
Only the Villainous Lord
Wields the Power to Level UP
II
Waruiotoko
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Only the Villainous Lord Wields the Power to Level Up: Volume 2 [Complete]

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Chapter 1: A Promise to Keep

Some days after leaving the capital, the castle towers of Eintorian finally came into view.

It's a powerful emotional moment, coming home from the battlefield.

It hadn't been long since Eintorian became mine, but it was still my home now.

"That's Eintorian Castle," I said, pointing to the castle towers. Jint stared at them before giving a silent nod in response. Perhaps it was to be expected given his taciturn nature, but the journey had been a quiet one. Yusen and Gibun were making the trip separately because I'd ordered them to come with their families. When we reached the gates of Eintorian, my boring trip with no one but Jint for company was finally over.

"Your Excellency!"

"Master!"

Commander in Chief Hadin of the Eintorian Domain Army and the head chamberlain called out as they came to meet us with soldiers following them.

"Your Lordship!" the soldiers all shouted before kneeling down before me.

The difference in discipline between when I first came to this world and now is like night and day. I see Hadin's training is proceeding apace.

"The domain is already abuzz with tales of your heroism. I couldn't be prouder of you, sir!" Hadin said as he knelt before me, looking every bit as pleased with my accomplishments as he said he was.

"Tales of my heroism? All I remember telling you is that I would be coming back home, though?"

"Oh, what are you saying? Word of how you drove off the Naruyans has already spread all across the country. How could we in Eintorian *not* have heard of it?"

Did the story spread all this way while I was spending time in the capital?

Eintorian Domain

Opinion: 85

Taking a look, Opinion had risen from 70 to 85, even though exempting them from taxes had only brought it up as far as 70.

I guess defending the nation had a major effect on it.

“Oh...” I scratched my cheek.

It’s not a bad thing. If anything, I wanted this kind of acclaim. I’m sure it will help us a lot when Eintorian goes independent after the destruction of the Runan Kingdom.

“Well, whatever. I’m heading back to the castle for now.”

“Yes, sir!”

The town was abuzz, just like Hadin said. All the people of my domain came out to cheer for my arrival. Their opinions of Erhin Eintorian had completely changed now, as if he’d never been a villainous lord to begin with.

That Opinion of 85 is really starting to sink in.

The people’s passion was palpable as I arrived at the castle. I didn’t plan to just relax there, of course. Exhausted or not, I had things I needed to do. The experiences I’d been through since becoming a lord had given me a lot more stamina than I’d started out with.

Resting and surveying the domain can wait.

“Both of you, follow me to my office. You too, Jint.”

I planned to introduce Jint to the head chamberlain and Hadin and then head across the border to retrieve Mirinae immediately. I’d given some thought to dropping by there on the way back from the Runanese capital, but in the end, I decided it was best to at least prepare ourselves somewhat first.

I swear I’m going to keep my word. That’s my policy.

It’s why this had to be the first order of business now that we were back.

“Don’t worry, Jint. As soon as I’ve given my orders, we’ll be heading right back out.”

Our destination was the Naruya Kingdom, specifically a town along the border of the Sentreet Domain. Honestly, it was pretty close to the Eintorian Domain, seeing as it was a border town and all.

“Really?” Jint asked.

I had finally gotten a smile out of him. He’d been tense this entire time, and this was the first time his expression softened.

“What would I gain by lying?”

I could see why Jint would want to rush there immediately, but I was uneasy about letting him go alone, so I had persuaded him not to.

I promised him that we’d go together. That’s why Jint’s waiting.

If he didn’t do as I said, he’d lose the guarantee that Eintorian would give the two of them shelter. Without our backing, he was nothing but an enemy soldier who had deserted his own side. Of course, he was also holding back because he believed in my promise to make the two of them happy.

“You two must be curious about this man,” I said, glancing at Hadin and the head chamberlain in the office.

Hadin was quick to nod. “Yes, sir! Who the devil is he?” he asked, the look on his face telling me I’d guessed correctly.

“A new Eintorian retainer. He’s even stronger than Randall of the Ten Commanders, the one who invaded us before.”

“Stronger than Randall, you say?” Hadin looked at Jint, surprised.

“It’s more than just that. He’s so strong he even gives the famous Lord Erheet a run for his money.”

“My word...! Even Lord Erheet?”

When I name dropped the most famous commander in all of Runan, Hadin’s jaw dropped so hard he forgot to close his mouth. That was apparently a bigger surprise than Randall.

“Say hello, Jint. This is Baron Hadin, the commander in chief of the Eintorian Domain Army.”

At my instruction, Jint bowed his head to Hadin.

“I should also mention, I’m going to be heading to a Naruyan border town to bring this guy’s woman back for him.”

“So suddenly?!”

“I promised on the battlefield that I would, and my word is my bond.”

I should let Hadin and the head chamberlain know about his situation, at least. Hadin’s the commander in chief of my forces, so obviously he needs to know about his subordinates. As for the head chamberlain, he’ll be looking after Jint and Mirinae from here on out. Mirinae has her own situation, so I intend to have her stay in the castle for a while after I bring her here.

After telling the story as succinctly as I could, Hadin patted Jint on the back, his face full of emotion.

“You went through all of that? What an incredible man you are!”

Well, that’s just how Hadin was. The man’s loyalty didn’t waver one bit, even after being locked up in the dungeon by his villainous lord for a whole year.

“Then I will go with him. Clearly, I can’t let you go with him yourself, sir...”

Although, he did have an issue with getting ahead of himself.

“It wouldn’t sit right with me not to go myself. You don’t need to worry about what might happen to me. Or do you not have faith in my strength?”

“Perish the thought!”

“There you have it, then. Head Chamberlain, prepare two sets of peasant garb for us. We’ll need simple clothes that won’t stand out.”

“Yes, of course, Master!”

We’re traveling across the border to snatch someone, so we can’t afford to draw attention. Dressing ourselves as soldiers isn’t an option, and dressing as nobles is completely out of the question. Ideally, we want to bring her back quietly.

I mean, it's not like we can just go in there with the army, right?

It wouldn't be that tough to occupy the Sentreet Domain, but there's no way that the King of Naruya would just shrug off losing the territory. He'd probably come after us for revenge, saying it was to prepare for the Grand Subjugation, or whatever.

That'd mean another war.

Now, that *would be a pain. Even if we managed to win in the short term, Eintorian wouldn't be able amass the power that we need to go independent. Right now, what I need to be focusing on is the preparations for that, not another war. I'd like to keep this as quiet as possible. Although, that said, I probably don't even need to bring a whole army just to bring back one person.*

"By the way, have we been making progress on construction work to repair the strategic pass?" I asked, suddenly remembering I had ordered them to do that.

When the the supreme commander of the Royal Naruyan Army, Valdesca Frann, sent a decoy unit to attack Eintorian, they hadn't even been able to use the pass because it had collapsed in an earthquake. It was going to be important for us to repair it properly in preparation for future developments. We had the money too, so I'd issued a repair order before leaving for the battlefield. I didn't expect them to already be done with a major construction project like that, though.

"Yes, sir. We are going as quickly as we can. I suspect it should be finished by winter."

"Oh, yeah? It's a big project, so make sure to give it sufficient funds."

"Of course, sir!"

Anyway, I can deal with all these administrative tasks once we get back from that border town.

*

It was still afternoon.

We took the road into the mountains after briefly surveying the construction

ongoing at the mountain pass. The road leveled out on the other side of it, and we continued along that route for some time until the checkpoint on the Naruyan side came into view.

Traveling merchants used to use this route before the war, but now it was shut up tight. If we wanted to go straight through the checkpoint, we were going to have to fight a war for it.

That being the case, Jint and I veered off the road midway and infiltrated the Naruya Kingdom by crossing the mountains.

With just the two of us—well, plus our horses—it wasn't all that difficult getting through the mountains. There were some Naruyan patrols, sure, but they couldn't watch the entirety of these precipitous peaks.

The problem's going to be when we get into the foothills.

There were watch posts all around the base of the mountains, and the scouts there worked together with the border patrol units.

I expected this, of course.

"Let's hurry to town!"

We spurred our horses as fast as they would go, and I had Jint lead the way. The mission was to extract a woman from a Naruyan border town as quickly as we could. While there was a need to be inconspicuous, abducting a person required an element of speed.

We're disguised, though, and they don't know we've crossed the border. We can afford to be a bit reckless, was my line of thinking, but...

"Tch!"

Because the country was at war, the border guards were especially high strung at the moment. A distant sentinel spotted us the moment we came out of the mountains and got on the road. Smoke rose from the watchtower before they even bothered identifying us.

We needed to move faster.

"They're onto us! Let's hurry!"

We managed to get out of sight of the sentinels somehow.

“Is it still a long way to town?”

“We should start seeing landmarks soon.”

After we’d rode some distance, Jint recognized some fields and hills that he pointed out to me. Though I called them fields, they were small and barren.

“I always used to rest on that hill with Mirinae when I finished working the fields.”

“Oh, yeah?”

One glance was all it took to see traces of all the hard work that had gone into developing this land.

“I used to eat the herb porridge that Mirinae made for me over there. It was really good.”

Jint gazed at the hill for a while, as if basking in fond memories. Then he pointed to a town in the distance.

“There, that’s the town!”

Once the little town became visible on the other side of the hill, Jint urged his horse to run faster. The place looked like the last refuge of those who’d lost everything.

Border towns were at high risk of being put to the torch when there was war with a neighboring country. That’s why the only people who’d live in them were those like Jint and Mirinae with no other place to go.

Once we were sure no one was chasing us, Jint stopped at a ramshackle hovel on the outskirts.

“Mirinae!”

It must have been their home once. Jint dismounted and ran inside.

“Mirinae!!!” he bellowed her name again.

I had a bad feeling. There was no joy in Jint’s voice, only a fearful haste. When he emerged from the house, his face was as pale as I’d worried it would be. He continued shouting her name, as if possessed by terror.

“Mirinae...! Mirinae!”

Come to think of it, the whole town was quiet. I hadn’t noticed before now because we were in such a hurry, but we hadn’t seen a soul since getting here.

Oh, no...

I began to imagine the worst.

“Mirinaeee!”

Jint started searching the other houses nearby for her too.

In response to his shouting...

“Who’s making all that racket?”

...an elderly man emerged from the neighboring house.

It was kind of a relief seeing someone. I left Jint, who was running around like a horse off its reins, to his own devices and approached the old man.

“Pardon me, but would you happen to know a woman who lives next door by the name of Mirinae?”

“Of course I do. I suppose that must be Jint, then?”

“Yeah.”

“I see. He made it back alive. Everyone gave him up for dead once he got conscripted,” the old man murmured, an intrigued look on his face.

“Well, anyways... Where is Mirinae? I don’t see the townsfolk either.”

“She’s out working. There’s nothing left in this town, after all... Mirinae said she was going to the next town over to help work the fields and do needlework.”

“Got it.”

Oh, thank goodness. My heart was pounding for a moment there. What a relief.

It seemed the town was so desolate because of the draft. If all they had left was old men and women, I suppose that made sense.

“Jint!” I shouted as I jumped on Jint, who was totally losing his head, and

punched him in the face.

Thump!

I wasn't using the bonus, so my Martial was way lower than his. Normally, Jint would dodge it easily, but he was too far gone now.

"Pull yourself together! Mirinae's off working in the next town over!"

Jint blinked at me.

"Really...?"

"Just calm down for now. Do you know where the neighboring town is?"

"Sure do."

"Then mount up already! There's no time to waste!"

*

"Are you okay, Mirinae?"

Mirinae's hands were covered in cuts and scrapes. Because of all the work she had been doing out in the fields, they never had a day to heal. But Mirinae prided herself on her sewing, and she kept her needle moving with a deft hand.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Can you really handle all this work? I got what you asked for, but..." Malfie, the middle-aged woman who had come to work with her, said in a concerned tone.

There was a large bundle of old cloth in her hands: all jobs that Mirinae had accepted.

"I need to make all the money I can. When Jint comes back from the war...I know he'll be exhausted, so I want to be able to let him eat his fill."

"Oh, you poor thing..." Malfie felt bad for Mirinae. She figured there was almost no chance of Jint ever coming home. When those without power were drafted, they were just expendable. Her own brother had been drafted at a young age and died like that too.

Because of that, Malfie felt sorry seeing the way Mirinae waited so bravely for

Jint to return and repeatedly told her that she should give him up for dead. But Mirinae, who lived only for Jint, stubbornly refused to accept it.

“Don’t devote your life to a man who might be gone for good...”

These words always met with the same response. Even when Mirinae was so exhausted she had bags under her eyes, there was a vital sparkle in them when she talked about Jint.

“Jint’s strong. He’ll definitely come back alive. Definitely.”

She repeated the word “definitely” like some sort of mantra. At that moment, they heard a voice coming from outside.

“Is Mirinae here?”

The unfamiliar male voice made Malfie and Mirinae look at one another. The other townsfolk looked suspicious.

“Who’s there?” Malfie asked, opening the door.

It was Erhin.

And beside him, looking restless, was the man they had just been talking about himself—Jint.

“Huh...?”

Jint and Mirinae’s eyes met. A moment later, each raced to the other so fast that you couldn’t tell which of them had moved first.

“Jint, you’re not hurt, are you?! No injuries?!” Mirinae asked as she felt his body all over, checking for herself.

“I’m fine,” he confirmed with a nod.

With that Mirinae was finally reassured, and she nuzzled up against Jint’s chest.

“I always believed you’d come back alive. But the women in town kept on telling me you might not, so...I’m just happy to see you’re back. So happy...”

Tears streamed from Mirinae’s eyes.



“If you died on me, I was planning to follow you,” she said, revealing her tragic resolve.

“It was the same for me,” Jint told her. “I’m just so glad you were still alive.”

Jint and Mirinae shared a passionate embrace.

I, however, was unfortunately going to have to be the insensitive clod who interfered with their touching reunion.

