

Lantern under the Ochre Vault

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Lanterarium sub Firmamento Ochraceo

Any cleric wont to travel oft between Taitchland and the Papacy Romo would surely know that above southern Taitchland, even within the vault, one may often behold a sky of pallid red. This sight is most striking at dusk, when above the far horizon it seems as though some ailing soul hath smeared the heavens with blood. The lingering crimson makes one suspect that the setting sun is bidding farewell to the world, leaving behind such hues to echo across the earth together with the sound of bells. A poet of southern Taitchland sang:

Wann da Hacoromer Nebel kimmt,
werd aus'm zwielicht a roat's gedimmt.
When fog Hacorui comes drifting down,
The dusk is dyed a crimson brown.

And in the Ellin-Badan¹ province of northern Roma, the Ellins who dwell there discovered several hundred years ago that should a blood-red boundary appears in the distant sky during the day, a cold wave would arrive within five days.

What then is this red mist? No need to fear it an ill omen, nor yet a plague of insects sweeping through the fields. Though maps of the region Romo are ever loath to mark it, those reared in these lands cannot ignore the non-human realm to the west—the Duchy Hacorui².

Beneath the dark brown sky, beyond the reach of grace Apollinis, lies the land hominum sanguineorum, the Duchy Hacorui. Throughout the duchy, towering giant dragon trees³ stand on every hand. It is these lofty trees that, by means unknown, sustain this dark brown sky. Dwelling in such gloom, homines sanguinei are far more sensitive to light than any other race that walks the surface of the Orken continent. Therefore this dark brown sky, in the eyes hominum sanguineorum, is an ochre vault.

The *Bicentennial Pandemic* of six to eight hundred years past in region Romo was perhaps the catastrophe that historians Romo least wished to speak of, yet could not avoid. War raged without end, famine and plague alternated in their ravages, and in some quarters corpses lay strewn across the land. A long two hundred years—enough, were it today, for a respectable gentleman to live three lifetimes over.

At that time the various lords Romo turned one against another, storming cities and seizing lands. Armies came and went, and every settlement along their path was plundered bare; what could not be carried off was burnt to the ground, not a single resource left for the foe.

¹Ellin-Badan: A coastal province in the northwest Roma, almost the cradle of civilization for all Orken.

²Duchy Hacorui: Ducatus Hacorui; when referred to simply, it is Hacorum as a noun instead of adjective. It is said this word means “that skylight.”

³Giant dragon tree: *Draecana magno*, a plant similar to the dragon tree, but whose height can reach one hundred metres. By releasing a certain substance, it becomes a dark mist high in the air, forming the dark brown sky above the Duchy Hacorui.

The poor fled into the mountains to starve and freeze; those who could not flee surrendered all their worldly goods and at last joined the ranks, not knowing where their bones would lie. Later the wars ceased, and none were victorious—only human strength was spent, and so conflict could no longer continue.

Yet the end of war brought a state more wretched still. Corpses piled up like mountains, on battlefields and in fields alike. Not that none were willing to bury them, but that the living were already unable to undertake such arduous extra toil.

It was then that plague swept in like the west wind, blowing through every corner of the Empire Romo. It blew across the Grand Plain Romo, into the Danop River⁴, into every civil and every village.

First came unrelenting fever, with lumps appearing on the body that spread apace; then the skin showed frightful black spots, and within five days one died in agony. This plague was exceeding contagious. Vassals fell one after another, and the corpses of city dwellers piled up like mountains. The old and the young went first, the frail followed after, and then even those in their prime could not escape, dying cold and alone in their homes, giving off a lingering stench of death. Countless settlements were left with dead bodies and empty houses, none to collect the corpses, none to pray. Ominous birds—crows—gathered in flocks, pressing down upon treetops and covering rooftops.

The Papacy misread the providence and declared that this was Iahovuni testing the folk. The Papacy convened processions; believers walked barefoot upon crushed stone, striking one another with scourges, howling in pain, “Thou art guilty,” “Thou art guilty!” The religious courts burned heretics and slaughtered beasts and allophases alike. We know that mortals must suffer the ordeal of inferno when they have gone to the netherworld. If they are burnt temporally, then after death they shall not warrant penalty and shall not rest. Rows of stakes grew scorched and stinking, and the folk hoped these instruments would carry the plague away.

Yet the plague did not stay; it paid the Aeonivacuum no heed.

