simply going to cross that mountain and attack Lenster at once, don't you think?"

"However..."

It seemed that the two hadn't noticed Finn, but once they got close to him, Glade called Finn.

"What do you two happen to be arguing about, General Dorias?"

"Right now, His Majesty's battle formation."

So said General Dorias. His tone indicated that, if there were a table around, he would punch it.

"Somebody inexperienced like me is unable to understand what His Majesty is thinking, but it seems he plans to drive them away before they reach Lenster. I wonder if there's something we don't know."

Finn made a great effort to behave calmly in front of that perceptive general.

“No, it’s just that there were too many archers left behind. Since we don’t have many mages in Lenster, archers would be our main force if we were to fight Thracia. And the large amount of archers left here worries me.”

“There are Conote and Manster as well. Besides, even though I think it isn’t going to happen, we would be defenseless if the dragon knights came to Lenster and we lacked archers.”

General Dorias’s worries were well founded as well. However, Finn told him not to worry, since apparently the king’s worries were different.

After seeing off General Dorias, Finn walked the corridor in order to return to the prepared room. Then, Glade called him to a halt, from behind.

“Were you serious back then, Finn?”

Glade inquired Finn, his expression leaving it clear that he wouldn’t accept an evasive reply.

“Back then... ah, when talking to General Dorias? Didn’t I tell you I don’t know?”

“Then, why did you have a gloomy face yesterday?”

“That’s... didn’t I tell you about it yesterday already? I felt that the duty of protecting Lord Leaf was too heavy, and...”

“It can’t be just that.”

Finn, who didn’t think his sometimes perceptive friend would feel his own uneasiness, stumbled when replying. That said, he hesitated to put his uneasiness into words.

“Just like you said before as well, I don’t think His Majesty is going to lose. However, I can’t picture those Thracians coming and making a direct frontal attack... don’t you agree?”

“So that’s why you’re uneasy? But you said General Dorias staying behind was a relief...”

“Yeah... if the ones besieging are infantry soldiers, then what are the dragon knights doing? Don’t you think they’re heading to Conote, or even to this Lenster, as we speak?”

“Well... you have a point.”

“This is something I heard from His Majesty, by the way. He was saying something like that in Lord Leaf’s room. ‘We can’t make light of Thracia’...”

Glade listened to what Finn said, thoroughly impressed. However, as Finn talked, his own uneasiness worsened drastically.

The army that left Lenster's castle reorganized its ranks and advanced towards Conote. On the way, voluntary soldiers joined from towns and villages, and thus Lenster's army swelled considerably.

"Your Majesty, we are about to enter Conote's territory."

"Yes, tell the troops to halt. I'll send a messenger to Conote."

"All troops, halt!"

The order was given, and the entire army stopped. Comments of relief could be heard among the voluntary soldiers, who weren't used to their equipments.

King Calf sent a person with many acquaintances in Conote as a messenger, and directed all kinds of preparations to make camp at that place. However, after a short while, the messenger heading to Conote returned.

"Your Majesty, it seems that the king of Conote, His Majesty Carl wants to meet you, and is heading in this direction."

Those around King Calf grow noisy, because of the unexpected event.

"Stretch the tents right away, and prepare for the meeting."

He directed his servants, and made his own preparations for the audience.

"Why would the king of a country leave the castle at such a time... even though he's young, didn't those around him say anything...?"

King Calf felt a hint of uneasiness. He praised to the Crusader Nova, asking for that what he told Finn before leaving not to happen.

"King Calf, I wanted to meet you. Are you aware of how reassuring your coming here is?"

The young king of Conote, who blushed while talking, was pretty much a child.

"After my father died, I've been target of countless assassination attempts from a faction that would rather see my uncle as the king. However, God sided with the legitimate successor. Starting with Leidrick, the amount of people supporting me increased, and finally I was able to be recognized as king."

"Then, who's guarding the castle now?"

"Leidrick. I cannot go to the front, but the soldiers who can are waiting in the castle for my return... together with you."

King Calf looked, somewhat amazed, at the king of Conote, who talked as if he were dreaming. After the previous king's sudden death, he heard there was a dispute between the king's younger brother's faction and the prince's faction. How did this young man gather such support? He heard the king's younger brother had greater military power.

"King Calf, please decide the battle plans with the generals. I've left it in their hands. I can stay at ease in the castle because they're reliable people."

King Calf felt a light headache from watching that king's innocent attitude. Even if Conote's generals were excellent, should the king they're supposed to serve rely on them this much? That could become a problem.

Eventually, rushed by that king, King Calf entered Conote's territory. He told each knight divisions' commanders to rest, then entered Conote Castle with his escorts.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty. Thank you for coming, Your Majesty the King of Lenster."

A man, probably a vassal, came to greet them. King Calf didn't have a good impression of him, but Conote's King Carl seemed to trust him.

"So you've come to greet us? King Calf, he is Leidrick, whom I told you about. He's a quite experienced man, so he's been doing a lot for Conote. He's being of great help to me."

"As already introduced, I am Leidrick, Your Majesty. I have been waiting to meet you ever since I heard you'd personally take part in the battle to support Manster."

There wasn't anything wrong with what he had said so far, but thinking about what was behind his words, he noticed his eyes were too sharp. He had the intuition that those were the eyes of somebody who was thinking things he shouldn't and considered informing King Carl of that; however, concluding that would just dampen his humor, he remained silent.

"Please leave the rear support to my knights. All of Conote's knights will be happy to fight alongside Lenster's army."