“Sorry to ruin the moment, but...we need to get going, Jint.”

They’d have plenty of time to bask in all these touching emotions *after* we were safely back in Eintorian. The smoke signal from the watchtower earlier meant there would likely be enemy soldiers searching the area, so we probably wouldn’t be getting out of here without a fight.

“Mirinae, there’s a lot going on. Let’s get out of here quickly,” Jint said, realizing what I was getting at, and scooped Mirinae up in his arms before putting her on a horse.

“Eek! Jint!”

Her eyebrows arched with surprise as she rode a horse for the first time in her life.

“We’re going on horseback? Hey, wait, this is...! Jint! You stole again!”

“Sorry...” Jint apologized reflexively. “Uh, wait, no. I didn’t steal it. This is his horse.” He pointed at me.

“Come to think of it, who is he?”

I looked at Jint and waited for him to answer. I was a little curious what he would say.

“My savior.”

“Your...savior?”

Jint surprised me a little, calling me that.

“I don’t know what happened, but I’m sorry,” Mirinae said to me. “Jint isn’t very talkative, and he’s terrible at explaining things...”

“I’m well aware of that. But it’s not important now. We’ll talk about the rest later.”

I set my horse galloping, and Jint followed behind me.

“Wait, Jint!”

“Sorry. I’ll explain everything later!”

“This is the wrong way! Aren’t we going home?”

Her confusion was understandable. We ignored her shouting as we raced back down the road we’d come.

Along the way, we ran into the border patrol unit, just as I’d anticipated. They’d been searching for us a while now, and were understandably pissed off as a result.

“Think you can cross the border when it’s closed, do you? Are you Runanese scouts?!”

Sentreet Border Patrol

100 men

Morale: 76

Training: 85

The border patrol was made up of rather capable soldiers, as befit a nation like Naruya. There were units like this scattered across the border too. The system used for border defense was just about the same whether you were in Runan or Naruya. The main difference was in unit size and their degree of training.

Based on information I’d received before, there were more than ten units of one hundred men on the Eintorian-Naruya border. They worked with the sentinels in the watchtowers, who gave them orders in real time.

Which means troops will keep rushing to our location. There’s only a hundred of them now, but that could grow to a thousand if we dawdle.

I triggered a skill to get away from the patrol unit. During the recent war, Jint and I had used guerrilla tactics to wipe out the enemy’s remaining manpower once Erheet Demacine drove them out of Ruon Castle. That had earned me

some points when I leveled up, so my Martial score was now 64.

I'd even learned a new skill.

"Jint, I've got this! You pull back!"

"As if I could do that! I'll help too."

"Just protect Mirinae, okay? I can handle a group like this just fine by myself, but if anything were to happen to her, it would defeat the entire purpose of coming here!"

"Urgh... Fine."

Jint must have had no counterargument, because he scooped Mirinae up in his arms and helped her down from the horse.

Ideally, I had wanted to break past the guards on horseback, but being on a horse made you an easy target for skills. With a Martial score like Jint's, he could deflect ranged attacks from archers and the like with his sword, so he must have figured he was safer on foot.

"Jint? H-Hey, wait!"

Once I was able to see that Jint had taken the confused Mirinae a safe distance away, I turned to face the hundred soldiers.

Will you use Tremor?

I triggered my new skill.

When facing large numbers of enemies, what I needed was a skill with a large area of effect. The skills I'd already had were powerful in a one-on-one match-up, so this time I'd gone for an AoE attack skill. When I triggered Tremor, my body began moving automatically and thrust my sword into the ground.

Rifts formed in the ground, starting from my blade and stretching out towards the soldiers' feet!

Red beams shot out from between the cracks, and...

Rummmble!

...the land swallowed up half of the hundred men. The land caved in beneath the enemy, forming a massive hole.

As an added benefit, since this was a battle of one against one hundred, the system recognized that as a “battlefield,” which meant I was able to gain experience.

“Wahhh!”

The soldiers screamed, unable to understand what was happening. I looked at the status screen and saw only thirty of them remained.

No need to use skills now.

Will you use the bonus?

I swung Daitoren around as I finished off the survivors. Mirinae could do nothing but blink at this sudden development. Jint looked jealous of my skill.

“Jint, we’re crossing the mountains pronto. We need to shake the other patrols that are after us!”

We had to hurry because I knew a fresh border patrol unit was after us. Fortunately, we managed to lose them. The border patrols units were converging on our position, though too late, and began to chase us.

“They’re Runanese infiltrators! Seize them! Hey, stop!” the border patrol shouted as they pursued us through the foothills. I couldn’t help but scoff to myself. What kind of fugitives stop just because they were asked to?

Because I’d wiped out the first border patrol unit, it wasn’t all that hard to escape the others.

Mirinae was my sole worry, but somewhere along the way, Jint picked her up and carried her in his arms as he ran.

Once we were over the mountains, there would be no further risk from the Naruyan border patrol.

Even if they thought we were enemy spies, once we got away from them, that was the end of it. While they might be able to send a person or two across the

border after us, a whole patrol unit would amount to a declaration of war. The border patrol didn't have that kind of authority.

After a long trek, the plains of Eintorian spread out before us.

That was proof enough that we'd successfully extracted Mirinae.

*

A few days later, Erhin had the head chamberlain prepare a house for Jint and Mirinae to live in—a lovely two-story home near the castle.

Unable to believe this change in their fortunes, Mirinae repeatedly asked Jint, "We're really allowed to live here? You're sure? I'm not dreaming?"

She'd never even dreamed of living in a place like this. Every house they'd lived in before had been run-down to the point where it wouldn't have seemed odd if it had just collapsed. Mirinae looked all around their new residence, sighing with emotion at each new discovery.

"Jint, look! There's a bed! It's so soft!"

After lying down on it for a bit, she went to the kitchen where she was in for another surprise.

"Just look at this kitchen! I've never seen anything like it! I'll be able to make so many delicious meals for you here!"

When Jint walked over, she rested her forehead on his chest.

"Jint... I'm so overjoyed. If this is really happening, we're truly blessed. Are you sure we can believe all of this?"

"Yeah. That guy's no liar—unlike the rest of the nobility."

"Hold on, Jint. 'That guy'...? You're not talking about the lord, are you?"

"Who else would I be talking about?"

"You idiot! You dummy, dummy, dummy! How could you refer to His Lordship so casually?!"

"Well... That's how I've been talking all this time..."

Mirinae pinched Jint's cheeks, a look of exasperation on her face.

“You’re his retainer now, aren’t you? You need to show him the proper respect!”

“O-Okay...”

Jint said with a nod, his words slightly slurred by her grip on his cheeks.

“Anyway, so you saved the country with His Lordship?”

“That’s how it worked out. It wasn’t Naruya I saved, though...”

“You silly man! What does Naruya matter to us? It doesn’t, that’s what. From now on, this country, the one that accepted us, is our homeland!”

“Oh...”

“Of course it is. They took in people like us...*fugitives*. Besides, they recognize your talent... That’s marvelous! How do you think we should repay them, Jint? Just how many pieces of clothing will I have to mend? No, how many tens of thousands of them?”

Mirinae was counting on her fingers, but the numbers were far beyond anything she could count like that. Her eyes began to spin.

“Well, I’ll do my best! Oh, that’s right! I managed to save up this much with my needlework.”

Mirinae pulled out the precious silver coin that she had tucked away in her pocket.

“I’m going to buy you something nice to eat with this... So...we can be together...forever, right?

With the silver coin clenched tightly in hand, tears that Mirinae had been holding back since they were reunited started to overflow.

The image of himself in jail flashed through Jint’s mind. If he hadn’t managed to make it back, then Mirinae would never have shed these tears of joy. His debt was great—so great it wouldn’t be repaid even when his sword lay broken, and his severed head rested on the ground.

As he thought about that, Jint’s hands tightened into fists.

*

Jint and Mirinae's story didn't end there. Several days after the head chamberlain found a house for them, Mirinae suddenly came to visit him.

"I'll do anything. I'm confident in my sewing and I can clean too. Please, let me work!"

When I heard about it from the head chamberlain, I summoned her and Jint so I could speak to them.

Mirinae

Age: 21

Martial: 5

Intelligence: 59

Command: 10

Those were her stats. The numbers fascinated me. An Intelligence score of 59 when she'd never properly studied? Martial, Intelligence, and Command all represented both a person's innate talent and the result of the effort they put in. Additionally, the system capped ability scores based on talent.

That meant there was an initial value based on the person's talent, and hard work could raise their ability scores up to that talent cap. It took time to raise your stats through hard work, of course, and nobody—except for me who had access to the level up system—could go beyond their talent cap.

However, there *were* some people whose talent cap had what was called A-class Breakout. Those with such a gift were able to get their ability scores over 100 and become S-class.

A person's capacity for wielding mana was deeply connected with this.

There was a skill in the system that would allow me to view people's talent caps, and having it would help me discover people with hidden abilities, but it cost 3,000 points. That wasn't happening at my current level.

Even without the skill, I can be reasonably confident that Mirinae's never worked to raise her Intelligence score. She was never in a situation where she could have done anything about it. So, assuming her initial score was 59, she

might totally transform if given the chance to work on improving it.

Curiouser and curiouser.

“You want to work here?”

“Yes, Your Lordship!”

Mirinae had bowed down before me the moment she arrived, pulling on Jint’s arm like she was saying, *“You hurry up and bend the knee too!”*

“Enough of that. You don’t need to bow and scrape all the time. Besides, Jint is one of my retainers. As his wife, you should address me as Your Excellency.”

“Call you ‘Your Excellency’? I-I’m not sure I...”

Mirinae seemed confused at the honor of being allowed to address me as the nobles of this world did. Her eyes wandered nervously. I decided to cut to the chase.

“Anyways, you wanted work, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I don’t know how to repay you... I’ll really do anything!”

“No matter how painful it is?”

“Yes!”

Hearing the resolve in her voice, I shrugged and said, “Why not try studying? Yes... How about learning to read for a start?”

Mirinae blinked at this for a good ten seconds before looking at Jint.

“Not Jint. He’s too far removed from that sort of thing.”

When Mirinae heard that, she pointed at herself.

“Me? I-I couldn’t! Never! Book learning is for the nobility!”

“Must I repeat myself? You are my retainers now, which makes you practically nobility. If you genuinely want to work for the sake of the domain, then you’ll start by learning to read. I have no intention of letting you work otherwise.”

Mirinae gaped at me, unsure what to make of this proclamation.

“But...! Are you sure I can do it...?”

“That, I can’t tell you. But if you work at it, I’m sure you’ll get results. Let’s wait and see what those results are.”

Yeah. That part was a mystery to me too. Would her Intelligence score rise, like I was hoping it would? Or was it going to remain unchanged? There were all sorts of intelligence too.

The intelligence to manage a domain.

The intelligence to fight a war.

It remained to be seen what kind of intelligence she possessed. It felt like I’d just bought a lottery ticket, and now I was waiting to find out if I’d picked a winner.

*

I'm currently level 19.

Wiping out the Royal Naruyan Army in the recent war brought me to level 18, and our battle with the border patrol while we were rescuing Mirinae pushed me up to 19.

My Martial is 64. I have 300 skill points remaining. I can't neglect leveling up during the one year I have before Naruya starts the Grand Subjugation. I'll keep searching for personnel too.

Ultimately, I'm going to keep needing to influence the outcomes of a variety of battles. Although, that will probably be after I have my own domain in order.

"Hadin, gather all our forces!"

My first order of business was to assemble the army to introduce my new retainers to them. This included Yusen and Gibun, who had arrived after us.

I've told Hadin about them already, but this will be the first time that the army as a whole sees the new retainers. Since this is such a choice occasion for it, I want to have a martial arts tournament with a prize and everything. I *can see people's ability scores, but no one else can. No one but me knows what Jint, Yusen and the others are like.*

This was why it was important to show off the martial prowess of the new retainers I had brought on board with a tournament.

The outcome isn't important. It's all about the process. Basically, making them understand just how competent the new folks I've brought on board are, and preventing any dissatisfaction that might emerge when I put them in important positions. Because no one in my current army is a match for Jint.

Even Yusen lost after crossing blades with him just once.

Of course, Jint won the tourney, and Yusen took second place.

There was even a bonus match where all of the hundredmen took on Jint at the same time, and he *still* won that with an overwhelming victory! I did that so they could personally get a feel for his strength.

Once the event finished, I announced my retainers' new titles. Hadin, the only noble among the retainers I valued, was to remain commander-in-chief of my army.

In light of his high Command score of 90, I appointed Yusen to be lieutenant commander of the army.

Then I appointed Gibun and Bente to the newly established rank of thousandman. These two were the most suitable candidates for leading new units with a manpower of over a thousand men. Gibun had a Command of 76, and Bente's was 82.

Now that I look at it, we have a serious shortage of personnel.

In Jint's case, his Command was too low, so I appointed him as captain of a special operations unit that didn't have any subordinates assigned to it yet. His rank was equal to the thousandmen.

With ranks reassessed, I took a look at our manpower next.

The Eintorian Domain Army currently consisted of fourteen thousand men, but that didn't make a standing army. If you looked at European or Chinese's historical standing armies, they generally only made up about one percent of the total population. This one percent weren't foot soldiers but specialized troop types like cavalry and horse archers.

However, when a war came, China often conscripted as much as ten percent of the population to fight. In that situation, one percent of the population made up the standing army, and another nine percent, usually farmers, were held as reserve manpower that could be called up in time of need.

By making them work the fields in peacetime, it became possible to raise up a tremendous portion of the population as soldiers.

Eintorian's manpower consisted of both career soldiers and conscripts as well.

As things stood, the Runan Kingdom had a population of ten million, and the Eintorian Domain had a population of two hundred and twenty thousand. Since it was clear that war was coming, I intended to raise our standing army to ten thousand men and the number of conscripted farmers to twenty thousand.

My first goal is a combined total manpower of thirty thousand.