In such a hell upon earth, the templ⁵ awoke. When too many had died in a region, the ancient script templorum would slowly begin to glow. The transparent blood cocoon templi began to breed, and a batch of vates sanguinei rose up. Vates sanguinei were much like vatis, yet they no longer tuned; they shrieked across the fields. When the dying heard the shrieks of the vates sanguinei, they would stumble out of their homes, past the care of fearless physicians; those who could walk walked, those who could not crawled, and by the time they reached the templum some were already a bloody ruin, white bone showing at the knees.

Originally no human knew what had come to pass; let us pay respect to those who dared to investigate the matter, together with the physicians of that time. The vates sanguinei led these people toward the blood cocoon, where they were pierced by countless blades. Chant-script, like maggots, crawled all over their skin. They convulsed and twisted within the blood cocoon, trembling in unconsciousness—

⁴Danop River: The most important river in the region Romo.

⁵Templum: Ancient abandoned holy halls. Said to be ruins of an ancient civilization. The plural form “templ⁵”, and adjective form “templi, templorum” in single and plural form.

After crawling out of the blood cocoon, they greeted their new life as homines sanguinei.

These people—these beings—were no longer human. But they remembered everything: their names, their family’s faces, the sights of their homeland, the way to speak. Only, their hearts no longer beat.

This is the origin hominum sanguineorum. They are beings created jointly by ancient civilisation and modern suffering, a hope born from the crevice between despair and death. If the *Bicentennial Pandemic* was the deepest wound of all people in the region Romo, then the homines sanguinei are the scar that wound left behind.

But secular eyes cannot see this. They know only that homines sanguinei drink blood, that homines sanguinei fear light, that the hearts hominum sanguineorum do not beat. They forget that homines sanguinei were once human, were once people living on this land, some of them their own neighbours, even kin. They call the homines sanguinei “monsters.”

So the homines sanguinei were driven from villages, expelled from civils, stripped of their former identities. The Papacy declared that the very existence hominum sanguineorum was a sin. Many people, seeing a person on the street—a pale-faced, hooded homo sanguinis—would turn away, leaving behind a curse.

The homines sanguinei merely fled, fled their former dwellings, fled everything in their memories.

Later, much later—at the end of the *Bicentennial Pandemic*, the Duchess Lucia Tenebrosus, who had been transformed into a homo sanguinis, found a way to create a “vault” using the giant dragon trees, so that homines sanguinei could have a place to live a wholly normal life. These people, who had snatched their lives back from the plague, developed animal husbandry in the Duchy Hacorui established by Duchess Tenebrosus. After solving their food source, they at last set their own society in motion. Homines sanguinei reproduce through a special absorption of paternal blood, with the mother completing gestation. Thus the lineage hominum sanguineorum is almost entirely carried by mothers, and the society hominum sanguineorum became a matrilineal society dominated by female.

This is the origin of the Duchy Hacorui.

In the northwest of the Duchy Hacorui, against a backdrop of towering beeches, a great river winds. Most of its course runs flat, but at one bend it scours out a cliff. Should one look from the opposite bank, one may descry a pointed castle atop that lonely, sheer precipice; separated by the harsh lighting beneath the ochre vault, only a bleak outline is visible. Though the river’s current is not swift, on windy days one can always hear rustling upon rustling, as the trees of the Schwarzwald entangle one another, whispering to exchange the few pieces of fresh news in this land.

Looking up, the castle seems very large. In truth, by size, Mangusacia Manor is not particularly outstanding within the Duchy Hacorui. This is the edge of the Schwarzwald in the duchy’s northwest, beside the River Quies at the foot of the highland mountains. Further east, the River Quies is called the Quiei Venatus. This river is also called the Styx; homines sanguinei believe that when a homo sanguinis dies, its soul must follow the River Quies back to the region Romo.

The Mangusacia domain, unlike the nobles *hominum sanguineorum* of the south, does not possess vast pastures and scattered settlements. The roots of the Schwarzwald's trees seem quite stubborn, affecting the livelihood of the Mangusacia domain. They live scattered around the castle, raising a modest number of livestock, occasionally hunting beasts and monsters in the forest, gathering fruit from the beeches, or dealing with merchant ships passing on the River Quies.

The surname Mangusacia is not among the “since ancient times” surnames of the duchy. Six hundred years ago, Duchess Tenebrosus formed the Sisterhood Hacorui; thereafter the great families of the duchy gradually took shape, among them the renown of the Carnstaen family. A hundred years later, when the Taitch armies pressed upon the eastern border to “suppress heresy,” the Carnstaen family of the duchy's northeast, to preserve themselves, split off a portion of their people who came to the far side of the Schwarzwald, upstream on the River Quies, and established the branch family Mangusacia, gazing at the Carnstaen main family from afar. For five hundred years, Mangusacia has ever maintained its status as a branch of Carnstaen, and when the Carnstaen main family holds its annual evening banquet, they still send people to attend, fulfilling their duty as a branch family.