"He's probably not lying," King Calf told himself. King Carl looked at Leidrick as if trusting him completely, but the mature King Calf found it strange. However, if they weren't to cooperate with each other, driving off that big Thracian army would become quite hard.

In order to counter the anxiety that arose inside his chest, King Calf returned to where his own army was at a quick pace.

"How was it, Your Majesty?"

Lurvin, one of King Calf's most trusted men, greeted him. Although younger than himself, this general's perception and insight were definitely impressive; because of that, the king entrusted the role of military strategist to him.

"Have you met with that Leidrick before?"

"No, I haven't, what about that man...?"

After confirming that he wasn't well-known, King Calf approached Lurvin more closely and proceeded.

"He's very close to King Carl, but I feel he's suspicious. It seems King Carl trusts him quite deeply, but I can't help but think he's up to something."

“I understand. I’ll have somebody look into that. However, no matter how worried Your Majesty might be, we’ll probably not be able to catch his tail if the King of Conote doesn’t notice it. We might also lack enough time...”

Lurvin’s thoughts became clouded.

“Indeed. We must depart and head to Manster as soon as possible... they’ll make their move after that, right? We’ll only know when we’re already battling against Thracia...”

“Your Majesty...”

“Either way, now we must devote ourselves to taking down the enemy in front of our eyes. Once we destroy a part of Thracia’s siege, we’ll be able to naturally see the way. It’s no use to worry about something that might not happen. I was planning to leave the rear guard to you...”

“Please leave it to me. No matter what disaster may happen, I’ll make arrangements as Your Majesty requested.”

Even though his behavior was peaceful, it was clear that he was at his wit’s end.

After Lurvin left, King Calf stayed alone inside the tent. The reported number of dragon knights was increasing, compared to when he received the communication. Even though it was to be expected, it felt like he was confronting a military force kept in store for God knew how much time... Trabant’s ambition.

Once a communication that a war council was to be held came from Conote’s side, King Calf entered Conote Castle with his main generals. Naturally, Lurvin was among them.

There, the soldiers were divided between those who would stay in Conote Castle and those who would go to the front with Lenster’s, so it looked like things were going as Leidrick wished. Conote’s generals were anxious about King Carl’s future, but apparently Leidrick coaxed them well.

“This man called Leidrick has an evil mind... it seems he’s up to quite a few frauds.”

After a meeting that was a war council only in name, Lurvin casually approached King Calf and handed him a memo – “It seems Thracians have slipped in.” After returning to his tent, King Calf burned the so written memo in the camp’s bonfire and called Lurvin.

“Is that true?”

“Yes, it seems they’re moving around quite a lot for some reason. Apparently some of them kept contact with local nobles, but I still haven’t found out who...”

The usually evasive Lurvin said direct words. He probably investigated it on short notice, and yet had apparently reached the core of it already.

“We’ll get up early tomorrow. You should rest already.”

“No, I still have to wait for a report, so until that comes...”

After saying that, Lurvin left the tent.

Early in the morning, the entire army gathered and started marching towards Manster. Its full command was entrusted to Lenster’s king, while the king of Conote saw them off from the castle.

“Since I’m here, the rear guard will be alright.”

His words were promising, but it was impossible to fully trust them. Even so, now he had no choice but to trust those words and march forward.

Before the departure, Lurvin, already using his armor, informed King Calf that he didn’t get any news of his contact, so he couldn’t know what Leidrick and the Thracians were planning.

“March!”

Lenster’s soldiers felt exalted, but King Calf and Lurvin alone grew depressed due to their increasing uneasiness.

The people of Conote saw the biggest army they had ever seen off with wild enthusiasm, as it passed by. “There’s no way they’ll lose to Thracia,” everyone said.

THE BATTLE OF RIVER THRACIA

After three days going south from Conote, they reached River Thracia. After the entire army entered Manster’s territory and passed the river, the bridge linking Manster and Conote was dropped. In the distance, they saw the mountains that surround Manster Castle. Then, when they thought the ridges were moving, they noticed that countless flying dragons were coming down on them.

“The dragon knights!!”

“It’s a surprise attack from the Thracian army!!”

The infantry, which was ready to flee, was soothed, and the archers commenced attack.

“Calm down! Even dragon knights aren’t invincible. If you calm down and aim bows at them, they’ll fall!”

Chunaav, the general leading the archers, could be heard scolding the soldiers. Lenster’s horses were calm, but the ones ridden by Conote’s generals and soldiers alike were becoming unquiet. When the heavy cavalry tried to move forward to protect the infantry, a rain of arrows fell from the forest to their right.

“Is this an ambush?!”

A group of infantry units – probably Thracian – could be seen coming out from the shadow of the mountains to the left. The Lenster-Conote union army

wasn't prepared for this, so the troops rushed to combat. It became a chaotic melee battle.

The dragon knights cleverly stayed at a height beyond the reach of the arrows, while the infantry and heavy cavalry kept on soundly exhausting the union army's forces. Moreover, a mercenary-like group came to join the battle, hailing from the forest.

"There are even more fresh troops?"

"Your Majesty, the bridge heading to Conote was...!!"

Lurvin, who was defending the rear, rushed to King Calf.

"What happened to the bridge, was it taken?"

"It was dropped. By a soldier from Conote... not only can we not cross the river anymore, but also we'll become easy targets for the dragon knights."

"Damn that Leidrick, he really did it!"