The primary issue was that, as a border province, we had a lower population than other domains, though that had changed as of late.

Our population started at one hundred and eighty thousand, but my tax exemption policy and personal fame drew refugees from the northern areas of the Runan Kingdom once the fighting broke out.

Maybe our population would keep growing if I were to lower the taxes a reasonable amount once the exemption ended and develop the land? Living on the border was always risky, but in troubled times, problems could crop up anywhere and people would choose somewhere safe to live.

If I can make people confident that they're safe here, our population will continue to grow. Immigration may cause some issues, of course, but for now, I can loan them unused land and use them as extra manpower. Once we have a population of three hundred thousand, I'll have thirty thousand soldiers at my disposal.

That's my primary objective for now.

Will you draft troops?

In order to work towards that goal, I used the system to make it so I would have twenty thousand troops at my disposal.

Who will draft troops?

One somewhat interesting feature of the system was that a higher Martial or Command was reflected in the draftees' Training score, and the higher the Popularity of the drafting commander, the less the public's Opinion would fall as a result.

When Euracia was visiting the Eintorian Domain, I'd had her lend me a hand with drafting troops. In her case, it was her high Charisma score that had the effect instead of Popularity, but that's probably because she wasn't officially

one of my subordinates.

Hadin — Popularity: 90

Jint — Popularity: 50

Bente — Popularity: 70

Yusen — Popularity: 50

Gibun — Popularity: 50

Mirinae — Popularity: 50

The starting value for Popularity was 50, and most of the new retainers had only just come to the domain, so this was to be expected. If anything, I was surprised to see that even Mirinae, who'd barely shown her face in public, had a Popularity of 50.

I'd initially hoped that Yusen's Popularity would quickly rise thanks to his amiable personality and ability to make friends, but those hopes aside, the only one suited to recruiting men right now was Hadin.

Will you have Hadin draft troops?

6,000 men can be drafted.

Expected Drop in Opinion: -5.

That was the message that showed up when I picked Hadin. I struggled with the decision for a while before deciding to do it myself this time. Between the recent war Eintorian itself had experienced, and the seventy thousand Naruyans who'd invaded the Runan Kingdom, everyone was feeling tense around now.

I decided to appeal to those feelings.

"Naruya continue to build their manpower. Soon, an era of war and chaos will be upon us. The time will come for you to defend your families. When it does, I of course will be doing everything in my power to defend Eintorian. Yet I cannot defend this land alone. You, my people, will need to defend Eintorian and your

families with your own hands. We will carry out this draft in order to defend Eintorian. So, allow me to promise those of you who will take to the battlefield this one thing: I will stand at the vanguard in that battle. I will always be there, leading the charge!”

With my own Popularity being pretty high, and the times being what they were, my speech in the plaza had the following effect:

Opinion increased by 2.

Surprisingly, not only did the public’s Opinion not fall, it actually went up by two points. Thanks to that, our manpower successfully rose by six thousand to become twenty thousand. I then reorganized these twenty thousand men to begin training them anew.

I entrusted Gibun, Bente, Yusen with the task, with Jint’s assistance. I didn’t have many retainers, so everyone had to get involved. I planned to choose the members of the standing army from this bunch and pay them a salary. We would train ten thousand career soldiers.

From those ten thousand, we would choose two thousand of the best performers to form an elite unit. There were no knightly orders in this game, but I planned to make something like an order of knights for these two thousand and give it a name.

Thankfully, because our war chest was flush with cash, my struggle would mostly be against time. I had my Eintorian ancestors to thank for that. Now that I had done all this, all that was left was to raise the Training of my troops.

Am I just going to wait for that to happen? No, of course not. Because the absolute key thing is the foreign element.

In fact, thinking about what was to come a year from now, you could see just how important our ability to counter external threats was.

The Naruya Kingdom is very quiet right now, just like they were in the game’s history. History’s been rewritten, but the Grand Subjugation was never going to be an easy thing for them to start. The pride of Naruya is ten elite units, each led

by one of the Ten Commanders.

The units all had flashy names taken from the nom de guerre of their commander, and were a pain in the butt to deal with in the game. Now I had to deal with those nuisances here in the real world. I could raise my manpower all I want, but the manpower available to a single domain paled in comparison to the manpower available to a king.

Closing that gap requires strategy and tactics: in other words, using my head. If I fight with manpower alone, I'll never win. Of course, even if I do use my head, I need manpower to serve as my hands and feet, even if it's smaller in scale than our enemies'.

That's what I'm training now.

In parallel with that process, I intend to move forward with preparations to deal with foreign adversaries. In order to expand Eintorian's influence in a manner akin to Zhuge Liang's stratagem to divide the land in three in Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.*

I expect to receive reports of a new war soon. Not between Naruya and Runan, but between the nations of the south.

In the game's original history, the Runan Kingdom was already ruined by the time this war broke out, and the Naruya Kingdom stayed out of it as they were preparing for the Grand Subjugation.

But history had changed.

The relationship between the country where the war would break out and the Runan Kingdom meant things were going to get interesting.

And if they do, I'll have a chance to get involved.

My plan might not have been as grand as Zhuge Liang's stratagem, but it would lay the foundation for Eintorian's independence.

Chapter 2: A New Battlefield

Eudante za Rozern, King of Rozern, was enraged and terrified by the Brijitian envoy's words.

"Will you accept our demand for your surrender, sire?"

"Ngh...! I could never surrender!"

Eudante had only just turned fourteen.

The sudden death of his father, the former king, brought him to the throne, but he was just an ordinary boy. Now he had received an ultimatum from the neighboring country, Brijit, demanding to surrender and fork over the nation's land. It was effectively a declaration of war.

The young king's desperation-tinged shout was met with a smirk from the envoy.

"Oh, I see. Then you claim you can defend your country? Perhaps, rather than invite death, would it not be better to surrender and live out the rest of your life in a peaceful retirement?"

The envoy's tone was arrogant, but none of the nobles could refute what he was saying. They could only tremble in fear of the Brijit Kingdom.

"I-I could never do such a thing. It's my duty as king to defend Rozern's land and people... I will not surrender. Now, begone before I have your head lopped off!"

The boy king was quivering, but he alone was thinking of what was best for his nation.

"If that is what you say, then I suppose the people of Rozern will become slaves. Will you have no regrets, even then?"

That gave the boy king pause. "If I surrender, will they be spared slavery?"

The envoy smiled faintly at the king's words.

"Did you not read the ultimatum? It says that we will 'guarantee the life of

the king and his family.’”

In other words, there were no guarantees for anyone else.

“That’s all the more reason I can’t surrender! Leave me at once!”

The envoy shook his head in dismay at the king’s irate shouting.

“You’ve made the worst choice possible, sire. Your people may find that death was a preferable fate to slavery. Heh heh.”

With that, the envoy left the audience chamber.

As he did, he had a smirk on his face. He’d never expected Rozern to surrender in the first place.

The royals who would be spared if they just surrendered, the nobles who were only thinking of how to save their own hides, and the people who were directly exposed to danger...

Driving a wedge between these three groups had been Brijit’s true goal all along.

*

Once the envoy departed, the audience chamber devolved into chaos.

“Sire, it’s still not too late to surrender. It’s our best chance to survive!” cried Count Sciara.

“Hardly! Have you forgotten the massacres the King of Brijit carried out against his own people?! How could we be safe after surrendering to a tyrant like that?!” countered Marquis Burkra.

“But...!” Sciara raised his voice further. “If we could just secure promises about the treatment of us nobles, you’d be fine with surrendering, wouldn’t you?”

Sciara sounded like he was perfectly fine letting the people be reduced to slavery. Burkra shook his head.

“What country could guarantee us such a thing? When a country surrenders to you, you purge their nobility. Time and again, history has proven this one fundamental truth. We’d be safer running for our lives. Or submitting to

Runan.”

No one spoke up in favor of defending the country. The boy king was on the verge of tears as his pitiful nobles shouted back and forth.

He alone had the will to defend the people, but unfortunately he lacked the power to rally them to the cause as little more than a figurehead king.

At this point, Duke Lushake, who had been watching quietly all this time, opened his mouth to speak. “What are you all making such a fuss for? Our Queen Cedelia is the daughter of the King of Runan. Furthermore, Runan are our allies, and we even pay them tribute. We need only appeal to them for support!”

Sciara shook his head. “But the Runan Kingdom is in a bad situation because of the war with the Naruya Kingdom...”

“They need to keep up appearances for their other allies! Do you really think they could afford to abandon us just because their own situation is not so good?!” Lushake roared with anger.

Burkra joined Lushake’s side. “If we had support from the Runan Kingdom, which was even able to repel the Naruya Kingdom,” he added vigorously, “we’d have nothing to fear. We’d be more than able to fight Brijit then. And if we can’t expect reinforcements, we can run then!”

The other nobles clamored to agree with him.

“Is that all right, sire? We must send an envoy to Runan at once!” Lushake insisted.

“B-But who...?” the boy king asked hesitantly.

“There’s only one person we could possibly entrust with such an important task, isn’t there?”

“My sister...?”

“Who else?”

The other nobles all nodded in agreement.

*

Euracia Rozern, First Princess of the Rozern Kingdom, was the elder of the two children the former king left behind.

“Could there be some reason why Brijit is suddenly threatening Rozern?”

When Euracia crossed the border and arrived in the Runanese capital, she was met by Battan, a noble who served as resident ambassador for the Rozern Kingdom there.

“The Brijit Kingdom believes that the Runan Kingdom has yet to recover from their great war with the Naruya Kingdom.”

“You’re saying that they think our Runanese allies will be unable to afford to send us help, then?”

“That is correct, Your Highness.”

Euracia clenched her fists. “But what is the situation *really*? That is the most important detail. Is the Runan Kingdom truly unable to help?”

Battan shook his head. “The domains in the south of the Runan Kingdom couldn’t even participate in the recent war. That’s how fast the Royal Naruyan Army managed to advance to Lynon Castle. But it does mean that they have strength to spare. If only they had a decent commander to direct them... Well, with Rozern and Runan’s manpower combined, I expect we outnumber the Brijitians.”

“A decent commander, you say...?”

Euracia mumbled those words to herself repeatedly for some time.

*

Euracia was kneeling before the king in Runan Castle’s audience chamber.

“Your Majesty, the Brijit Kingdom is unfairly attempting to invade Rozern. Our own army sadly lacks the manpower to oppose them. I ask you, as our ally of many years, can we count on you to send reinforcements to Rozern?”

The Runanese king scowled when he heard her. He wasn’t interested in helping in the slightest.

“Cedelia’s asking me a favor? Honestly, if it’s so dangerous, she should just

run away.”

“That is correct,” Duke Ronan agreed. “We need to keep the Naruya kingdom in check now. We took considerable losses in the recent war, after all. I feel sorry for you as our allies, but the Runan Kingdom lacks the spare capacity to send reinforcements at this present juncture.”

The duke’s rejection was purely rational, in contrast to the king’s more emotional one. While it didn’t line up with what Battan had told her, it was still a response she could have expected. Of course, even if they’d had the capacity, Ronan wouldn’t have wanted to send troops to a war which held no benefit for the Runan Kingdom.

“Yes, that makes sense. We can’t let them invade us again. Euracia, was it? I’m sorry, but we’re still essentially at war. With those monstrous Naruyans, you see. It’s going to be difficult for us to assist you.”

Hearing this rejection, Euracia sensed she was in a bad position as things stood, and attempted to sweeten the pot.

“If you help us, we will pay you five times the tribute we currently do! Please, sire, this is the best Rozern can offer!”

“Five times, you say?”

The king appeared to consider for a moment, but his expression already said he wasn’t interested as he spoke again.

“I can’t be sending off reinforcements for mere tribute. As Ronan said, we don’t have the capacity for it. We just don’t!”

As the king rejected her a second time, Euracia’s face grew ashen with despair.

*

In the game, Rozern was a country beset by many problems.

Ever since the death of their king, the royal family had weakened as a center of power, and the nobles ruled their domains with no regard for the people who lived in them. This was no recipe for patriotism. It was also why, shortly after receiving the declaration of war, the nobles all fled in fear of a barbaric

invasion from the Brijit Kingdom.

However, even with the situation so bad, they didn't fall easily. That's because someone roused the fleeing soldiers and people, and fought the Brijitians to the end. Someone who'd had the people's support from a young age. Her inborn charisma meant every speech she gave was met with roaring applause, and her popularity grew by the day.

She never betrayed their trust in her.

She fought on the front line herself.

Ultimately, that was where she met her end.

Based on the fact that Rozern collapsed within a week of her demise, you can see that it was her strength alone which had allowed them to stand for the months before that.

Of course, that's all the game's history.

Her name was Euracia Rozern.

And now I watched on as she knelt before Runan's king.

Euracia Rozern

Age: 20

Marital: 87

Intelligence: 57

Command: 95

She had come to request reinforcements purely out of a desire to defend her nation. However, she didn't realize the amount of politicking it took to arrange such a thing. If she had brought the nobles on board before making the request, they couldn't have refused so bluntly. Her high Command score was due to her inborn charisma, but that only allowed her to move the people and command armies.

Also, while I hadn't seen it for myself yet, her high Martial score suggested she had an aptitude for mana. She was really more of a sober and honest

commander type rather than a politician. Of course, it was no mere coincidence that I was here right now.

I'd already arrived several days ago.

The war between Rozern and Brijit was critical for me as well.

The chamberlains and ladies in waiting that I had bought off during my last trip to the capital passed me word of what was happening so that I could have an audience with the king at the same time.

She'd received a clear refusal. Still kneeling, Euracia bit her lip. I could sense her noble nature from her long, blonde hair. She had enough charm to captivate anyone. It was a noble allure, one that made her feel out of reach.

My interest, however, was in the dispatch of reinforcements.

Runan *had* to send those troops to Rozern.

"Your Majesty, I believe we should send troops. Please, allow me to command them!"

When I spoke up in favor of sending reinforcements as all of the other nobles opposed the idea, Euracia looked at me with surprise.