The duty of the Mangusacia branch requires a bit more explanation.

The pioneer of the Mangusacia family, Chrona Mangusacia (still called Chrona Carnstaen then), received orders from the family head Carmilla Carnstaen to travel north, to the edge of the Schwarzwald on the border Hacorui, and found an abandoned castle. It is said this was once the domain of a certain family; on a full moon, after this family set out east on an expedition, no one ever returned. The few *homines sanguinei* left behind—the aged family head and a few loyal servants—turned to dust in loneliness.

Chrona came to this place with the mission given by Carmilla, renovated the castle, and fenced off a garden in the open space near the castle—though it was not truly a garden, only a specific area where flowers and plants were artificially planted. It was this area that was filled with pure white snowdrops⁶. A plant originally born in high mountains thus bloomed across the dark red plain. On thick stems, every flower drooped, opening toward the ground. The petals, three layers inside and out, looked somewhat sparse from afar, both beautiful and regrettable on the land covered by the ochre vault. It is said this flower was Carmilla's favourite; now that she is gone, there is naturally no way to verify it.

The relationship between the Mangusacia family and Carnstaen is somewhat subtle compared to other direct or branch families. Even when people of Mangusacia go out, they rarely mention the later part of their surname, “Carnstaen”—not out of estrangement from the main family, but maintaining a kind of “silence” in some way. Although family strife within Carnstaen is not particularly rare, the Mangusacia never participate. Nor is anyone in Mangusacia keen to scheme for balance and status on the duchy's political chessboard. For generations they are born in Mangusacia Manor, yet not always confined there; generation after generation, they pass down the duty given by the former family head Carmilla—“to record.”

Rather than saying such a duty flows in the blood of the Mangusacia family, it is more accurate to say they are born as Charons who bring ill tidings, lantern keepers on the

⁶Snowdrop: *Galanthus nivalis*. Note that *Nivalia*'s name later comes from the snowdrop.

Quies. They can sense the boundary between life and death, and discern the moment when soul and body separate. What family head Carmilla gave them was the ability to perceive “dissolution,” and the mission to record “dissolution.”

Compared with other domains, life here can be called somewhat in poverty. Yet the domain’s residents usually do not leave. Because the head of the Mangusacia family, in every generation, will use their eyes to remember every resident’s name, and when they turn to ash, sing them a final elegy.

Every generation of the Mangusacia branch head has a mysterious notebook, recording the deaths they have witnessed in their quincennial life. With elegiac strokes they record scattered romance, wilted purity. These notebooks are kept in a special library beside the underground cellar of Mangusacia Manor, from the first generation to the present. No one except the Mangusacia family has ever seen these notebooks.

Not long after the Mangusacia family settled in, Carmilla disappeared along with Duchess Tenebrosus. Apart from the Mangusacia family, even the Carnstaen main family did not clearly know the details; they only knew that Carmilla, one night, vanished from her separate bedchamber without a trace, without even the furnishings being disturbed, leaving only a letter for Chrona.

Every generation of the Mangusacia family has one female who gains a certain ability—to behold at the boundary of life and death, to feel at the moment of about to set out on the River Quies journey, when the most beautiful moment of memory in that life’s entire existence recalls itself, and what that life’s final desire reveals itself to be. What exactly is the result of this ability? It controls the Mangusacia family; though it does no harm, it is rather a curse—the result of this ability is the Mangusacia family’s inherited ambivalent feeling toward loss. They fear loss, fear that what is familiar will become an elegy under their pen; yet at the same time they are captivated by loss, seeking in mourning a moment of warmth.

In this generation, the Lunid-white Lily⁷ who listens to falling flowers in recollection, was born on a dark night shrouded by the ochre vault’s shadow. She was the child of the fourth-generation head of the Mangusacia family, born as the snowdrops quietly bloomed toward the earth beneath the dim clouds. So the family head Noctis named her Nivalia⁸. “Let us call her Nivalia,” Noctis said.

For some unknown reason, the Mangusacia family never had many children. Perhaps it was their ability to relive the dead’s lives, or perhaps it came from the mission Carmilla set for them; the bodies of “lantern keepers” likely did have such defects. Thus Nivalia’s birth was, as usual, regarded as a good omen.

In the year Nivalia turned twenty, the “lantern keeper” ability awakened during an asceticism.