The soldiers became agitated. However, King Calf remained valiant – believing that somehow they'd manage to defeat Thracia and enter Manster Castle triumphantly...

As dusk drew near, the violent battle heads toward a break. Thracia had certainly suffered damage as well, but the union army had been reduced to about half of its initial size. Some of the Conote soldiers fled as well, but King Calf didn't care about them.

They stretched the tents in near the place where the bridge stood, gave medical treatment to the wounded, built a bonfire and prepared for a night attack. Then, King Calf gathered the remaining generals inside his tent.

"You're the only ones left?"

"General Lance was killed by the dragon knights when hindered by the infantry..."

"General Alface too, against Thracia's heavy cavalry..."

"Only seven generals are remaining... it seems most of the knights have been wiped out, as well..."

King Calf's face showed his anguish. The pitifully bandaged Lurvin, too, was trembling with frustration. Everyone had suffered wounds, tasting this battle's severity.

"We don't know what happened to Conote..."

"If that cursed Leidrick tries to perpetrate something, King Carl will at least stop him, no?"

"However, those charged with protecting King Carl are all taking part in this battle. The ones who remain in the castle are either Leidrick's subordinates, or under his patronage."

The generals from Conote declared their scorn.

“That Thracian dragon knight was saying something, like they already knew we were going to come here. Of course, it isn’t like it was a secret, but there’s no doubt that somebody leaked that info.”

“That considered, if we don’t reorganize ourselves, we won’t be reinforcements for Manster; rather, we’ll be annihilated.”

There was a commotion after the word “annihilated” was said. Even Lurvin, who said it, made a sour face and fell silent.

“I know you don’t want to think about it, but we can’t let ourselves be defeated here. Not only for Manster’s army, who’s waiting for us, but also for our own countries... we can’t let that detestable Thracia advance any further!”

“Your Majesty...”

“However, we can’t quite advance like this... what should we do...”

A general from Conote asked, quietly.

“We’ll restore the bridge and cross the river, then retreat until near Conote. There, we’ll rearrange our ranks and attack back.”

“Otherwise, we’d have to be prepared to make large sacrifices to reach Manster, right?”

“It’s reckless, but those are our only options.”

The atmosphere was gloomy, and they were close to taking a decision. However, suddenly, there was agitation outside, and the sound of clashing swords could be heard.

“Enemy attack!”

“It’s the Thracian army!”

The generals went outside, led by King Calf, who hadn’t removed his equipment yet. Countless people were already crossing swords, and many soldiers were fleeing as well.

“What are you doing?! What happened to the knights?”

The heavy knight general, Shales, shouted.

“It seems they’re battling on the other side, and the Thracian army is in the sky...”

“Why are you so carefree?!”

“They’re withdrawing. Perhaps their objective was to lower our morale, rather than battle further?”

Lurvin calmly analyzed the situation. As he pointed out, the supposedly Thracian soldiers were retreating simultaneously.

They were attacked countless times that night and, as a result, the union’s soldiers were tired when morning came.

In the midst of the morning mists, the bridge that linked their army to Conote could be seen – and beyond it, there was the Conote army.

“Why are you here?”

Apparently, the one leading the army in front of their eyes was none other than Leidrick.

“If you need help, we’ve arrived as reinforcements... it seems the bridge was dropped by mistake. We had only planned to drop the bridge if you lost, to prevent the Thracian infantry from advancing. His Majesty, King Carl was worried, so we’ve come here.”

The generals from Conote were overjoyed to hear Leidrick’s words. King Calf expressed his thanks and asked him to join the front, but he hadn’t heard anything about Leidrick guarding their rear.

“In this case, let’s retreat for a moment and lure Thracia. If we take on them slowly, even they will grow impatient, no?”

King Calf, who prudently wanted to keep those concerns to himself, gazed at Leidrick.

“It seems it’s too late for that. They’ve come.”

Leidrick said calmly, and the others fell silent.

“It’s the Thracian army. They’re coming at once.”

“It can’t be helped. Prepare to strike back. We’ll hold out here.”

With his back turned to the river, King Calf spurred his horse and went towards the Thracian army.

However, the Thracian army’s movements were unusual this time around. Instead of attacking, they were only hunting the soldiers who went after them... or so it seemed. The dragon knights, too, launched mock attacks and called their opponents’ impatience... like that.

“Shit, who do they think we are?!”

Lenster’s knights were saying that sort of thing. Taunted and trying to save their wounded compatriots, they ended up losing their own lives.

The flying dragon of Trabant, the king of Thracia, was slowly circulating high in the sky. He probably knew that his army wouldn’t lose the upper hand.

The retreating Lenster and Conote troops were made targets of Thracia’s attacks, and the damage they took only increased. Even King Calf was injured, returning to the rear with the help of Lurvin and other subordinates.

“Damn you, Leidrick. Why don’t you move? Why don’t you attack? Isn’t Thracia our enemy?”

A general from Conote who had grown tired of waiting went to Leidrick, who wouldn’t go beyond the bridge. Even then, Leidrick displayed a bold smile and stayed still.

Then, the flying dragon of Trabant, the king of Thracia, appeared. The Thracian army stopped advancing.

“All troops, face Lenster and commence the attack.”

Leidrick, who had stayed silent until then, surprised the soldiers from Conote who were mixed with Lenster’s army. He killed the general who had come closer to him with one stroke and, likewise, the part of Conote’s army under his control crossed over the bridge and started attacking the exhausted army of Lenster.

“So you’ve deceived us.”