The king and his nobles did too.

"Don't talk nonsense! Runan lacks the capacity to support such an action right now!" Ronan turned to face me, his tone irate.

"Indeed! Where are you going to go when you're supposed to be defending me?!" the king shouted, sounding like a child.

Runan's king is a coward. But he was also incredibly greedy.

"Not even Naruya will be so quick to move again after a loss of seventy thousand men. I expect they'll stay put for a year or so. Or am I wrong, Duke Ronan? I hear you've sent scouts."

"You're not wrong, no, but we're in no position to go sticking our nose into other countries' problems!" Ronan shook his head as he pushed back against me once more.

Yeah, this is why Runan's screwed. I don't give a damn what happens to

Rozern. I'm sure they've got nothing but a bunch of rotten nobles and ill-trained troops, just like Runan. Rozern also borders a large number of countries, all of which can easily attack them, so they aren't in a strategically advantageous location either.

That's not true of Brijit. They're on the coast where there is a chain of islands, which is a location that's actually well-suited to secretly raising troops.

But the most important thing is Euracia Rozern.

I've already built a relationship with her, and if I can get her reinforcements this time, she'll owe me one. Besides, with the help of her popularity inside Rozern, we'll have an easy time inspiring the troops. We'll hold off the invasion with Rozernian manpower, then use Runanese troops for a quick counterattack that takes Brijit!

In the history I knew from the game, the King of Brijit had a high Martial himself, and led from the front like Euracia.

Brijit destroyed Rozern, but was later destroyed by Naruya. Maybe they were somewhat exhausted by the earlier conflict, but Brijit simply never had the power to stand up against Naruya.

What if I couldn't do what Naruya did? Then I'd have a hard time uniting the continent.

My goal this time was simple: kill the Brijitian king as he led his troops. I wasn't going to let this chance slip by. It was a chance to preserve my own manpower while using someone else's to win territory!

"My goal isn't Rozern, sire. If you'll entrust me with the reinforcements, I'll stop Brijit's invasion, and then go on the counteroffensive to wipe them out. With Brijit under your control, there will be no need to fear Naruya. This will be another step towards you becoming the victor of this continent!"

The King of Runan's eyes widened at this declaration.

If he's greedy, then of course he'd be interested in getting his hands on Brijit. Rozern already pays him tribute. But if he can get hold of Brijit as well, that would gain his considerable power. The greedy and foolish are easily caught with large bait.

“I have a number of plans. Like the one the Naruyan strategist used to rapidly advance on Runan’s capital. If I can’t do what he did, then I have no right to my post as advisor. Should I fail, I’ll return my domain to you and return to being an ordinary noble!”

The king gulped and hurriedly asked, “You’ll make Brijit mine, no, Runan’s? That entire domain?”

“Indeed I will, sire!” I stated outright.

The king exchanged glances with Ronan. It seemed neither of them were entirely sure what to do now.

“The southern domains of Runan suffered hardly any damage from the recent war. They sent their troops too late, and the war was over by the time they arrived. If you round up just fifty thousand soldiers from the southern domains, I will launch the counterattack against Brijit when they invade Rozern!”

There’s no helping the fact that Brijit’s going to become part of Runan’s domain once I destroy them. I don’t have the personnel or the manpower to manage the territory myself right now. It’s not yet time for me to go independent. Of course, that just means I’ll be letting Runan hold onto my conquest for me for a little while.

When the Grand Subjugation began and Runan fell to Naruya, I planned to seize and absorb Brijit without spilling a drop of blood. This strategy let me take aim at a large domain without having to use any of my own manpower. To pull it off, I needed to destroy Brijit first.

This was a big gamble for me too.

But that’s what makes this world so interesting!

I could see in the king’s eyes that he’d given into temptation.

I know, right? It’s an unbearably alluring proposal, isn’t it?

*

After dismissing everyone from the room but Ronan, the king asked, “Is it true that Naruya hasn’t moved?”

“Yes, sire. If we only send troops from the south, I think we should be fine for

the time being. Erhin *did* say he would settle things within half a year... I don't think we have anything to worry about. Erheet is leading the reconstruction up north, and I've sent scouts to keep an eye on any movements by the enemy."

"I see. In that case... You're sure we can go after Brijit, then?"

"I'm sure Erhin can pull it off. In the recent war, he made the enemy strategist leave empty handed, didn't he? And the man had his sights on our capital. If Erhin were to use that strategy on Brijit once they lose their king... I'm sure there will be nothing the enemy can do. Of course, this is supposing he can kill the King of Brijit in Rozern. I think the plan has enough merit to let him try."

"Heh heh. It does, doesn't it? It has more than enough merit. His own domain is on the line if he fails. I like it. Indeed, I welcome the gamble. Brijit, huh...? Gah hah hah hah!"

Seeing how happy his king was, Ronan opened his mouth to add a word of caution.

"But, sire. We should recall Erhin to the capital as soon as he takes Brijit. You mustn't give the domain to him!"

"Oh, of course not. Erhin has a job to do, fighting the Naruyans. Once I have no enemies left, I'll kill him. Heh heh heh. I have no use for one who doesn't bear the blood of our royal house. That's why I offered him a title for his deeds, but no actual reward. Heh heh heh!"

Duke Ronan was a relative of the Royal House of Runan. In short, they were kith and kin. He was also open in his desire to have Brijit for himself.

*

"Everything went as you said it would," Euracia said in front of the palace, impassive as ever.

"You could look a little more surprised, you know?" I said emphatically.

Euracia's brow furrowed. "I'm plenty surprised. Incredibly surprised, even. Honestly, our situation was hopeless until you appeared..."

Oh, is that a fact? You don't look like it.

After saying that, Euracia took a step closer and looked up at me, her clear

eyes gazing straight into mine.

“I sent you a letter saying I’d help, didn’t I? Have a little faith in me.”

“You did, yes, but...the Runanese king’s attitude was so firm... But, more importantly, how did you know Brijit would invade?”

I only knew because of the game’s history, but I couldn’t exactly go and explain that to her.

“Information makes the world go ‘round, you know? I gather intel from around the continent and make plans to match what I learn. Without that power, there wouldn’t be much but despair waiting for me in troubled times like these. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“That’s a reasonable argument,” Euracia replied, her eyes still raised to mine, never looking away. Her expression remained as blank as ever, but there was something in her gaze that felt dissatisfied. “But I think there’s more to it. There’s something...odd about you.”

“Odd?”

“Yes, incredibly so. I can never figure out where your thoughts will lead. That’s what scares me about you.”

“Hey, now. I thought we’d cleared up the misunderstanding about me being a villainous lord, didn’t we?” I thought, thinking there might be another misunderstanding, but Euracia’s eyes were unswerving.

They told me that wasn’t what she meant.

“Well, whatever. Just watch me. With the coming war, I doubt you’ll be able to take your eyes off me for a while.”

“I suppose not. First, we have to defend Rozern. I certainly have my suspicions about you, but I’m still grateful for the help you’ve given me!”

“Oh, yeah? Is that the look of someone feeling grateful?” I said with a shrug, but Euracia’s expression remained unchanged.

*

Sixty thousand elite Brijitian troops were gathered in the Luxenbaum Domain on the southern border of Rozern. The King of Brijit, Bautore, immediately gave the order to attack. At his command, forty thousand infantry charged across the border into the Rozern Domain all at once. Bautore watched them with satisfaction, his lips curling into a slight smile.

Oh, how badly he wanted this conquest.

The Brijit Kingdom had always been treated as far inferior to the Runan Kingdom and the Naruya Kingdom before now.

Bautore couldn't stand that. It was a large part of why he'd started this war.

"Yaaargh!!!" cried the charging Brijitian troops.

It would be impossible for four thousand defenders of Luxenbaum to stop sixty thousand elite soldiers. Even with seven thousand forces now, thanks to a rapid recruitment drive after the declaration of war, they were still no match.

The terrified soldiers and their lord couldn't do anything.

Ganeif, one of Brijit's Three Royal Swordsmen, climbed the castle walls and laughed scornfully as he watched the lord.

"Kill him!" the lord shouted as he backed away in surprise.

Ganeif was faster, though.

As might be expected from a man whose nom de guerre was Ganeif the Swiftblade, his sword carved out the lord's heart with speed and precision.

Bautore laughed out loud as he watched. Rozern's forces were not much different from what he'd expected. Having reached the front of the castle, Bautore bellowed the orders, "Now's the moment we've been waiting for! Charge into the castle! Steal everything that's theirs!"

The words echoed far and wide, shaking the castle so hard it seemed as though it might crack. It was a death sentence for the Rozernan people.

"Eeeek!"

"C'mere!"



The soldiers became like slavering beasts, hunting young women.

“Help...!”

Most residents who were not young and female were killed on the spot. Women who'd hid inside the houses were dragged out by their hair. Tens of drooling soldiers surrounded a lone woman.

"No...! S-Stop...!"

All around the city, cries echoed back and forth. At this rate, it seemed like every last resident might be slain. However, the king chose just one hundred people at random to be spared. They were set free to bear witness to the hell he'd unleashed here.

"Go, and tell everyone what you saw. Tell them Brijitians show no mercy!"

He hoped to intimidate not just the Rozernan soldiers, but their entire populace. He wasn't doing this just to let his men blow off steam: it was to show the people of Rozern that Brijit was merciless.

Their next target was the Briant Domain, which also fell without any effective resistance. Here, too, Bautore unleashed a fresh hell within the castle walls before releasing a number of residents to tell the tale.

As word spread, rumors gave birth to new rumors.

Bautore effortlessly trampled across the domains. Coming to a fork in the road he demanded both the Kesenbine and Tilant Domains submit.

"Surrender. Do as I say, and I will spare your lives. You will be untouched. That's better than all of you dying if you resist!"

Every day, he stood before the domains' castles to call for their surrender. Having already heard many a time about the horrible fates that others had met, the demoralized Lord of Tilant raised the white flag.

"Your Majesty, if we guarantee their safety, they say they'll throw open the gates at once!"

"Very well. Have the enemy disarm themselves."

There was nothing so amazing as entering a castle without a drop of blood shed. The best victories were the ones won without fighting.

"Good! I forbid any massacres in the surrendered Tilant Domain! Spare their lives."

“Say what...?” Ganeif cocked his head to the side. Bautore arched an eyebrow at him. “Oh, no, it’s nothing!”

“Thoroughly trample any domain that refuses to submit. Kill the men; drag the women to Tilant to be raped and killed there. These Rozernans need the difference between those who submit and those who don’t carved into their thick skulls!”

These tactics would have massive influence through the war to come. They spread chaos between the lords, their retainers, and the people. The difference in manpower was overwhelming, and the lords submitted one after another.

The result was that the Brijitanian army had lost less than one thousand men by the time they reached the castle.

*

I took Euracia to the southern domains where we were to meet up with the Royal Runanese Army.

30 training, 30 Morale. The unit’s stats were terrible. The commanding officers consisted of two counts, five viscounts, and ten barons. This was all as Ronan planned. The viscounts and barons were nobles who’d led their troops here from various domains, but the counts were Ronan’s own retainers.

They’re here to monitor me, basically.

The leader was my second-in-command, Count Fihatori. He wasn’t openly dissatisfied with me, but he also had no intention of just meekly doing as I told him to. I had Jint hurry to join us as backup, but none of my other retainers from the Eintorian Domain were to join him. They were too busy training our army.

Because this was a foreign war, I only really needed Jint. The problem was that the king only gave me thirty thousand men. He explained that I could fight using these men for now, and he’d send more later to replenish us.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

That meant he wanted me to show him to create a possibility with thirty thousand men first: the possibility of killing Brijit’s king.

*

We ran to their aid with our thirty thousand reinforcements, setting up camp in sight of the border as the sun went down. The battlefield lay just across the border. Tomorrow, we would rush into Rozern.

It was tense in camp.

I was feeling tense too, of course. Because sure, I knew how things went in the game's history, but that was no guarantee I'd survive. Nevertheless, I had to act.

If I could pull this off, it would create some slight possibility of unifying the continent.

The flames of the campfire rose up high.

Euracia, who had entered the camp earlier, perhaps unable to sleep due to the tension in the air, walked over to me.

"You can't sleep?" I asked.

"No... May I join you?"

"Of course." I nodded. She came closer and we sat shoulder to shoulder by the fire.

"The southern regions of Rozern are being trampled by Brijit. Their king is massacring our people!" Euracia's clenched fist shook with rage.

We were receiving real-time reports on the situation in Rozern. I couldn't blame her for not being able to sleep.

"The Brijitian king is using horrific tactics to force you to surrender," I explained. "It's the worst kind of war. And he has an overwhelming numerical advantage too..."

After a long pause, Euracia asked, "Do we stand any chance of winning?"

I'd love to know the answer to that myself. I have a winning plan in mind, of course, but I have no idea how things are going to play out.

"Does only having thirty thousand men concern you?"

"I saw you drive out the Naruyans with less than this. A massive Naruyan

army, far more powerful than Brijit," Euracia said, her eyes shifting from me to the fire. "So, it's not that I'm worried. I want to hear your strategy. That's what's been keeping me up tonight. What are you thinking?"

"Well, of a strategy to beat Brijit, for one thing."

"What strategy? If it protects Rozern, then...I'm prepared to do anything!" she declared, suddenly rising to her feet, but I had nothing to tell her.

She's fundamental to my strategy this time. There haven't been major changes from the overall flow of the game's history yet. I think that might be because it's decided based on whether each battle plays out the same as it did in-game. If she learned anything about what happened in the game, then there's a good chance a battle from the game wouldn't be recreated.

Basically, I was watching out for the butterfly effect.

"Calm down, Euracia." I stood up, walked around behind her, and placed my hands on her shoulders. Then, sitting her back down, I said, "I do have a strategy, but I can't explain it to you now."

"Why not? You don't trust me? I'd never breathe a word to anyone!"