Adapting to local conditions, the children of the Mangusacia family all had to undergo cultivation in the Schwarzwald at this age. Today was the last day of this cultivation; Nivalia was about to be permitted to return to Mangusacia Manor and end this asceticism. She was

⁷Lunid-white Lily: *Lilium Lunicandidum*. This flower also exists on Earth, where it is called the “Casa Blanca lily,” also known as the Perfume Lily or the Oriental Lily; legend says it grows by the Styx. Its flower language changes with the number of plants.

⁸Nivalia: As mentioned earlier, Nivalia’s name comes from the snowdrop.

staring absently at a woodland anemone about to wither, watching it quietly fade after its flowering period ended. The white petals tinged with red were still curled; this flower would likely soon leave the world.

So Nivalia reached out and touched it.

She saw the flower's memory. It was a moment in its brief life, the instant when it had first broken through the soil in winter, preparing to grow stems and leaves on the borderland covered by the ochre vault, and then smile toward the earth. This experience suffocated Nivalia; she cried out and sat down on the ground. She almost thought she was that flower, experiencing a once-in-a-lifetime, flower-only near-death, her pupils bright red.

By the time the servants led Noctis there, she simply gently took her daughter in her arms.

"This is Mangusacia's inheritance, mission, and at the same time... perhaps also a curse. You must watch every life about to dissolve, and with your own eyes witness their most cherished moment. After this asceticism ends, you must learn to bear such experiences. Because from today on, you too are a lantern keeper of the Mangusacia family."

It was also in this year that Noctis began personally teaching Nivalia how to control this "lantern keeper" ability. If this ability were not controlled, one would likely easily be drowned by the tide of desire and memory from the dying. Thus Nivalia could choose when to immerse herself in feeling, rather than standing at the tide's crest and letting it devour her.

At thirty, a follower who accompanied Nivalia lay on a sickbed—she had served the Mangusacia family for several hundred years, and now had finally reached the end of her life. The departure *hominum sanguineorum* differs from that of humans: they simply turn to dust, carried away by the wind, like fallen leaves finally swept away when the time comes.

This follower lay in bed, her fingers already beginning to peel off, turning into dust whose shape could no longer be discerned.

Noctis signalled Nivalia to come forward. "Go face it. This too should be part of your lifelong asceticism."

Nivalia sat by the bed and grasped the follower's already withering hand.

Unlike what she had expected, she felt warmth beneath the ochre vault. In this land like the world beyond in folktales, there was the satisfaction of belonging. In memory, the follower, at some unknown moment, was carrying the lord's young daughter on her back, strolling among the flowers near Mangusacia Manor. She felt a desire, that her name wanted to be remembered, not carved in stone, not written on paper with ink, but by a person who, long afterward, could still call out her name.

Nivalia simply called "Vilia" over and over, until Vilia completely turned to ash.

"Vilia" was the first word in Nivalia's new notebook.

Over the next fifteen years, Nivalia followed Noctis and became familiar with the affairs of the domain.

In the year Nivalia turned forty-five, Noctis's long black hair turned grey. She had already drawn her breath over two hundred and fifty years; among *homines sanguinei* this was nothing remarkable, but the Mangusacia family's lifespan always seemed shorter than other *homines sanguinei*. Noctis was somewhat old.

Yet the Carnstaen main family's evening banquet was naturally held as scheduled. This should be the most important annual social event for the Carnstaen main family and all branch families. If a branch family did not attend, it would probably count as an "abnormality."

Noctis had attended the evening banquet for nearly two hundred years; this year Nivalia would attend.

"Me?" Nivalia was startled. "I have never—"

"You are Mangusacia's heir; one day this will be your charge. What wrong is there in its being today?"

So Nivalia alone crossed the Schwarzwald and came unto the Carnstaen domain in the duchy's northeast. She sat in that castle, far larger than Mangusacia Manor, a whole evening through without uttering a word. The then-head of Carnstaen glanced at her and asked, "Where is Noctis?"

"My mother is unwell and is tended by my father; she could not come."

"Oh." The Carnstaen head nodded, and spoke to her no more.

In the year Nivalia turned seven and forty, Noctis's life likewise drew to its close.

When Nivalia came, she found Noctis yet in the library, her fingers already beginning to wither.

"Niv⁹," Noctis reached out unto Nivalia.

Nivalia clutched her hand and felt a burning emotion, one that well-nigh consumed her. It was what had been handed down from Chrona Mangusacia, what Carmilla Carnstaen had left them, the content of the letter.

The follower who had gone with Duchess Tenebrosus was but a departing silhouette. She told Chrona of her going.