“King Calf, King Carl is waiting for you. Please go meet him soon.”

Leidrick drew his lance. King Calf, who had the blood of Nova running strongly in his veins, normally wouldn’t have trouble avoiding it... but not this time. His tired and wounded body wouldn’t move as he wished, and the corpses of fallen soldiers around him make him lose his balance. As he looked to his side, he saw Shales being pierced by the lance of a soldier from Conote. Lurvin, who should have been by his side, had countless arrows engraved on his body and was fighting frantically, swinging his sword. The Conote soldiers who had been fighting alongside him watched the situation dumbfounded, unsure of who to follow.

“As expected from the military hero and heaven-sent child of Nova, King Calf. Why don’t you die already?”

“I won’t be able to face Cuan if I’m killed by a cursed betrayer like you!”

Unable to stop his blood from flowing, King Calf continued to fight Leidrick.

“So, since I’m a betrayer, I’ve joined forces with Thracia for the continuity of Conote.”

Leidrick grinned broadly and stepped back. As he did, lance-wielding soldiers impaled King Calf from both sides.

“Guuh, y... you damn coward...!!”

King Calf used his lance as a staff, in order to support his own body.

“I have no fear of being called a coward or anything similar. However, king, I shall finish you with my own hands.”

Leidrick abandoned his lance and took the sword that rested in his waist.

“Look, soldiers of Thracia, King Trabant!

I, Leidrick, have killed King Calf of Lenster!”

“Your Majesty...!”

Lurvin, who had somehow survived the enemy attacks, screamed upon seeing his king’s atrocious figure. In no time, the infantry’s lances pierce his body.

“Soldiers of Lenster and Conote. If you beg for your lives and serve me, I’ll let you live. Those who don’t will be killed, without exception.”

Leidrick displayed the defeated King Calf's head and let out a victory cry. At this point, most of Thracia's army had retreated already; the ones remaining in the battlefield were soldiers from Lenster, who had lost their will to fight, and soldiers of Conote.

King Trabant, who was flying high in the sky, came down near Leidrick.

"Congratulations, you've done well. With this, you're the lord of Conote, isn't that right?"

"Are you going to keep your promise?"

"Of course. As long as you don't betray me, I'll keep it."

After taking a look at the head Leidrick held, Trabant once again took to the skies and flew away.

"Lord Leidrick, I don't see King Calf's horse anywhere."

"Ignore it. What can a horse do? We're going back to Conote. All troops, prepare to evacuate."

The Conote Army led by Leidrick quickly retreated.

"... Your Majesty..."

Once the enemies left the battlefield, the fallen, wounded soldiers of Lenster who had survived finally stood up.

"... We must warn the castle..."

So said the less wounded of the knights.

"Warn them? But how? Do we have the means to do so?"

"Either way, we must go away from here..."

So said a soldier who, able to stand by himself, was supporting a companion.

"Manster will fall, too."

"If only Lord Cuan were with us..."

"Even if you say that, it can't be helped. We don't know if the Thracian army is going to come back here. If we stay here doing nothing. At least those who can move must go back to the castle... we won't have our wounds treated here. Besides, we can't go to Manster, Conote is no option either, so the only place we have to return is Lenster Castle."

Following the young knight's desperate attempt of persuading them, the surviving soldiers slowly started moving.

TRAGIC NEWS

The eastern sky was dyed red, as if burning. It was supposedly like every other sunset, but, yet, it transmitted uneasiness.

The queen of the Kingdom of Lenster, Alfiona, felt anxious while looking at the eastern sky. The soldiers who remained in the castle were mostly either imprudent or apprentice young soldiers, or old soldiers who weren't really in active duty. Her heart trembled, divided between her desire to believe that the king will return safe and sound, and the anxiety that this time could be different.

The wind stroked her face. Her standing shadow stretched lengthily on the castle's balcony.

"Your Highness, the wind is becoming cold. Please come inside."

So said a maid.

"How is Leaf?"

She asked that same servant, while entering the room.

"He's in his room, playing with Lord Finn."

"I see, that's good, then. I wonder if there isn't any communication from His Majesty, yet..."

"Well, Lord Dorias asked the same thing some time ago..."

"I see... thank you, that is enough."

Queen Alfiona sat down by the window, and once again gazed at the sunset.

She hadn't felt this uneasy ever since her marriage with King Calf. She felt a great deal of unrest when she was informed of her daughter's death, and when her son Cuan died in battle, too; however, it was different from those times, and she felt strangely restless and uncomfortable.

"To think that I'd be this worried when you aren't around... I didn't think I would feel so helpless without my son and daughter to support me..."

The setting sun was disappearing in the horizon. By association, she was growing filled with melancholy.

Knock, knock.

"Your Highness, your meal has been prepared."

"I understand, I shall be going soon."

The queen, who was about to sink into dark thoughts, was brought back to reality by the servant's voice. If she didn't pull herself together, she would end up unable to protect even the prince Cuan had left. Even if she had to become a shield, she would protect that heir. Cheered up by those thoughts, the queen stood up.

"Everyone in this castle is anxious... if I don't pull myself together, His Majesty will laugh at me..."

After adjusting her posture, the queen looked through the window. As the traces of light were soon to be swallowed by the coming night, it felt as if they were struggling frantically.

Lenster's army swallowed a crushing defeat in River Thracia, but not all of its soldiers died; a few knights and soldiers managed to stay barely alive, and aimed to reach Lenster Castle. One of those lent his shoulder to a wounded friend, while another used a broken lance as a walking aid, as if it were a rod.