"This isn't a matter of trust. It's so we can win."

A look of doubt crossed her face as she stared at me with those strong eyes of hers.

"Huh? What do you mean...?"

"I'll explain once we have the results. Here's all I can say for now: You fight your battles. I'll fight mine. Our strategies in this war are strictly separate."

"But even if we worked together, we'd have so few men... So, why?!"

"You believe in my strategies that repelled Naruya, don't you?"

"I believe, certainly, but what exactly am I supposed to believe in when you're giving me nothing to go on...?"

"It's all part of the plan. So, try trusting in me as a person, not my strategy."

"..."

When I gave her a straight answer, Euracia fell silent.

“But more importantly, what were you planning to do if I hadn’t persuaded the King of Runan and come here?”

“I’d have returned to Rozern, and we would have fought by ourselves. Until I died. For as long as I draw breath, I will never hand over Rozern!”

Yeah, that’s it. That’s what she’s like in the game’s history.

“That’s the way. Don’t ever forget how you feel right now. If you just fight your own way, you’ll be able to defend Rozern.”

There was a confused pause. “I have no idea what you mean.”

You don’t need to know. No, you mustn’t find out. I see the look of discontent on your face now, but I’ll change that out on the battlefield.

*

After days of sad reports and unmitigated chaos, some good news arrived in Rozern’s palace for the first time in a while.

Word had come of reinforcements.

Eudante opened Euracia’s letter with unbounded joy. He’d only read a few lines of it when he exclaimed, “Everyone, rejoice! Reinforcements from Runan are on the way!”

A buzz ran through the nobles who heard this.

“Is that true?!”

“Ohh! That might save us!”

But as he read the letter, the king’s expression changed, darkening visibly as he continued. “But...they’re only sending thirty thousand men...”

Those words froze the room like ice.

Wrinkles formed on Commander-in-chief Berack of the Royal Rozernan Army’s forehead as he asked, “Sire, could you have misread the number? We could never win with only that many. In the recent war where Runan stopped seventy thousand Naruyans they had a total manpower of a hundred thousand. How in the world are we supposed to fight with only thirty thousand?!”

“W-Well, their commander is *the* Count Eintorian, the one they say drove off

the Naruya Kingdom. S-So... He'll manage it, somehow!"

The nobles weren't even listening anymore. The only thing that had mattered to them was the number of reinforcements. Even Duke Lushake, who had proposed requesting reinforcements in the first place, shook his head in dismay. No one was going to say, "Well, we have thirty thousand men joining us, so let's try and fight," in this situation.

The nobles who'd stayed in the capital, trusting in Runanese reinforcements, were considering options for other countries to flee to. Even Berack left the palace with a scowl on his face. How was he supposed to fight with a mere thirty thousand troops? The Royal Rozernan Army had suffered from horrible levels of desertion and poor discipline, leaving only about ten thousand troops. That gave him ten thousand men with no will to fight, plus thirty thousand reinforcements.

Meanwhile, the enemy had sixty thousand elite soldiers. Not only that, the Brijitians had conscripted the surrendered armies from Rozern's other domains, using them as slave soldiers that shielded them from incoming arrows. That meant that they'd added another twenty thousand slaves to their forces, bringing their total manpower to eighty thousand.

Thirty thousand men would never stand a chance against that.

Berack was well aware of the morale and training levels of the Royal Army, and he'd concluded the war was unwinnable. His advisor Kaiten felt differently, though.

"Commander! I think it's worth putting up a fight and seeing how it goes. Even if they're only thirty thousand men, with *the* Count Eintorian leading them, I believe they'll protect the capital somehow..."

"Shut up! One man doesn't change the number of soldiers!"

"But Count Eintorian achieved victory in an even larger war..."

"Hmph, those stories were blown out of proportion. That's just how rumors are. Besides, he can't take advantage of the geography in this situation. He'll be fighting on the open plains in front of the capital. What kind of strategy could he possibly execute there?!"

“We can’t let ourselves think like that. The lords who submitted already made a mistake. Their eagerness to surrender left the country in this awful shape... It’s not yet too late. We should regroup and consider how to fight back in earnest now!”

“Would you shut up?! Don’t talk like you understand!”

Kaiten was only managing to piss Berack off.

*

The Runanese reinforcements crossed the border and arrived at the capital of Rozern without incident. From there, we went directly to the palace for an audience with the king. He was as young as I’d expected, probably around middle-school age.

“I come with reinforcements, Your Majesty! This is their commander, Count Eintorian,” Euracia introduced me as we both knelt before the king.

“O-Oh, I see! Are you the Count Eintorian we’ve heard so much about?!”

“While I am not entirely sure how I should take that, I am indeed the Count of Eintorian,” I said, nodding.

With a look of urgency on his face, the king said, “Then let me ask you this: is it true that the reinforcements from Runan are thirty thousand men...? Is there any chance of more joining you later?”

That question made all of the nobles look at me too. They seemed dissatisfied with the number of troops.

In other words, they think there aren’t enough. Okay, I’ll give them that. There certainly aren’t too many*, that’s for sure.*

Still, this wasn’t the worst possible scenario. We had enough to fight, at least.

“There is not.”

“Oh, no... You mean to stop the enemy with just thirty thousand troops...?”

The nobles all nodded at the king’s words. Euracia shook her head in dismay.

“Sire, even these thirty thousand men were not easy to obtain. And they are more than enough to fight with. Have no worries. In the name of Rozern, I

swear I will defend the capital!” she shouted, unable to maintain her silence any longer.

“I came here because I also believe there’s more than a good enough chance that we can win!” I agreed with her.

The nobles only sighed. Every one of them looked utterly defeated already.

*

Standing atop the castle walls of Rozern’s capital, which would soon become a violently contested battlefield, I asked Commander-in-Chief Berack, “What is the current state of the Royal Rozernan Army?”

I could have just looked at the system, obviously, but I needed to ask the question for its own sake. It would have seemed strange if I already knew before he told me.

“We have ten thousand troops. I tried to gather men from all the other domains, but they’ve all just surrendered or fled... We only have the capital’s basic garrison now.”

“That’s awful! Most of the domains just submitted without a fight?” Euracia interjected. Berack answered her with a firm nod.

“That’s correct, Your Highness. This is the reality we’re faced with.”

I had to admit, I hadn’t expected this. Basically, none of the domain’s armies had arrived to support the capital, and all we had was its original garrison, ten thousand men strong. Not even the domains north of the capital, which had yet to be invaded, had sent troops.

This was going to require a massive change in plans.

They were in no state to defend the place with just the Royal Army while I sent the reinforcements around elsewhere. While the King of Runan had been taking his sweet time getting these reinforcements together, Brijit’s invasion had proceeded at a breakneck pace, worsening the situation even more.

If we could have made it before the Brijitians invaded, this would have gone totally different. Well, not that I have time to gripe about it now.

“Anyway, how *do* you plan to fight them?” Berack asked me. “Between the

Royal Army and your reinforcements combined, we still only have forty thousand troops...”

“We’ll have to take optimal advantage of a siege battle.”

That’s the basic thing, for now.

Berack, however, snickered at my idea. “The vaunted advisor’ strategy is *simply fighting a siege battle*? Hah hah. Oh, that’s just splendid.”

Turning his back on me with a mocking laugh, he walked off and descended from the castle walls.

I guess that means that the Rozernan commander in chief’s lost the will to fight too, then. Just look at the way he’s acting. And the stats tell me the Royal Army only has 8 Morale.

Euracia bit her lip with a pained look on her face as she regarded the commander in chief.

“I never thought Rozern was such a weak-willed country,” she said. “It seems that everyone’s already decided that the thirty thousand troops we’ve brought won’t do any good. Even though it’s not a small number of men, by any means...”

“The enemy do have more than us, after all,” I replied. “It probably feels that way even more strongly to those who aren’t experienced with war.”

“But there’s a vast difference in what we’re capable of with and without those reinforcements,” Euracia insisted. “If we put up a desperate struggle, I’m confident we can win. We can manage so long as we all bring our hearts together!”

She’s right. We do need to bring everyone’s hearts together.

Basically, we needed to raise their Morale. Ultimately, she needed to give her own nation’s soldiers the will to fight, because if fleeing was the only thing on the locals’ minds, there was no way the reinforcements’ Morale was going to improve.

I could come up with the best plan ever and it wouldn’t mean a thing if I’m unable to execute it.

I'd already known Rozern would be in this kind of awful shape.

*

"Your Majesty. We only have Ronaf and Beijen left to occupy before we reach the capital!"

"Heh heh. We already have them in our sights!" Bautore, King of Brijit, nodded, pleased with their steady progress. "Isn't it around the time Runanese reinforcements will be arriving in the capital now?"

"Indeed it is!" answered the Brijitian advisor Isenbahan.

Bautore stroked his chin awhile before calling on one of the Three Swordsmen, Elante the Heavyblade over.

"I will take Ronaf and Beijen before heading to the capital. You take the long route around and head there ahead of us. You are forbidden from attacking the castle before I arrive. Set up camps and thoroughly torment the enemy!"

"Understood, sire!" Elante answered.

Bautore looked back to the troops, chuckling and satisfied. "Have no fears, men! You'll have your fill of rape and murder in the two remaining domains, whether they surrender or not. Enjoy yourselves as we prepare for the decisive battle! Heh heh heh! Gah ha ha ha ha!"

The Runanese reinforcements were a paltry thirty thousand men. It was just like he'd thought: Runan didn't have anything to spare. Thirty thousand men were nothing to fear. Bautore continued shouting, assured of his victory.

*

In front of the Rozernan capital, the yellow uniforms of the Brijitian military started coming into view outside the walls. They were sooner than I'd expected. We still hadn't gotten anything ready yet, and morale's terrible as ever.

It was to be expected, really, given it had only been a day since we arrived.

Royal Brijitian Army

Manpower: 20,000 men

Morale: 90

The army showed up with twenty thousand troops. From the look of it, they were some sort of advance party. The main force would still be attacking the other domains.

The problem's the Rozernan Army's pathetic 8 Morale.

The mere sight of this advance party had already sent the Rozernans into a confused frenzy. If it weren't for the fact the gates were all closed, they would have deserted already. As soon as the enemy appeared, morale plummeted again. If this chaos was what they'd been aiming for when they sent the advance party, the operation was a rousing success.

Although, it didn't look like they were going to lay siege to us immediately. They just stayed out there, putting pressure on the castle.

"The enemy! The enemy are coming!" came the startled report from atop the walls.

"Th-Those are Rozernan citizens!" Euracia cried out in surprise. Just as she said, the people who were pressing towards the walls were Rozernans who had been captured.

The Brijitians set the prisoners loose before giving chase, killing those at the very rear. If they stopped, they'd die. The people rushed to the walls for dear life. They kept on running as people tripped, or were pushed and fell and were trampled to death.

"H-Help!"

"Open the gates!"

The prisoners managed to reach the gates, but they would not open. The more they wailed in despair, the more the Brijitian cavalry seemed to delight in murdering them. But if we opened the gates now, the cavalry would rush in with them.

We couldn't open the gates, but at this rate, the Rozernans were just going to watch as they countrymen were massacred. In other words, their morale would fall even further. It was a dirty move, but fairly effective at making Rozern

suffer.

Whether they opened gates or not, Rozern would collapse.

Trembling with rage as she watched, the princess gritted her teeth and raced down to the gate.

“Throw open these gates at once! Can’t you people see and hear your fellow countrymen screaming for help on the other side?!” Euracia shouted at the guards.

But Berack stood in her way. He booted the guard aside and stood blocking the gates personally.

“This gate must not be opened. Are you going to jeopardize the capital for their insignificant lives? No one, not even you, has the right to do that, Your Highness!”

Euracia delivered a swift kick to Berack, knocking him out of her way, before angrily shouting, “Silence! What point is there in desperately shouting that we must fight to defend our families and the nation if we then turn around and just watch as our own people die?! Those people out there are Rozernans, our own flesh and blood!”

Drawing her sword, she commanded, “You will open these gates at once!”

The guards hurried to do as she demanded, and the moment they did people rushed inside. Euracia raced out in front of them on horseback, surprising everyone with the speed of her steed.

“Didn’t you hear Her Highness?! Let’s go, men!” Advisor Kaiten shouted, ignoring a glare from Berack.

Euracia’s flying off the handle? Well, I’m not going to stop her. I’m the one who told her to fight her own way. Yeah, this is her *fight. It’d be wrong for me to stop her. I need this to play out as per the game’s history. It’s laying fundamental groundwork for my future strategy.*

“Fihatori!”

So with the intention of following her, I called Count Fihatori, who was second-in-command of the reinforcements.

He's one of Duke Ronan's retainers, but I don't really have any choice but to trust him. Regardless of whether he deserves that trust, if we botch the defense here, we'll both either end up dead or return to Runan in failure. That means we're in the same boat, at least. I can trust him more than I can trust Berack.

"I'm going to the princess's side. Leave the reinforcements in the capital. Close the gates if the cavalry starts getting near them!"

The vast majority of soldiers in the capital were reinforcements. That meant we had control of the city. By extension, so long as the reinforcements stayed in the city, Berack wouldn't be able to close the gates again without our say-so.

"Commander! You could be going to your death, walking alone into a trap like this! You mustn't do it!" Fihatori tried to stop me, looking surprised.

This guy doesn't know about my Martial score. All he knows is that I can pull off a good strategy.

I didn't have time to explain that to him, however.

"That was an order, Fihatori!"

My domineering attitude made Fihatori give up and back down.

"Remember what I said! So long as the enemy doesn't come within two hundred meters of the gates, they're to stay open! Don't let Berack do whatever he wants!"

"Understood. But if anything happens to you, the reinforcements will withdraw immediately."

He was saying if I died, there was no point in them helping Rozern. Well, that was fair enough.

"Let's go, Jint. It's your time to shine."

I had zero intention of dying, so I nodded to Jint, then hurried outside.