"Thou askest wherefore I must go. Thou art the kind of child who wilt question to the last. I let thee see the desire of every dying soul, I let thee see the fairest memories of every thing about to dissolve. We have watched too long, upon this land. How much longer must we watch? Whilst the armies of the eastern border trample.

"Such fair memories make thee and me envious in the present. They welcome their final beauty in death, depart, and leave behind such reality.

"But I am truly afraid. I am afraid that when I dissolve, all who remember me shall have already bid farewell. None shall remember me, like a lone snowdrop withering in the dark.

"So, this stubborn one will leave, following that lady as perhaps the best occasion. I shall leave my last glance back upon the bank of the River Quies.

"The mission I give thee, and thy descendants, is not to make thee suffer endless torment, but to make thee remember the weight of the world. Thou shalt remember the dissolved in my stead, remember the proof that they lived.

⁹Niv: An affectionate name for Nivalia.

“If thy descendants ask of this past, if thy descendants would seek these meanings, tell them: seeking is itself the meaning.”

Noctis had already dissolved. Only a floor of ash remained, and upon the desk beside it, a pendant.

The shape of a snowdrop, passed down through generations among the heads of the Mangusacia line.

Nivalia read through the library all night, amid the clamour of other servants running to and fro, from the first-generation head Chrona’s notebook all the way unto the fourth-generation Noctis’.

That year, Nivalia, Nivalia Mangusacia Carnstaen¹⁰, became the fifth-generation viscount.

The head of the Mangusacia family must, from time to time, walk alone through every corner of the domain. Setting out from the castle, following the River Quies north a short way, unto the tree at the edge of the Schwarzwald, then east along the Schwarzwald’s boundary, gazing at the foothills of the Joland Highlands, all the way unto that boundary stone, then south along the domain’s border back unto the castle. There is no main road; walking upon the soft soil of the forest, walking beside the scattered gravel of the riverbank—this is called the “circuit of the domain.”

Nivalia’s first circuit was in her fiftieth year; she wrote a dozen lines in her notebook. Not only the names of the domain’s people, but also footnotes for the many lives she beheld along the way.

In later years, Nivalia made a circuit annually, and while on circuit she did some asceticism. Sometimes upon a fixed day, sometimes just on a whim, and she would walk out of the castle under the moonlight.

Where the River Quiei Venatus reaches the southeasternmost end of the Mangusacia domain, many stones are piled. The characters carved upon them—some still sharp-edged, some worn indistinct by the years. Some stones can no longer be clearly told as placed by human hands or there from the first. Nivalia also placed some stones there. In her three and seventieth year, Nivalia met a dying human at the stone circle. It was a young woman, collapsed beneath a beech, covered in wounds. She must have been illegally used as an experiment by a rogue magician lurking in the western nan-homo land; Nivalia saw it at a glance. This human, her mind clouded by the karmic fire the rogue magician had planted within her body, had fled from somewhere and at last waited here to die.

Nivalia crouched down, wishing to stroke her face. The human suddenly opened her eyes and gathered fire in her hand to throw—just then she saw Nivalia’s face.

“You are... a sanguinis?”

Nivalia replied, “I am Viscountess Mangusacia, lord of this place.”

To try to save her, or whether to report it instead, was already too late. Nivalia simply sat beside her, keeping her company until nightfall. Her desires and memories poured into Nivalia’s consciousness and were recorded in Nivalia’s notebook.

¹⁰Nivalia Mangusacia Carnstaen: Pronounced /niva:lia.mãŷusa:kʲia.ka:ʃstãĩ/.

In Nivalia's eight and ninetieth year, also on the circuit, Nivalia sat by the River Quiei Venatus and thought long.

Carmilla departed—had she found her own end?

In her one hundred and tenth year, on the circuit, Nivalia gazed at the towering Joland Highlands.

Since seeking is itself the meaning.

She wished to leave—not to flee, nor to give up, neither to depart. She simply wished to go out, to look about the duchy's border. To see things not yet recorded in her notebook, to see the “seeking” Carmilla spoke of, to see what it was like before the ancestor Tenebrosus set down the ochre vault. She placed a stone at the stone circle where the River Quiei Venatus reached the southeastern boundary of the domain, without carving a single letter.

So, just as every head of the family suddenly attains insight, she applied to the Sisterhood Hacorui for periodic leave. The Carnstaen main family stood as guarantor. The family head said, let her go; their branch has ever been thus.

From then on, every year there was a season when the head of Mangusacia went out again. She stood at the gate of Mangusacia with a lantern, gave final instructions for the year's remaining affairs, turned, and walked into the ochre vault.