"I wonder how far His Majesty's horse went..."

Everyone was seeing King Calf's horse galloping through the battlefield. The king wasn't on its back, as it left shortly after Leidrick's triumphant cry could be heard.

They could only think of that as a nightmare. To think that King Calf, who was even called a "wargod" for his bravery and resolution in the battlefield, had his head taken by that pathetic Leidrick, a traitor from Conote without any special power... they wanted to think it was only a nightmare.

"... Leave me here. Go report this to the castle, quickly... tell it to the generals."

"Don't be silly, after we've come so far..."

The wounded soldier was trying to break free from the companion who was carrying him on his shoulders.

"You have a girlfriend waiting for you, no...? Londa, wasn't it? You want to meet her soon, don't you? So..."

"You..."

"I don't have a girl like that. We can see a village from here. I'll hide there, and go back once my wounds heal."

"Huh... I have a horse here. Its knight fell unconscious, so I was leading it here, but please use this horse if you can."

Perhaps having listened to the knights' dialogue, a soldier who was riding a horse took the animal to them.

"But it's carrying a wounded man..."

"I'll carry him. I'm known as a strong man, back in my village..."

"Thank you. Now, go. If you stay here doing nothing, you might end up not having a place to come back anymore."

The hesitant knight then gave a staff to his friend and rode the horse.

"This is a good horse. Isn't it General Ranz's?"

"The general's horse...? I don't know his name, but it was of the person who gave us orders."

The soldier who was guiding the horse, while carrying the soldier who was riding said horse on his back, answered with a hint of sadness. General Ranz, who fought like a fierce god in the battle field, was very popular among the

soldiers, even the ones who joined along the way; they were soldiers as well, after all. They expressed clearly their grief over his fall.

“Then, I shall borrow this, General Ranz. And your name is...?”

“I’m Dio. I used to live in a village near Lenster... please take care, Lord Knight.”

“Thank you. Then I’m coming, Romul...”

“Go, fulfill your role as a knight... Karlel... I’m alright. Even in this state, I’m a knight of Lenster. I have no intention of following our fallen king so he can laugh at me.”

“Then, to Lenster... to our queen...”

The knight rode the horse, heading towards the national border. He was lucky that both the Thracian army (starting to devote itself to taking Manster) and Leidrick’s army of Conote (desperately suppressing the unrest within its borders) were too busy to care about the tiny remnants of Lenster’s army.

The king’s horse galloped for around three days from the crushing defeat in River Thracia, until it finally reached the border outpost.

“One horse, alone... why is it here...”

“Go get it, we might discover something.”

“... I’ve taken care of it before... that’s His Majesty’s horse!”

“Really?”

One of the soldiers who saw the horse from the top of the outpost opened the outpost’s door and ran. That soldier called the horse, who followed obediently.

“It’s His Majesty’s horse... this ornamented saddle, too...”

“Are these... traces of blood? But whose... it can’t be...”

“The horse is tired, so let it rest. We must have somebody report this to the castle...”

The captain in charge of the outpost chose two soldiers and sent them to Lenster Castle as messengers. Then, he ordered the strengthening of the outpost’s defenses.

Two days later, the knight riding General Ranz’s horse arrived in a different outpost.

“Captain, I can see a knight that appears to be from our army.”

“Is he a messenger?”

“No... he... seems to be wounded.”

“Let him in at once. Make arrangements so that we can send a messenger to the castle as soon as needed. I’ll listen to him.”

The captain took the tired horse to the stable, then listened to its rider’s story.

“What happened?”

“Thracia... at the river... surprise attack from Thracia... we fought... then we met... a betrayer from Conote... His Majesty... died in the midst of that chaos...”

While the knight talked despite being out of breath, those around him became noisy.

“His Majesty has...”

“A betrayer from Conote...”

“So he lost...?”

“Silence! I don’t think he’d tell a lie under these conditions, but wonder if it’s true...”

The captain approached the young knight. The knight succumbed to fatigue, and ended up falling on his knees right there.

“Messenger, report this to Lenster Castle. Tell Her Highness of His Majesty’s death in combat!”

The captain said only that, at once. Then, he looked at the sky.

The messenger rode the horse prepared for him, with Castle Lenster as his goal. The soldiers who were noisy until a moment ago sympathized with the tired knight and took him to a bed they had prepared. The other soldiers prepared their weapons and started to make arrangements to communicate the surroundings.

The messages from those two outposts reached Castle Lenster at about the same time.

“Report. It has been reported that a horse, thought to be His Majesty, arrived to an outpost, tired and covered with blood.”

“Report. My army fought against the Kingdom of Thracia at River Thracia. During the battle, Conote changed sides and we received heavy damage. It has been reported that His Majesty died in battle.”

“What?! His Majesty has...? I must tell Her Highness at once... gather the soldiers remaining in the castle. Thracia will come soon!”

The face of the general who received the reports became pale. However, he soon pulled himself together and promptly started giving directions.

The only general who had remained in the castle in active duty was the young General Dorias. The one who received the reports was an old general, charged with overseeing the practice of the young soldiers.

“They’ve probably worked from behind the scenes and instigated Conote... sounds like something Thracia would do...”

“It isn’t the time for this. The most important subject now is how to protect the castle with our current military force, gentlemen.”

While the old general was greatly perplexed, a quiet voice responded to Dorias's distinctive and thunderous voice.