*

She was a hero—always standing at the vanguard, swinging her sword in defense of the country. The situation was different now. While she was away requesting reinforcements from Runan, Rozern failed to hold the line and was

pushed all the way back to the capital.

But what she *was* at her core hadn't changed.

If she does well, she can still rally the troops!

Euracia rode her horse out in front of the Brijitian cavalry in order to buy time for her people to get inside the walls. The cavalry she saw now were, in fact, special among the forces of Brijit. Because Brijit had many iron mines, the cavalry came to be known as iron cavalry due to their steel armor.

Their charge attacks boasted overwhelming strength on the open plains!

Though they were defeated by Naruya in the game's history, that was only because they were up against an even tougher opponent. Had they been used properly, they might have been able to play a larger role in the game.

And Euracia stood against these guys alone!

"The gates are open! Charge!"

Once he saw that almost none of the defenders had sallied forth to meet them despite the gates opening, Elante ordered the iron cavalry to get into formation for a charge attack.

"What a bunch of bores. They aren't even trying to buy time. If this is how they are, then there's no need to wait for the main force! I'll be the one who takes this castle!"

At this, all of the Rozernan soldiers who'd unenthusiastically followed Euracia suddenly got cold feet. Their horses whinnied as they pulled back on the reins, not just stopping, but actually starting to retreat. Some of the soldiers even took advantage of having gotten outside the castle to flee outright. Those who weren't running trembled with fear.

Even Kaiten, the advisor to the Rozernan Army, who had been keeping up with her, fell from his horse before he could really fight at all.

That meant that, ultimately, Euracia was on her own.

She didn't say anything, though. She simply charged the iron cavalry, sword in hand. As she swung her blade, blue mana impaled the iron cavalrymen she rode past through the chest. Her attack hit ten men all at once, but the deep blue

mana whirled like a hurricane, tearing through each man's chest.

Rossade

A valuable sword handed down through the Rozernan royal family.

This sword unleashes the user's mana like a skill. The higher their mana score, the larger the effect.

Martial +3

That was the nature of the sword she carried.

Using Rossade to unleash her mana, Euracia cut down the steel-clad cavalrymen one after another, each one splattering her with his own blood. Euracia went on slaying even as her entire body was stained crimson.

After losing around twenty men, the iron cavalry captain who'd underestimated her finally snapped to his senses and yelled, "What are you fools doing?! She's only one woman!"

The iron cavalry charged Euracia all at once. She continued advancing, unconcerned, taking them down with mana. The further she went, the more enemies there were, but still she kept on moving forward, leaving nothing but the broken bodies of the iron cavalry and their horses running wild without their masters in her wake.

"Attack her horse!" shouted the captain of the unit of iron cavalry charging at Euracia. At some point, they had managed to get both in front of and behind her.

With such a massive difference in numbers, it had always been just a matter of time before they surrounded her. And soon after the order was given, her horse let out a sharp whine as the enemy's spear tore through it. Euracia cut down the spearman responsible, but fell from her horse as soon as she had.

The princess rolled across the ground. Still, she rose again, albeit somewhat shakily, and took up a fighting stance against the iron cavalry with her sword.

There was a trail of blood running down her forehead, perhaps from a cut she took when she fell.

It didn't seem to bother her in the slightest as she swung her blade at the iron

cavalry, but the fact they had already had her encircled was a problem.

The enemy fell by the dozens in front of her with each swing of Rossade, but her back was exposed to the enemies behind her. Those enemies attacked. Of course, because she used the power of mana, she was able to avoid their attacks because of her overwhelmingly higher Martial score. Still, dodge as she might, the enemy came in ceaseless waves, and eventually, one of their swords met the flesh of her back.

Blood gushed, and her face twisted in pain. Regardless, she never backed down.

Thrusting Rossade into the ground, she removed the pendant from around her neck and closed her eyes. As she did, a massive mana circle appeared around the spot where the sword had been thrust.

The circle flashed white, and a giant explosion spread out around her.

Boom!

The blast triggered a chain of secondary explosions as white light swallowed up all of the iron cavalry. After the big explosion, she remained the only one standing—every single one of the cavalrymen who had been surrounding her had vanished.

A tool! That white mana circle's the power of a tool. Valdesca was using one too, come to think of it.

However, as Euracia leaned on Rossade for support, her strength all but spent, the Brijitian infantry rushed towards her.

They were led by a large man with heavy footsteps. The man who carried a greatsword as long as he was tall laughed.

"Excellent. Just brilliant work. I never would've thought Rozern had a woman like you. Now it's my turn to have a go at you myself!"

Elante Modidev

Age: 41

Martial: 91

Intelligence: 31

Command: 71

The man's Martial score was needlessly high. True to his "Heavyblade" moniker, he swung a sword as tall as himself about with ease as he attacked Euracia. She quickly pulled Rossade out of the ground and struck back, but not even the blue mana was a match for her opponent's sword.

Then the swinging greatsword produced a powerful mana pressure that blasted her backwards.

"Hey, what gives? I thought you were going to make this at least a little fun. Is that all you've got?"

Elante took up a fighting stance facing Euracia as he complained. Euracia, all cut up from rolling on the ground, rose to trembling feet.

Rossade's a treasure that manifests mana as a skill.

Even a user who didn't have A-class mana could unleash the blue mana, but only using their own accumulated mana. Once that was all expended, they couldn't use its power anymore. That said, I'd already been expecting that she would get hurt. It was absolutely necessary that she put up a good fight to raise the Rozernan soldiers' Morale.

As such, I was simply watching as she bled.

I won't let her die, though. I'll only let her get injured at worst!

I watched her fight while preparing to use my skills to step in and protect her at any time.

It looked like she was reaching her limit, so I shouted to the Rozernan soldiers, "Men of Rozern! Do you feel nothing as you watch her fight like that?!"

Now that they had all seen Euracia, the key thing was pulling the trigger. If they saw her in that state and didn't do anything, then Rozern truly was beyond saving. I'd be better off packing up and heading back to Eintorian.

But then something changed!

"Damn it! I'm going too!"

“Me too!”

“Her Highness has always looked out for us. She’s the one who saved me when I was being tormented by the nobles!”

“Yeah! You know, I think I saw her looking after an old woman who collapsed as she was passing by once too. Damn it all! Screw these Brijitian scum!”

The Rozernan soldiers drew their swords one after another. Their once-lifeless eyes, bereft of the will to fight, began to take on new color.

“We’re gonna save Her Highness!”

The men of Rozern all raced to get to her first. The more who joined them, the greater their ardor grew. It was infectious.

As they all rushed to Euracia’s side, they cried, “We’ll save her even if it costs us our lives!” and threw themselves in front of the Heavyblade to protect her. They moved with such vigor that no one would ever believe they were the same men with the lifeless eyes who’d been unable to do anything.

Royal Rozernan Army

Manpower: 5,700 men

Morale: 90

Training: 20

In that moment, their pitiful 3 Morale leaped all the way to 90. Thanks to that, dozens of Rozernan soldiers fended off Elante’s attack on Euracia. Of course, the boost in Morale did nothing about their Training. They could grit their teeth and fight, but they were up against the uppermost elites of the Brijitian army.

That’s why fighting on the open plains without any strategy could only end in defeat. But if they could maintain this level of motivation, there were all sorts of tactics that became viable. We could carry out operations from the other side of the castle walls.

It would require Morale, but we had that now! The way Euracia risked herself had awakened the soldiers.

“Jint, you take care of the small fry!”

“Got it!”

Jint, who had headed out here with me, swept aside the enemies in front of us with a brilliant attack and led the way to the princess’s side.

“You’ve done enough. Let’s pull back for now!”

I helped her onto a horse before getting on myself. She didn’t look like she was in any condition to ride alone. Elante came after me, trying to prevent that, of course.

But this time Jint deflected his sword.

“Wh-What?!”

Yeah. That’s right.

For as strong as they made Elante out to be, he was weaker than Jint. That’s why I didn’t need to use Daitoren against him. We could have saved Euracia any time we wanted to. The only reason I hadn’t was that I needed the men of Rozern to realize they had to fight for themselves.

This was a battle I’d prepared for her, and she’d fought it well.

So, now it’s my turn.

“Huh? Are we running away?” Jint asked, giving me a blank look.

I motioned for him to shut up and follow me, then turned to speak to Euracia.

“There’s no need to keep fighting here. While you were buying time, almost all of the prisoners made it inside the capital.”

I’ve already achieved the goal of raising Morale. So there’s no need to fight any more right now.

“In that case, hold on for a moment!”

Euracia pulled something out from under her collar and hurled it towards the enemy. Instantly, there was a burst of white light. It was like some sort of flash grenade.

“Let’s all pull back to the capital for now!” Euracia called out to the soldiers

who'd begun fighting. They wasted no time following her call to retreat. So apparently, she had a number of tools at her disposal.

This one let us put some distance between ourselves and the enemy, but obviously, they came after us again as soon as the bright light dissipated.

"Damn it! It's too bright! After them, at once! Call in the iron cavalry who were at the rear! We're pushing through the gates!"

I could even hear Elante's voice from behind us, giving orders.

"Do you know who that guy is, by any chance?" I asked. "He seemed like a rough and tough kinda guy."

I knew his name and abilities from the system, but nothing more than that. Euracia was quickly able to answer my question.

"That's Elante the Heavyblade, one of the Three Swordsmen of Brijit."

"The Three Swordsmen? You're telling me they've got three guys like that? Is he the strongest of them?"

By the time the game's protagonist raised his country and started to fight, Brijit had already been destroyed by Naruya. So all I knew about them was that their tyrannical king led his forces into battle and died.

"No. The rumors say another of their number, the Swiftblade, is the strongest..."

This is the reality that a country like Rozern faces without a single commander with a Martial over 90. Elante's strong, sure, but he's not a top class character by any stretch of the imagination. It'd be easy to kill him, but we'll pull back for now. The Brijitian king probably only sent him here to lower our morale using the prisoners. It's clear Elante's overconfident, though. He must think he can take Rozern on his own. What Brijit doesn't know, and neither does Rozern, is that there's a commander here in the capital who's stronger than him.

"More importantly, though, is this going to be all right?" Euracia asked as she looked behind us, her arms wrapped tightly around my waist. "I can see that we've put some distance between us and the enemy, but they might be able to break through the gates at this rate..."

Although she had slain a thousand iron cavalrymen, there were still nineteen thousand soldiers menacing the capital. It was only natural she'd be concerned.

"For now, we've gotta get to the gates!"

I rode between the capital's gates with her riding behind me.

*

"That strategist, Eintorian, is a disgrace! Look at him run after all his bluster and confidence! Bwa ha ha ha ha! Serves him right!" Berack laughed out loud from on top of the walls.

Fihatori, on the other hand, felt Erhin had made the right call. There was no reason to fight a battle he knew he would lose. If the enemy could use mana, that meant he was an A-class commander. In Fihatori's estimation, that meant the princess and the commander in chief stood no chance of beating him.

"Have our archers take aim to delay the enemy's pursuit!"

He's still our commander. I can't let him go dying on me right now.

Fihatori ordered the archers to protect them. Beside him, tittering madly with a malicious grin, Berack murmured, "That's right. Rozern deserves to fall."

*

As soon as we were through the gate, I helped Euracia down from the horse. She was limping a little, but managed to walk somehow, possibly because she still had a little mana left.

"Shut the gates as soon as all our soldiers are inside!" Fihatori gave commands from atop the walls while providing support with his bow.

The problem, however, was the iron cavalry.

Rumble!

It was all infantry that showed up with Elante, but there were two units of iron cavalry in his twenty thousand man force. Euracia had wiped out one of them, but the other charged forward at an incredible speed. The enemy infantry weren't fast enough to be a concern.

That's why the cavalry were our major issue—they were faster than our own infantry forces. We had no mounted troops.

"Fihatori!" I shouted at my second-in-command. "That's enough support. Give Jint two thousand archers and three thousand cavalry right away. Jint, you lead them and head out the west gate, not the south. We'll close the west gate right

behind you. Follow the plan I told you earlier. Also, Fihatori! You lead the remaining twenty five thousand reinforcements and follow me. We're going to the central plaza!"

After giving Fihatori and Jint their orders, I turned to Euracia and asked, "The iron cavalry aren't afraid of arrows. Judging by the speed they're going, they'll breach the gates before the Rozernan infantry can get through. If they're able to hold the gates and buy time, we can expect a massive enemy force to enter the capital. Now, the question is: would you leave the gates open?"

"Well...!" Euracia trailed off, unable to instantly answer the question. But she quickly shook her head. "Those men risked their lives to save me from Elante! If I were to abandon them now because they didn't make it in time, it would be impossible to move them to act like that again. Like you've already said, the morale of Rozern is on the line in this fight!"

That was the right answer. This was all about morale.

"I'm still fine," Euracia continued. "I will face the iron cavalry in front of the gates, and I'll hold them off, even if it costs me my life!"

"Looking at this from a cold, rational perspective, you're in no state to take on a thousand iron cavalrymen. Do you have another tool or something?"

Naturally, it took time for mana to recover. In her current condition, Euracia would only be able to muster as much strength as a common soldier. Her wounds must have ached every time she moved, still bleeding as she was.

"No, not right now." Euracia shook her head, biting her lip. "But I cannot abandon the men outside! If your strategy is to cast them away, then... I won't be following it!"

"That's the way. This is why they call you a hero. You're deserving of that respect."

"Huh? What are you talking about, so suddenly...?"

"If you fight your way, it should help see my plan to fruition. You've done that so far, so now it's my turn to step up. Of course, I won't be having them close the gates, for all the reasons you've laid out. If you trust me, then lead the defenders to the central plaza!"

Having said that, I turned my back on her.

In all honesty, if I were to make a cold, rational decision, it would be better to shut the gates immediately and give up on the men who are still out there. But right now, the most important thing is morale.

If I abandoned the men who didn't make it in time, there was no chance that morale would have improved.