Nivalia's hair was chestnut-black, tied back with a blue ribbon into a bun, then falling from behind down to her waist. The hair at her temples was braided into pigtails, adorning an otherwise somewhat monotonous back of the head. Her grey-blue eyes were somewhat melancholy, and would redden when her emotions fluctuated. Her pale, almost transparent skin had long become an outside stereotype *hominum sanguineorum*. In the Mangusacia domain, she always wore a court-style long dress with a black base and red ornaments, with several white cords hanging at the side as decoration, the length just at the middle of her calves. Such a dress looked good without hindering movement, while the boots on her feet were probably chosen for the same reason.

When going out, Nivalia would put on a somewhat loose beige trench coat. The coat's collar was rather high; when properly worn it just covered her chin and mouth, and the red snowdrop-shaped pendant hanging at her neck. Along with the coat she wore a hood, covering as much as possible her most obvious features *hominis sanguinei*.

Nivalia had a Mangusacia short sword, originally given by Carmilla to Chrona. The blade was serrated, the body silver-plated; Nivalia used it for self-defence. Nivalia also had a one-step¹¹ long, broad-bladed *Zweihänder* Quies, usually hidden under her trench coat. Since she began training in swordsmanship at twenty, this *Zweihänder* had often accompanied her on distant journeys.

Nivalia left Hacorum for the third time, following the River Quies through the duchy's interior, heading southeast.

She wanted to see what the place the River Quies flowed back to was really like.

¹¹One step: 1.52 metres.

At the border of the Ellin-Badan province Romo, the moon was then hidden by clouds, and all around was pitch black.

Nivalia saw a campfire in the distance. Just as she was about to approach, a short sword pressed against her back. The lantern fell to the ground, and a woman's voice stopped her: "You a sanguinis?"

Nivalia raised her hands: "I do not feed upon human beings."

"Heard that before. Too many times."

Nivalia was silent for a moment. The person behind her said again: "I saw you approaching those dying people."

"The matter is difficult to explain. Might I trouble you to examine the notebook at my waist?"

"Why should I believe a word you say?"

"I leave the decision to your discretion."

The person behind hesitated for a while, but in the end did not kill. She put her arm around Nivalia's waist and took the notebook. Nivalia felt a shudder—not from fear.

"Walk to the fire. Now." The hand did not leave Nivalia's waist. "Need light to read it."

Nivalia obediently approached the campfire under the threat of the blade. The person behind withdrew her hand and clumsily turned the pages with one hand. "I would ask that you take care as well as not to damage it."

"What's this?"

"My family possesses a peculiar gift... in brief, I gather the happiest moments from the lives of the dying. I wish to remember them."

The person tied Nivalia to a tree, roughly pulled off her hood, and sat across the campfire watching her all night, her hand repeatedly touching the short sword she had put back at her waist, then lowering it.

At dawn, she picked up the short sword and walked toward Nivalia. Just as Nivalia was recalling her life—or rather, her **vita hominis sanguinei*—the ropes binding her were cut by the short sword.

"What's your name?"

"You may call me Nivalia."

"Go."

Nivalia turned her head, slightly surprised: "You no longer intend to kill me?"

"Before I change my mind."

Nivalia smiled slightly. "Might I ask your name?"

"Get lost."

Even after the war between Taitchland and Hacorum receded into the long river of history, direct conflict on the border gradually decreased. Even the long-lived *homines sanguinei*, through inheritance, forgot many grudges along with humans. Gradually, *homines sanguinei* dissatisfied with the duchy's system wandered into human territory occasionally, and some of those unable to make a living secretly killed people and drank blood to survive. To hunt

such homines sanguinei, hunters hominum sanguineorum were born. What Nivalia met that night was probably one such hunter hominum sanguineorum.

This hunter hominum sanguineorum seemed to have followed Nivalia to Othens. Nivalia did not mind; she was only searching Othens for traces related to Carmilla. Fortunately, Carmilla's whereabouts back then were not entirely without trace. There were actually legends hominum sanguineorum in various places, legends that during the war between Taitchland and Hacorum, a magician hominis sanguinei had dealings with a noblewoman, met her in secret at night, drained the noblewoman's blood, and left the city. After half a month investigating legends hominum sanguineorum in various places, Nivalia set out, preparing to go to the outskirts of Urbs Romo to search.

On the way she still encountered the hunter hominum sanguineorum from half a month before. Not travelling together, but Nivalia could feel someone following far behind.