*"Protecting this castle isn't important. Protecting Leaf, preventing the blood of Lenster from disappearing... **that** is important."*

"Your Highness, that outfit..."

"In order to let Leaf escape, I shall resist here. While the enemy is confused, we'll have Leaf escape. Moreover, I believe that planning the restoration would be our best option, what do you think?"

The queen was dressed for battle; it was said that, in her youth, she fought side-by-side with the King, just like Ethlin. Actually, many of the old generals gathered there had seen the queen like that countless times. Grasping the queen's extraordinary determination from that, the gathered generals bended to her will.

"Finn has already been instructed to escape with Leaf. In order to know well Thracia's soldiers, I shall serve as a decoy; I shall have everyone's help for this. However, I wish those who stay with me to be prepared to die. Dorias, please protect Leaf alongside Finn. If Leaf stays alive, Lenster will revive, and the holy blood of Noba won't disappear. There are also young knights in Dorias's unit, so I believe that Finn will be reassured in his duty."

"I accept. I shall protect Lord Leaf, even at the cost of my own life."

Dorias bowed deeply and accepted the queen's words. The other generals cast their eyes down as well, pensive; that meant that, even for a moment, their Lenster would crumble.

"Your Highness, please escape safely with Lord Leaf as well."

"That would be impossible. I don't think a man like Trabant would let me escape. Leaf will probably be able to escape by himself, especially because I'll remain in the castle..."

The queen persuaded them with a smile, her eyes showing her resolution.

"If Your Highness has thought so far, then I shall not say anything else. Even if we are old, we are still knights of Lenster. We shall perform that duty splendidly."

Except for Dorias, all the generals exclaimed their determination of fighting alongside the queen.

"Dorias, in order to confuse them, divide and escape. If you all flee in one direction, you'll stand out. Leave Lord Leaf to Finn and focus on securing a safe route."

"Yes, understood."

"It has been asked of Lady Lachesis to take care of Leaf, as well. Even though she's carrying a baby, she's a refugee from that war... I'm sure she'll be of assistance."

Accepting the old generals' advice and the queen's warm words, Dorias thought that hard days were to come.

Finn, who was in Leaf's room, stood still in horror after hearing about the situation from the queen; his greatest fear had become reality. The queen soon pulled herself together and gave directions to those around, before going back to her room.

"His Majesty perished... Lord Cuan, I..."

The one who brought the stupefied Finn back to reality was Prince Leaf, who pulled his cuff.

"What happened, are you crying?"

"No, it's nothing, Lord Leaf."

Finn, after holding Leaf in his arms, sat down on a chair by the window in order not to get in the way of the servants around them.

"What happened with grandma?"

"Alright, our task here is done."

The hands embracing Prince Leaf were still trembling. Finn was watching the servants charged with making the preparations for Leaf's escape. The prince, always quick to complain, was unusually quiet in his arms.

"Finn, I was worried so I came. Prince Leaf..."

The door opened, and Lachesis came into sight. Dressing her usual armor and embracing Nanna, she looked brave and reliable. The nervous court lady ordered to make the preparations asked her, fluttered.

"Ah, Lady Lachesis, what should I do... what should we take..."

"A few changes of clothes for Lord Leaf, with as little decoration as possible. No matter where we're going to hide, not standing out should be our main concern. Afterwards, let's get something Lady Ethlin and Lord Cuan held; it'll be good to show Lord Leaf something of his parents when he becomes an adult. If possible, getting Lenster's emblem would be nice as well."

The flustered maids then promptly arranged what they were told.

"Finn, can you go like this?"

"Ah, yes, anytime. I don't have anything to take with me... my horse is in the stable, and I can quickly prepare weapons..."

"As one would expect from a knight, indeed. I can go anytime, as well. And Her Highness..."

"Probably in the war council... since I've heard that, like Lord Cuan and Lady Ethlin, she fought alongside His Majesty in her youth..."

Lachesis put Nanna down and sat on a chair as well. The servants, having finished the preparations, came to Lachesis and Finn, looking for confirmation. Lachesis checked the luggage, indicating what wasn't enough.

"I wonder what Her Highness is planning to do..."

Lachesis's expression dampened. Perhaps she was remembering when the castle of Nodion was about to fall, Finn thought. Her hardened image when they first met; her image encouraging her subordinates to protect the castle to the end came to his mind. However, that time, help came. The army led by the young noble Sigurd, of which Finn was part of, arrived just in time.

There wouldn't be anyone helping Lenster. Even if they tried an alliance with the Grandbell Empire, their ally Chalphy had been destroyed for rebelling, so Lenster would probably be seen in a similar light.

"It's painful not to have any choice but to run, isn't it..."

"What are we going to do if you're weak now, Finn? Lord Leaf will laugh at you!"

"Finn, you're acting strange!"

Prince Leaf, who innocently looked up to Finn, melted the weight of his heart.

"Is this odd... Lord Leaf? ... shall we go on a trip together?"

"Grandma too?"

"No, Her Highness must stay and watch over the castle, so we're going with Lady Lachesis here and some other people. A few moments from now..."

As if to trick Leaf, who still didn't know anything, Finn tried to make it sound fun for him. Seeing Finn do this looked tragic to Lachesis. She knew full well how difficult it would be to run away from the castle and escape. After the matter of Agustria, her life in Silesia was still good thanks to Sigurd and the others' good will. To avoid that battle at Grandbell, she left her son in Isaac and struggled to reach Lenster... how many times did she think she'd rather die? However, she couldn't ignore the feelings of her late brother, or of the one who loved her. That was all that allowed Lachesis to stay alive.