The princess's feelings—her will to fight alone outside the gates—made a major impact on the Rozernan soldiers. We could have killed Elante out there several times over. But if we had*, we would have killed him and him alone. Even if the loss of their commander threw them into confusion, those are well trained soldiers. If we'd launched a pursuit, it's quite likely that they'd have turned the tables on us. Fighting a battle of cat-and-mouse on the open field would put our forces, which have the lower Training score, at a disadvantage.*

It'd also mean leaving the castle unattended. That'd make it the worst possible option if it turns out there's another unit around. If we can't wipe them out by chasing after them, that means we need to try and do it another way.

I felt the intensity of Euracia's eyes on my back, but said no more to her and moved to the central plaza.

*

I don't know if she decided to trust me or just had no other option, but Euracia gathered the Rozernan soldiers in the central plaza. The iron cavalry, which had taken the southern gates, must have been waiting for Elante or something, because they hadn't shown up yet.

As soon as he caught up to them, their arrival was imminent, though.

Yes. This is good.

"Why in the world are we doing this in the central plaza? If we let the enemy come in this far, they'll occupy the capital!"

I shook my head and disagreed with the princess.

"It's the only way we can decrease their numbers. Even if we held the southern gates, the enemy would retreat temporarily once they were closed.

We'd just be letting twenty thousand men go at that point, right?"

"Isn't stopping the enemy the best thing we can do?" Euracia's voice rose, a look of incredulity on her face.

"In strategy, you always have to do better than the best. So watch. It's time for me to do my thing."

"What are you talking about...? H-Hey, you!"

It looked like I hadn't dispelled Euracia's doubts in the slightest. I got the feeling that was the case for Fihatori and the reinforcements too. They all thought I was crazy, leaving the gates open to lure the enemy deep inside the capital.

While all of this was going on, the iron cavalry showed up in the central plaza with Elante leading the way. He must not have been able to use that big sword of his while mounted, because he had a separate horse carrying it.

Elante chortled down at us. "Are you a pack of fools? Bwa ha ha!" he bellowed as he dismounted his horse. "I thought you'd defend the gates, but you opened the way to the plaza instead!" Three iron cavalrymen carried Elante's sword to him, every one of them heaving for breath. Elante took the sword in two hands and fell into a fighting stance as he turned to face us.

More and more soldiers pressed in from behind him. I checked with the system, finding that their number totaled ten thousand strong. They crowded in as if trying to surround the central plaza. With the exception of the iron cavalry, they were all infantry. The remaining ten thousand were probably still making their way through the gates.

I faced off with Elante by myself.

"Hey, you, stop!" Euracia called after me, but I ignored her.

It wasn't just her. Fihatori, and the members of the reinforcements who had been up on the walls and witnessed Elante's mana looked on with shock too. They were all totally scared of a commander with a mere 91 Martial.

I needed to show the Royal Rozernan Army reality. The fact was, there was no need to fear a Martial score like that.

Now it's my turn.

"All right, I'll start with those iron cavalry."

As I said that...

Will you use Earthquake?

...I unleashed a skill in their direction.

Rumble!

The ground instantly shook, forming countless rifts on the surface. Like a riverbed during a drought! Red light seeped out from the cracks, crimson as molten magma.

"Aghhhhhhhh!"

Soon they were wreathed in a roaring red hellfire.

"Hmph! That's nothing!" Elante snorted, thrusting his sword into the ground like I had. Yellow light manifested in front of him.

A defensive skill! He has a Martial of 91. Even if his defensive skill momentarily boosts it to 94, that's not going to make a difference. I've got 300 points in reserve. I can use my skills up to three times in total.

That meant I had two uses left.

I used Earthquake again with the surviving iron cavalry and Elante in range.

*

Boom!

Unless they had a special treasure like Rossade, only those with A-class or higher Martial scores could unleash their accumulated mana through their weapons. Erhin's skill caused further cracks, followed by a fiery explosion. That one strike collapsed the iron cavalry's formation.

Formations were the most important thing in battle. When a group broke formation, that created all sorts of openings to attack them.

"H-He just...!" Euracia stammered, blinking in surprise.

She'd heard he was a mad genius when it came to military strategy, but never that he was also an A-class wielder of mana. She'd never have dreamed it possible. All she'd known was that his brilliant tactics let him retake Lynon.

"Never would've guessed the commander could do that..."

It was the same for Fihatori. Actually, everyone was shocked.

"He can't possibly do this alone!" Euracia cried, grasping Rossade.

But maybe together*, we can,* she thought.

And yet, at that very moment, Erhin activated the same skill again, setting off another explosion of flames. Elante smirked as he too slammed his sword into the ground once more.

"Elante the Heavyblade, was it? Do you know the difference between confidence and conceit? The man who knows his enemy and knows himself is confident. The man who knows not his enemy, yet smirks, is merely conceited."

Having said this, Erhin threw aside the sword he'd been holding. He then spread his hands, summoning another that appeared with a flash of white light. Erhin immediately cast the summoned sword—Daitoren—towards Elante. As the effects of Earthquake faded, Elante pulled the Heavyblade from the ground, his brow furrowing.

"Now you're just fooling around... Cease your worthless prattle!"

But Erhin's sword was fast. Elante tried to defend with his greatsword, but his Marital score was only 91 to begin with, and a skill that let him momentarily raise it to 94 was no match for Erhin's Crush. The enemy's arrogance and incaution had gifted Erhin a victory.

Daitoren smashed through the greatsword like it was made of glass, then impaled Elante through the chest without losing any momentum.

"Gwagh!"

His heart pierced, Elante's massive body...

Thud!

...fell to the ground as he let out a dying scream.

It only took an instant.

Euracia and the Rozernan soldiers, Fihatori and the Runanese reinforcements, and even the eagerly advancing Brijitians —all of their jaws dropped in awe.

That's just how famous Elante was in Brijit.

Erhin walked over as if he hadn't done anything special and pulled Daitoren out of the ground where it was now embedded. "Your captain's dead," he said matter-of-factly. "If you want to keep on fighting anyways, then bring it. I'll take you on!"

With this declaration, Erhin sprang into the middle of the enemy. The thousand iron cavalrymen had been reduced to less than two hundred by his Earthquake. Once Erhin started firing off Martial 94 Attack commands at random with Daitoren, that number rapidly fell even further.

"What are you doing, Fihatori?! Now's the time! The enemy is in disarray!"

Fihatori had been looking on in stunned silence, but Erhin's shout snapped him back to his senses and he gave orders:

"B-B-Begin the attack at once. The enemy is in disarray. We have the advantage. Everyone, charge!"

"Yeaaargh!!!!!!!"

The Runanese reinforcements, emboldened by Erhin's display of martial prowess, cheered as they rushed towards the enemy.

"Ah...! We should go too. This is our capital. We can't let the reinforcements do all the work!"

Despite her exhaustion, Euracia joined the fight on trembling legs. The roughly ten thousand soldiers who had breached the capital were so thrown into disarray that they began to panic.

"Retreat. Damn it! The captain's dead. We've got to retreat!" a Brijitian commander shouted as he remembered that basic strategy called for a retreat in this kind of chaotic situation. However, that retreat spread word of Elante's demise to the men in the rear, and the Royal Brijitian Army fell into even worse disorder.

*

As Erhin was fighting Elante, Jint was leading a unit of archers and cavalrymen out the western gates and around to the southern ones.

He asked Fihatori's subordinate, Yorlen, who had joined him, "What exactly's a crane wing formation?"

"A crane wing formation? Well, that's what it's called when we deploy in a semi-circular formation, like a pair of wings, facing the southern gates."

All Yorlen knew about Jint was that he was Erhin's retainer, and was allowed to speak to him on familiar terms, so Yorlen ended up answering him more respectfully than he might have otherwise.

"That sounds too tough for me to understand. Anyway, just deploy in that formation!"

"It's not all that complicated. This is one of the simpler formations," Count Yorlen replied, before giving his men the orders.

"Good. Shower any enemies who leave the walls with arrows!"

"But will they be in any hurry to come outside when they look like they have the momentum to take the capital?" Yorlen asked.

Jint seemed to think for a moment before replying, "How should I know? I just do what I'm told."

Even if I'm ordered to die, he added to himself mentally as he gripped his sword.

Sometime later, the Royal Brijitian Army did, in fact, begin barreling out from within the walls, surprisingly enough.

This was what Erhin had sent all the reinforcements' archers here for.

"The enemy are really coming out!" Yorlen shouted with a look of disbelief.

"Better shoot them, then, huh?"

On Jint's signal, they started to rain arrows on the Brijitian soldiers who fled through the gates.

"Urgh! Don't push! There's arrows!"

Even though they saw the arrows, turning back wasn't an option for the Royal Brijitian Army. They would have been better off fighting inside the walls, but their commanding officers had all given the order to retreat at the same time in the chaos after the captain fell, and that had resulted in the worst outcome possible.

They rushed them out of the capital to retreat, leaving them with no other recourse than to be met with a great hail of arrows once they were outside.

That was the hell they now faced.

"Once you finish firing, hold formation. Then head towards the enemy and strike. Don't let a single man escape!" Jint said as he stood at the vanguard, drawing his sword.

*

The capital was awash in blood.

We didn't have a choice. If we'd let those twenty thousand Brijitian soldiers go home, this war would have dragged on indefinitely. I needed to take advantage of this opportunity to ensure that didn't happen.

Our troops had insufficient training, but against an enemy that had fallen into a disorderly mess and had their route of escape cut off, they would obviously still have the advantage. We were able to use the castle walls to cut off their escape from the enemy's central plaza. But if I'd killed Elante outside the walls, they'd have been able to flee across the open fields.

It made a huge difference. Also, the most important thing in this battle was Rozernan morale. Maintaining that high score of 90 was the key.

The princess had fought on desperately by herself as the soldiers watched, and so long as she survived, their Morale would be preserved. Letting Euracia fight alone was a strategy I'd pursued, despite hating to do it to her, in order to improve morale. If we were able to eliminate the enemy because of it, then her sacrifice paid off.

Once we were victorious, I shouted to the soldiers of Runan, "This is another nation's war, yes. But if Rozern loses, the south of Runan will be the next battlefield. What is Southern Runan? That's right. It's where your families live.

So long as we win here, the battlefield won't spread to Runan. That makes this your war too. Follow me. If you just do as I command, we can achieve great things with minimal casualties! And when the day comes that we win this battle and advance on Brijit, I am certain His Majesty will reward you all generously. You'll all be paid so well that not just you, but your families will be able to live without fear for your lifestyles!"

This was something the men who'd come to fight a foreign war needed.

A motive.

That's why now that I'd shown them my power, and had a great victory in hand, it was the perfect chance to raise their morale.

"Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" The reinforcements cheered when they heard me.

Morale is now 80.

Their Morale score shot up unbelievably fast.

Brijit likely had stronger commanders still. Some of them might have skills that could neutralize Crush, and if more than two of them were A-class commanders, then Crush would never be enough to let me win on its own.

This is where the real battle begins.

Fortunately, Euracia's hard fought battle had raised morale, so my preparations were now complete.

*

"I saw your work. It was wonderful. Truly wonderful. You're amazing!"

The young king was so full of glee, you would have thought the Brijitians had been driven off completely. But the war wasn't over yet. We did hold the advantage now, true, but it wasn't time to celebrate.

"Your Majesty, the true battle is only just beginning. Please, save your praise for after we've defeated the Brijitians."

The king nodded in agreement.

“R-Right you are! Okay! Let me see to it that you are amply rewarded when the time comes!”

The look in the king and the nobles’ eyes had changed with this battle. The princess’s had too. Euracia, wrapped in bandages, gave an intense nod of agreement. Fortunately, her wounds were not deep. They were just scratches, nothing serious like a broken bone. She was back to work the next day after a good night’s sleep, after all.

“Thank you, sire. I’d like to ask something of you to help with our victory now.”

“Of course!” the king shouted, and his nobles nodded in agreement.

I concluded the audience politely, having taken stock of how their opinions of me had changed, then left the chamber with the princess.

We headed to the barracks for a war council. As we walked through the palace, shoulder to shoulder, Euracia suddenly stepped out in front of me to block my way.

“Why did you hide it from me?! I never knew you were so strong! Do you have any idea how famous the Three Swordsmen of Brijit are?!”

“I never really tried to keep it a secret. It would be more accurate to say I’ve just never had the opportunity to show off that side of myself before.”

“Maybe so, but... Um! Could I trouble you to spar with me? I never had the chance to cross blades with you when I infiltrated the castle in Eintorian.”

She clenched her fists with great determination.

“You want to get stronger, I take it?” I asked.

“Yes. Because becoming mighty is righteous!”

I’d understand if she were to say that might makes right, but she thinks getting stronger is righteous in and of itself, huh?

“So, what you’re saying is that training is righteous?”

“Yes. If I remain as weak as I am now, I cannot defend anything.”

“I see... Well, whatever. My subordinate, Jint, is stronger than I am, by the

way.”

“Whaaaa?! He is?!” Euracia suddenly got a grim look on her face as she gripped Rossade.

That’s one more person for her to fight, I guess.

“So, you don’t doubt my strategy anymore? I haven’t forgotten the look you gave me when I said we should gather in the central plaza...” I changed the topic, as there were more important things to address than her training right now.

“...”

Euracia had no response for that. Maybe she felt called out? After some time, I tried asking a slightly different question.

“I told you, didn’t I? The plan was for me to fight my own battle. I trusted in your ability to raise the men’s morale. That means even you were incorporated as a part of my strategy. It’s why I couldn’t tell you in advance. If you knew what I was up to, and were just acting, there was a chance that the Rozernan soldiers wouldn’t react to your desperate struggle.”

If she had known someone stronger than Elante was waiting in the wings to save her, she might not have fought so hard. I don’t think I’d have been able to draw out that image of her from history, the hero of Rozern.

“Do you believe that I used you?”

It was certainly one way of interpreting things. That’s why I asked, but Euracia firmly denied it.