In the blood of the Mangusacia family, a lantern bearer can also actively perceive nearby life fluctuations; this is the "lantern keeper's lantern." Nivalia extended her perception outward; within such a range, she could sense the state of all living things. Who was dying, whose sihrut was changing, or the very existence state of life itself—all could be manifested in her senses. In battle, such magic also let her sense an opponent's attack intent. When the opponent was about to attack, when they held killing intent toward her...

At first, it was one person following. Probably that hunter hominum sanguineorum. Over the past half month, Nivalia had several times run into the hunter hominum sanguineorum active near her. Each time she said she was supervising whether Nivalia was behaving honestly, and Nivalia let her be.

But this time, from some unknown moment, Nivalia felt there might be others following as well. And unlike that hunter, she could sense killing intent from these people.

Hunters hominum sanguineorum are all hunters specializing in exterminating homines sanguinei; their weapons and combat skills are specialized against homines sanguinei, and because they are not allowed to harm humans nor to train to do so, when fighting humans they usually only have a slight advantage over ordinary people. Nivalia could not help but worry a little.

The hunter lit a campfire and began to dine. She could sense Nivalia sitting on a branch above her.

Then three people appeared. The hunter rasped and asked what they wanted; they gave no answer and rushed forward. The hunter kicked one down; another grabbed her hand from behind and used magic to bind it.

Nivalia jumped down from the tree, kicked away the magician, and swung her Zweihänder to drive off the third. The one who had been kicked down got up again, wanting to stab Nivalia with a dagger. Nivalia dodged, traced a beautiful arc in the air, her lantern struck her belt with a clear sound. Nivalia landed, pushed off with her foot, swung the Zweihänder back in a sweep, opening a wound on that person. After putting distance between them, Nivalia stood before the three, back to the hunter, in a stance, her hood slipping off, revealing her blood-red pupils and fangs.

“It is quite troubling not to have dined for too long.” Nivalia turned her face slightly, baring her fangs at the three attackers. “Maybe you are willing to be drained dry by me along with her?”

After the attackers fled in panic, Nivalia put her hood back on, tightened her coat collar, and looked elsewhere. “I noticed early on that they were following you.”

The hunter took a deep breath, as if she had made some resolution, and almost shouted at Nivalia: “If you want to drink my blood, then drink!”

Nivalia was stunned for a moment, then heard her add quietly, somewhat shyly: “After all, it was you that saved my life.”

Then the hunter saw Nivalia grin, a very soft laugh coming through the collar. “May I have your name?”

“Lin... Linselotte Guenther.”

Nivalia took out several pieces of black food, probably rations hominum sanguineorum. She sat down and ate in small bites.

That night Linselotte slept a peaceful sleep.

“You are... of the Carnstaen family.”

“How did you come to know?”

“Your Zweihänder technique. Very skilled.”

Nivalia gave her a curtsy. “Pray allow me to reintroduce myself. Nivalia Mangusacia Carnstaen, fifth-generation head of the Mangusacia branch.”

“To be honest, I only heard the old folks talk about these things.”

“Then now you have seen it. This can also be my honour. You actually did not want to continue killing me or such.”

Linselotte uncomfortably put her hand on her short sword, then felt the gesture might be offensive, so she put her hand behind her back, turned her face away from Nivalia, and muttered: “Nobles are such a pain, wherever they are.”

Then she asked: “You are going to Urbs Romo?”

“As you say.”

“To do what?”

“I want to seek some things left by my ancestor.”

“Then what, use these things to rule Baiarn¹²?”

“You really jest. I already have enough trouble managing my own domain residents. Honestly, should I had to make a circuit that far, I could not bear it.”

“Circuit?”

“It means walking around the domain. Approximately it will take me three days to complete that.”

¹²Baiarn: A geographical region in southern Taitchland, mainly hills when it comes to its terrain.

“Oh right, I... I also happen to be going to Urbs Romo, so let me continue... supervising you!”

“Do as you please.”

Linselotte was somewhat dissatisfied; she felt she was being coaxed like a child. In fact, that was indeed the case: by age alone, Nivalia was nearly a hundred years elder than her.

After reaching Istras, Linselotte rented a carriage, and the two rode to Urbs Romo.

At dusk one day, Nivalia, and Linselotte following her, finally arrived before the ruined templum Animae on the outskirts of Urbs Romo.

“Is this the place?”

“Indeed it is.”

“The thing you are looking for is in here?”

“Not necessarily; perhaps I will find nothing at all.”

The main gate was long gone; the two entered the templum through the arch where the gate had once been. Nivalia’s boots made crunching sounds on the crushed stone.