"Come, Lord Leaf. We'll leave at any moment, so let's get ready?"

When Finn stood up, a maid jumped in, bringing a message.

"Dragon knights. We've been informed that dragon knights have been spotted high in the sky."

"So early..."

"If everyone flees quickly, Lord Dorias's subordinate knights will protect us."

The maid who said that at a breath fell on her knees. The other maids who had understood her words began trembling with fear.

"Calm down. We have something we must do. If we do, a way will open for us."

“Lady Lachesis... we shall go with you. We’ll become your shield. Meanwhile, please escape.”

“You’ll be a burden. Think of a way of staying alive by yourselves; it’s better that way. If by any chance you attract their attention instead of us, ask the help of one of the knights and escape with him. You belong to Lenster. Hope for Lord Leaf’s safety, and stay alive until the day you can come back with him.”

“Lady Lachesis...”

“Now go. Don’t worry about us... I’ve been fighting in this war. I can at least keep up with Finn.”

“Good luck... Lord Finn, please take care of Lord Leaf.”

“We’re escaping towards Alster. If we’re alive, by then...”

“Lord Leaf, be well...”

“Shall we go, Finn?”

“Yes, with haste... Lord Leaf, Lady Lachesis shall go with you.”

“Let us go, Lord Leaf. Perhaps it’s a bit tight, but come here with Nanna...”

“Quickly!”

Urged by the maids, Finn and Lachesis left the room.

LENSTER’S FALL

Chaos had already reached there. Going through the gate to Conote, the Thracian soldiers invaded from the backs of their dragons, one after the other. The old soldiers fell, unable to even close the gate.

“This is way too early!”

Finn saw the flock of dragon knights spreading out in the sky, annoyed.

“Hurry, Finn. We don’t have any time left!”

Pulled by Lachesis, Finn ran through the castle with her.

“Lady Lachesis, I’ll take Lord Leaf...”

“I am alright. We won’t be able to break through this siege if you don’t fight well, Finn.”

“Yes.”

“My horse is already prepared. Finn, hurry!”

“Take this, Lady Lachesis... it’s Lord Leaf’s luggage. We’ve included a staff Lady Ethlin left behind, so please use it.”

“Thank you. You too must escape, quickly.”

“Good luck, Lady Lachesis, Lord Finn.”

“Thank you. May the blessings of Noba be with you too...”

After saying this to the maid, Finn ran to get his own luggage.

Together with the small luggage he gathered was the lance he had received from his master, Cuan. Called the Hero Lance, it had allowed Finn to get out of countless predicaments. It was the lance he always brought to battle, together with the iron lance attached to his horse.

“Lord Cuan, may Lord Leaf have Noba’s blessings... please protect him.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, offering a prayer.

The timid young knight changed his expression in face of battle.

“Finn, what are you doing here?”

“Glade? I’ll have Lord Leaf escape, together with Lady Lachesis.”

“I’ve heard. Do it quickly, it seems Thracia’s main troops are coming here already.”

“Already...”

“If they come, they won’t let you escape.”

Glade, who always talked calmly about everything, now talked fast, as if agitated.

“Are you going to stay in the castle?”

“No. All of General Dorias’s subordinates received a mission of protecting Lord Leaf. We’ll leave separately at first, in order to confuse our foes, and converge again later.”

“Then, that time...”

Finn separated from Glade and went towards the place where Lachesis waited, in the courtyard. Passing by a servant in the corridor, he asked him to get his horse ready.

Lachesis, already on horseback, watched Finn running. In her arms was Leaf, who stuck out his head from the shadows of her mantle. Surely he was worried about Finn.

“Quickly, Finn!”

“Forgive my delay, Lord Leaf, Lady Lachesis.”

“Lord Leaf, it’s dangerous so please don’t stick your head out. Watch Nanna well, alright?”

“But Finn...”

“Finn will be by your side without fail, Lord Leaf. Hold on to Lady Lachesis firmly, just like she said.”

“Okay.”

“We may shake a bit, but please stay hidden within my mantle, Lord Leaf. If somebody sees us, we don’t know what...”

“Okay, got it.”

Probably relieved after confirming Finn’s presence, Leaf hid inside Lachesis’s mantle and couldn’t be seen from outside anymore.

It had been a long time since Finn last saw Lachesis’s gallant figure – and it was a first for the other people of Lenster. Many couldn’t believe that apparently fragile princess held the title of Master Knight; however, those who saw her like that had no doubts. Lachesis, who still rode the horse she had received in Silesia, wasn’t wearing anything unusual except for her mantle; yet, her long flowing hair made her look like a battle goddess.

“Finn...”

“Then, I shall lead the way. Lady Lachesis, please follow me closely so you don’t stay behind.”

“It’s alright, Finn. I’ve improved a lot since that time.”

As Finn said they were to go, the two horses began galloping.

Lenster Castle, short on archers and mages, was an easy target for attacks from the sky. The vanguard dragon knights of the Thracian army prioritized removing the soldiers guarding the castle gates in order to ease their allies’ entry. Their good performance indicated they had been practicing such tactics.

“First, focus on conquering the castle. I want to finish conquering it before Lord Trabant comes.”

“Captain, what should we do with the fugitives?”

“Ignore them for now. However, don’t let the royal family escape; it’ll become trouble later... either way, it’s said there’s a prince among them. There will be a reward for the one who captures him alive.”