It should be a classical Taich feature, or perhaps classical Taich architecture was modelled after these ruined templa. Outside, the towering spire became a high dome inside, so high that light could not reach the top. Where windows seemed to be, the glass was not very transparent, carved with ancient script, giving off a faint blue glow in the darkness. On the ground were various crawling traces, looking quite retro, and all kinds of debris that could not be identified.

Nivalia carefully searched the ruined traces within the hall, listening to the echoes of her and Linselotte’s footsteps in the circular hall, stepping on the traces her ancestor had walked in the corridor, touching the writing on the walls with her fingertips, coming to the underground where blood cocoon lied and staring blankly at the empty blood cocoon.

She found none, whether it was Carmilla’s letter or relics.

Only the silence left in the world by the dissolved, sleeping for hundreds of years.

Nivalia returned to the circular hall, sat down on something like a central podium, leaned back, untied the notebook from her waist, and began to leaf through it.

She scanned the names she had recorded one by one, then on the newest page wrote Carmilla’s and Linselotte’s names.

Linselotte Guenther, a good friend met on this departure, is a hunter hominum sanguineorum.

Carmilla Carnstaen, what should I write for her?

Nivalia smiled, her gaze sweeping over a doodle among some ancient script. “Right here.”

She called Linselotte over to look closely. On the wall, in handwriting square and neat, was written: “Carmilla Carnstaen.”

Linselotte was somewhat disappointed: “Only this?”

Nivalia respectfully gave the doodle a curtsy, then without turning her head, said: “Only this.”

“What a—” Linselotte raised her voice in protest.

“Shh—” Nivalia put her index finger to her lips. “I think I already understand.”

“Understand what?” Linselotte was already beginning to feel they had made the trip in vain.

“I recognise this as the answer. The family head... never intended to leave anything behind.”

“What on earth...”

“That is right. She was afraid the homines sanguinei would stay under the vault forever and never come out. Someone needed to carry a lantern and walk out, just to come out and look. To see the places where humans are. She wanted us not to forget what we are.”

Linselotte also fell silent.

“Where are you going next?”

“It is like this.” Nivalia smiled, folding her hands at her side. “I am going back to the Duchy Hacorui.”

“You... not going to look anymore?” Linselotte’s voice even sounded a little lost.

“I am preparing to return now. Thank you very much for your efforts along the way.”

Linselotte pouted.

“Ah, next time I see you, may I call you ‘Lotte’? In my opinion, that may sounds more intimate.”

Linselotte’s expression relaxed a little: “Next time?”

“Ah, every year I may have to come out and visit around like this.” Nivalia’s lips curved up, her eyes narrowing, a flash of red passing through her grey-blue pupils.

“Then, I am usually in Muenichenn¹³ ... but not wait for you specially!”

“All right, I understand.”

The two parted outside the city gate of Othens.

The walls of Othens waxed dim in the gloaming, so that none might tell whether they were of old blue-grey or yellow-brown. In the crenellations the westward sun yet strove to linger. Already one might feel the wind blowing from the northwest, bearing the breath of autumn from Ellin-Badan. The Danop River flowed down, bearing the fragrant soil of the upper reaches. Nivalia felt upon the wind a burning smell, haply from distant wheat-fields burning stubble; no such smell had the Duchy Hacorui. She reached out her hand, letting the wind pass through her fingers, thinking that haply it was this wind that pushed the great blood-red clouds high in the sky, rolling toward Othens.

The two walked upon the cart tracks without the city gate. Given that Linselotte was not for the same road, yet she would still insist on seeing Nivalia off a stretch. Nivalia’s hood was blown off by the wind; she straightway put it back on with her hand, covering her chestnut-black long hair. Then the silent Linselotte spoke:

“Will you... really come back next year?”

“Next year I will presumably pass through here first, then go north.”

Linselotte looked up at the blood-red boundary in the sky dissipating.

¹³Muenichenn: The capital of Baiarn province.

“You...”

“What is it?”

“Wear more on the road; should get colder these next few days.”

“Thank you for your concern. Besides, it is getting late; it may be unnecessary seeing me off any further. Going out at night makes one liable to catch cold.” Nivalia turned back and said to her with a smile.

“Then only this far.”

“Yes, looking forward to the reencounter.”

Nivalia curtsied, raised her head, and gazed at the blood-red boundary. Then, from a stroll she shifted to long strides, gradually widening the distance between her and Linselotte.

Linselotte stopped, her right hand habitually on her hip on her short sword, her weight leaning to one side, watching Nivalia’s back.

Nivalia’s trench coat, and Linselotte’s cloak, fluttered in the wind.

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