There was a commotion among the dragon knights. The only members of the royal family remaining in the castle were the queen and Prince Leaf... to them, capturing the young Leaf alive probably sounded pointless.

“Prince Leaf will probably be protected by the knights. They’re tough, don’t let them beat you.”

The captain warned the overconfident soldiers. Although the main forces weren’t there, the old soldiers putting up a good fight and threatening the plan’s good flow came to his mind; besides, there was the possibility that his young knights would overdo it, seeing this opportunity of gaining fame.

“For Lord Trabant!”

“For Lord Trabant!”

Saying this, the dragon knights started their descent upon Lenster Castle.

“Our main objective is to conquer the royal castle. Find and capture the royal family. There should be almost no archers or mages. However, aim to take the minimum possible damage.”

The leading dragon knight's voice echoed. The descending dragon knights sallied forth, their lances aimed at Lenster's knights. Some dodged those attacks, but they were mostly old or inexperienced soldiers; thus, those who stood outside of the buildings fell one after the other.

Dragon knights descended upon Finn and the others, who had exited the castle and entered the town around it, as well. Finn skillfully maneuvered, riding beside Lachesis.

"Finn, be careful. Once we leave the town, they can take on us anytime. Just a little more."

"When the time comes, please leave me behind and escape. I'll serve as decoy."

"No. You must come with us... you're a knight of Lenster, aren't you? Don't even think of dying and leaving behind your master, Lord Leaf..."

"Lady Lachesis..."

"I don't know for how long I'll be able to stay by Lord Leaf's side. You are the only one who can... okay?"

"Yes. But for the time being, let us run at full speed."

"Indeed, that's what I expected from you, Finn. Truly a knight of Lenster!"

Those often repeated words... "Finn, you'll protect Lord Leaf" seemed to put him under a spell as they were repeated, sounding like "don't desire death, think only of Lord Leaf."

A female Master Knight clad in white armor, and a blue-haired knight of Lenster... there was no way they wouldn't stand out. Moreover, they were quite skilled, and the female knight seemed to be protecting something in her flight. The dragon knights pursuing them estimated that taking them down would be an achievement, so they were attacking them in succession.

"Finn, this way!"

"Reinforcements?"

A knight of Lenster called the two from one of the town's alleys. The dragon knights couldn't enter the narrow alley, so they started patrolling the area from above.

"Lady Lachesis, please use this mantle."

"You..."

"You two stand out. If you use this dirty mantle, we'll be able to confuse their eyes. We'll go out and serve as baits. You'll escape afterwards."

"Sorry... I'm counting on you."

"Yes, Lord Finn..."

"Hurry, Finn. You must at least reach that hill before the reinforcements from Conote come."

“Yes, good luck...”

As they saw the knights off, they soon spotted the dragon knights pursuing them.

“Let us go, Finn. We can’t let their efforts be in vain.”

Urged by Lachesis, they exited the town from a different alley. They could see a cloud of dust in the east; Thracia’s main forces were probably coming.

“Having no choice but to flee is... quite painful... isn’t it?”

“It is, Finn. However, as long as you stay alive, you can still pull it off sometime. If you believe this, surely a way will open.”

“I wonder...”

“My, of course. We, who are alive, are the ones who start them. If you say you can’t do it, you won’t go forward. That’s something I learned... when Lord Brother couldn’t go on anymore... so...”

“Forgive me...”

“You don’t need to apologize, Finn. Look, there’s the hill. It seems there are some people from the town there, too.”

A hill could be seen in the direction Lachesis pointed out; there, a few human shadows were spotted. Hiding their horses under the trees at its base, the two went up the hill – Lachesis carrying Nanna, and Finn carrying Leaf. There, they had a full view of Lenster Castle.

“It’s burning... the town... and Lenster’s castle...”

“Our town has fallen...”

Finn was unable to listen to the voices of the people around him.

The scenery in front of their eyes now was certainly the fall of Lenster. The fire that rose from the back seemed to cover the entire castle, painting it red. Inside of it, the dark shadows of Thracia’s dragon knights could be seen, as if insects drawn to a fire.

The following infantry troops appeared as well, raising a cloud of dust to their right.

Lachesis, who should have been by Finn’s side, had used up all her strength and was on her knees. Leaf, who was in his arms, watched the scene together with him. Some of the townspeople cried. However, Leaf didn’t cry, firmly staring at the castle.

“Finn...”

Coming back to his senses thanks to Leaf’s call, Finn urged Lachesis and left that hill.

That was the start of their road of hardships.

As Lenster Castle fell, the kingdom was destroyed with it. There was a rumor that its young prince escaped alive, but it was something hard to confirm.

The Thracian army, after felling Lenster, regrouped and changed its aim to the Kingdom of Alster. Taking their entire army, they sought to fulfill their ambitions at once.

However, anticipating an attack, the Kingdom of Alster had requested reinforcements from House Freege of the Grandbell Empire, and after a long time they arrived to the Thracian peninsula. However, terror came with them; namely, a group of mercenaries linked to the Lopto Church.

The Thracian army had the momentum, but had to retreat in the face of House Freege's prized Mage Knight squad's and the mercenary squad's offensive. Noticing he was at a terrible disadvantage, King Trabant reluctantly withdrew from the Manster District. House Freege stationed itself at the north of the district, effectively turning it into a territory of the Grandbell Empire.

That was the start of a time of trials.

Written by Fuuju Haruka

This story was written as a basis for the game's setting.