“No. I don’t mind being used if it’s to defend the country.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d say that.”

“But to think you’d use that to wipe out the enemy... It’s true, I was a little doubtful. You wouldn’t tell me your strategy, and you just watched as I was fighting all on my own...”

“Hold on. If things had taken a turn for the worse, I planned to help you no matter what, strategy be damned. I wasn’t about to let you die there. Please, trust me on that.”

“If that’s the case...” Euracia suddenly bowed her head to me. “I’m sorry!”

“Huh?”

“From now on, I’ll trust you with all my heart! No matter what you say!” she declared with determination.

She looked so serious I couldn’t help but poke some fun at her.

“And if I say the sun will rise from the west?”

There was a moment’s hesitation. “Then the sun will rise from the west today.”

“Seriously?”

Euracia nodded. “Because you say it will.”

“For the love of... Listen, it’s great you trust me and all...but your failure to trust me before now is still a great sin. I can’t forgive it so easily.”

When I said that to the woman who’d even nodded at my nonsense about the sun rising in the west, she gave me a troubled look.

“Th-Then what would you have me do?!”

“Well, it’s simple. I’ve seen a lot of your angry and cold expressions before now, but I haven’t seen you smile once. So, could you smile for me? I don’t care if you have to fake it.”

Ever since I met her at Eintorian Castle, I’d been smitten by her beautiful face, yet there was one thing I found incredibly disappointing about it.

She never let me see her smile. That hadn’t changed since we returned to her country. It only made me want to see it more.

“Well, you see...” Euracia furrowed her brow. “I can’t remember ever smiling before...”

“Not even once?”

“Not that I can recall.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve been shouldering the expectations of my people for as far back as I can

remember... My father taught me to live for the nation. ‘You unite and inspire the people, so you must never show weakness,’ he told me. It was a favorite saying of his, and I’ve lived by it. As a guardian of the nation, showing only my strength...”

Well, I kind of saw this coming, because that’s exactly what she was like as the hero of Rozern in the game’s history.

“Listen, just turn up the corners of your mouth like this and smile.”

In the end, I put my hands on her mouth. Then pulled.

“Owwwwwww!”

She raised both her arms and screamed while stamping her feet. I was worried she was going to kick me, so I withdrew my hands. If she booted me with all her strength, I’d go flying.

I’d better call it quits before she humiliates me.

“Oh, fine. I’ll give up for now. Let’s talk about that sword and the tools you used in battle...”

“This, you mean?” Euracia asked, holding Rossade.

“Could I take a look at it?”

She nodded and then handed me the sword, scabbard and all.

It was a beautiful sword, as one would expect. But it seemed it only bestowed a +3 to Martial in my hands. That was probably because it was a treasure that let a B-class mana wielder unleash their mana as if they were using a mana skill. But as I had no accumulated mana, I could only receive that enchantment as a bonus.

“Oh, and I have other tools as well. I used up the ones I brought with me, but there are still more in the palace’s treasury.”

“Oh, in the treasury, you say?”

“Yes. This seems like a good time. Would you like to see the treasury? I’ll bring some of the remaining tools...and you can have any that you need!”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes. In order to win this war, we’d part with them gladly,” the princess said then immediately turned her back to me. “Come, it’s right this way!”

She headed underground right away. The treasury was apparently in the palace basement. I followed her to a massive door. There was no one there to guard it. When Euracia held her hand up to the door, it reacted to the ring she was wearing and shone as it opened on its own. It was a white light.

This feels like the facility in the basement of Eintorian Castle.

There seemed to be a mana circle involved here too.

This facility was likely built in ancient times. Considering that white light is also associated with sacred power, could that mean the ancient facilities left on this continent have some connection to the game’s management team? Like, are the treasures and tools of the gods, or something like that?

Rossade’s an item-class treasure. The white light’s something different, associated with bonuses or perhaps something even greater.

Like Daitoren.

Could there still be more bonuses to hunt down?

That’s what I thought when I saw treasures or tools associated with white light, but I had no leads to go on now. For now, I just followed Euracia into the treasury.

“So this is your royal treasury...”

There was an incredible number of jeweled chests containing untold riches, along with expensive-looking arms and equipment on display. Of course, just because this was a treasury that didn’t mean all the treasures here were recognized as items by the game. Nonetheless, I had a feeling there would be several that it did.

Incidentally, the game’s items were broadly divided into two categories: treasures, which could be used over and over, and tools, which vanished after just one use. In fact, the tool that she’d used yesterday, the one which emitted white light, had immediately crumbled to dust.

“The tool I used was one of these pendants. There aren’t many left, though,”

she said as she put one on. “If there’s anything you think you’ll need, whether it’s one of the weapons you see over there or something else, just say so. Would you like to use one of these pendant-shaped tools yourself?”

Euracia pointed at the last remaining pendant.

“Hmm, I think you should use it to protect yourself. I’ll let you know if I need any of the weapons.”

“Sure. Take as many as you need!”

I began searching the treasury in earnest. To see if any of the treasures here were item-class. As I did, I found something unusual in one of the chests. The system recognized it as an item.

Rinkitsu

A treasure with the luck of the moon.

Raises the user’s Charisma.

It looked like an ordinary bracelet, but there were some intricate designs on the inside of it. This clearly wasn’t just any old item. I tried it on, but there was no point. The only info I could see about myself was my Martial score, after all.

“Have you taken a fancy to that bracelet?” Euracia asked with an odd look on her face. It was meant for a woman to wear.

“Yeah. I have.”

“Oh, really?”

I smiled and approached, then gently took her by the wrist.

“I think this might be a treasure with ancient mana residing in it. I have some ability to appraise these things. It shouldn’t be left lying in the treasury like this.”

“Huh? This thing?”

“You’re going to believe me if I say the sun will rise in the west, right? Well, there’s not much point in me using this. It’ll be most effective if you do. The mana which resides in this treasure heightens your charisma.”

With that, I put it on her wrist.

“Huh? Is that a fact?”

Euracia Rozern’s Charisma score has increased.

Euracia Rozern’s Command is now +2

Yeah, Euracia’s Charisma score heavily influences her Command. The higher it is, the more willing people will be to follow her. So this is the perfect item for Euracia.

Just as I’d predicted, increasing her Charisma also gave her Command score an impressive +2.

She already had a high Command score due to her ability to influence soldiers with her Charisma, and now her Command’s even higher!



“It really suits you. The golden color is a perfect match for your hair... It’s almost like it was made specifically for you.”

“You think so?” Euracia stared at the bracelet.

Well, she didn’t seem to have any intention of taking it off, at least. Having her Command go up was a good thing. I left her to herself and took another look around the treasury.

Yeah, I figured as much. Even though this is a treasure vault, hardly any of the things here are item-class.

After taking one look around, all I’d managed to discover was the bracelet I’d put on Euracia’s wrist. That, and a single sword. It was an odd one, brown in color and lacking any patterns on it. It didn’t look like it was made of iron based on the color, but when I hit it on something there was no mistaking that it was.

Nameless Sword

A sword crafted in ancient times.

Martial +2

It might not have had a special effect like Rossade, but it still provided a +2 to Martial.

It’s still a valuable treasure. Ordinary weapons don’t have this kind of effect.

Of course, when I saw the +2 to Martial, Jint was the first person who came to mind.

“Euracia, what’s this sword...?”

“Oh, that one? It’s an odd color, isn’t it? Father told me it’s very old. Rossade has been passed down through the Rozern family for generations, but that sword is one of the treasures we received as part of our share after the Twelve Continental Families destroyed the ancient Eintorian Kingdom.”

The Twelve Continental Families.

That was what they called the twelve houses that destroyed the ancient Eintorian Kingdom, and each became kings of the twelve countries they carved out of it.

“It must be pretty valuable, then, huh?”

“No. We’ve only held onto it because it came from the time of the ancient kingdom. If you need it, it’s yours!” Euracia agreed without hesitation. “Oh, hold on! Could it be there’s some secret about that sword? You mentioned you have an ability to appraise such things! It just looks like an ordinary sword to me, though...”

She brought her shoulder next to mine as she gazed at the sword, mystified by it. Standing this close to her, her pleasant fragrance stirred my senses.

“I don’t know if it has any secrets, but it’s not just any old sword. Jint doesn’t have a proper weapon, so could I let him use it in battle?”

“Please do!”

As she took the Nameless Sword in hand and looked it over, I noticed the ring on her finger.

“What’s that ring, by the way?”

Sacred Ring

An ancient treasure.

That was all the explanation the system gave me. It showed no additional effects, so I had to ask. Because the rings, pendants, and such that she wore were all tools.

Well, no, the ring’s not a tool, it’s a treasure, I guess. Since she’s able to use it more than once.

“This? It’s the key to the treasury.”

“It only works as a key?”

I have a key too. The key to the treasure storage facility under Eintorian Castle.

“To the best of my knowledge, yes. I suppose it also makes for a pretty ring?”

“I see.”

Now that I think about it, these facilities... One’s in Eintorian Castle, while the other is in Rozern’s palace. What if they were built underground by the ancient

kingdom and the kingdoms founded by the Twelve Families?

I sensed these facilities might have some connection to the game's bonuses and special items.

Wouldn't it be worth checking other palaces to see if they have anything similar in them?

"I don't suppose the King of Brijit uses a treasure too?" I asked.

"I wonder. I've never heard that he does. None of the treasures that the Twelve Families divided amongst themselves after destroying the ancient kingdom, like that brown sword, seem all that impressive."

They wouldn't have divided them among themselves if there really was nothing to them whatsoever. It might not be much to look at, but it must hold some secret. Were they just unable to pass that knowledge down to future generations? Well, it's something I should definitely look into once we've occupied the Brijitian capital.

"Anyway, I've seen enough of the treasury. Let's move to the barracks. I'll explain my strategy for crushing Brijit."

It's a strategy that'll let us take the enemy's capital soon after the Brijitian king falls.

I've already got it all planned out in my head.

Now, let the counterattack begin.

Chapter 3: Birth of a Battle Fiend

Experience List

B-class Strategy x2

Victory over A-class opponent as D-class x4

You are now level 21.

Defeating Elante made me gain two levels, bringing me from 19 to 21. That gave me 300 points for going from 19 to 20, and then another 300 for going from 20 to 21. Combined with the existing 100 points, I had 700 points in total. The higher your level, the more experience it took to level up. The reason my level had only gone up by two despite receiving x4 experience was that I'd reached level 20.

Well, the important thing is that it still went up.

I had 700 points, so the first order of business was to raise Martial.

Your Martial is now 65.

That left 400 points. I opened the skill purchase screen as I debated how to spend them. I'd already used some flashy skills to raise Morale in this most recent battle, so I wanted defensive skills over attack skills at the moment for practical reasons.

There seem to be a lot of high-Martial commanders, so I need defensive skills so I can run for my life if a plan goes awry.

The issue was that I couldn't buy skills however I pleased. Each time I purchased one, the system generated a new skill at random. In the case of attack skills, I could at least designate whether I wanted one that was single-target or area-of-effect, but defensive skills didn't even offer that level of choice.

Still, all the skills that could be generated had equal power, so the key thing

was ease of use. Also, by using a skill multiple times, a skill's proficiency, which is basically its level, would increase and it would get stronger.

Anyway, there was no question that what I needed right now was a defensive skill, so I paid the 200 points to buy one.

You gained 30 Second Invincibility.

The skill I got was kind of iffy.

As the name suggested, it could deflect all attacks for a duration of thirty seconds. Also, it wasn't just self-targeted—I could use it on someone nearby to make them invincible too. It was a skill with some useful applications, sure, but... Honestly, the duration felt too short.

I wish it was longer.

*

"Don't talk nonsense!" Bautore said with a sharp glare, demanding that things be explained to him again.

"I've checked repeatedly, and it seems to be the truth!" the thousandman replied, trembling beneath his gaze.

"Elante got twenty thousand men wiped out and died himself? Ridiculous!"

Bautore kicked the thousandman so hard that he went flying. As soon as the man stopped rolling across the ground, he got on his knees again. Then, because he couldn't change the facts, he just bowed his head over and over.

"I know I forbid him from fighting a siege battle. How in the world did he manage to lose twenty thousand men?!"

"Even I'm not sure of that, sire..."

Bautore swung his drawn sword. Then, after ordering the execution every last citizen of the Ronaf Domain, which they had just captured, he returned to the castle and began murdering the maids to blow off steam.

"S-Spare me!"

“Eeeeeek!”

Screams echoed throughout the castle for some time. When the massacre was finished, Bautore grumbled, “Damn it, Elante...”

Elante had been his most loyal man, and one of the Three Swordsmen who were expected to do great things in the wars to come. He shouldn’t have died so easily.

Curse them for killing my precious servant.

“Is Elante truly dead?”

As Bautore trembled with rage, Isenbahan, who had been working to ascertain the facts of the situation, rushed forward and bowed down.

“It seems to be true, Your Majesty...”

“I want details... Tell me, exactly how did he die?!”

“W-We still don’t have a good grasp of that. But we’ll get to the bottom of it, whatever it takes!”

Bautore shook his head at Isenbahan.

“No, you’ve done enough. That won’t be necessary. We advance on the capital at once. I’ll kill them. Kill them all. I’ll wipe out the Rozernan royal family, and send them to comfort Elante’s soul!” he shouted with bloodshot eyes.

*

The first thing I did after stopping the Brijitian Army’s advance party’s incursion into the capital was to destroy all manner of provisions in the surrounding area.

A massive city like the capital was surrounded by vast farmlands. While, fortunately, it wasn’t the harvest season for wheat or rice, the same couldn’t be said for other crops. As such, I deployed thirty thousand men to harvest everything in the immediate vicinity and burn the rest. If we left the fields as they were, we risked them becoming food for our enemies, so there was no other choice.

Soon after that was done, I received word from my scouts that the Brijitians

were coming from Ronaf.

This was good news, as far as I was concerned. If the enemy acted hastily out of anger, that only served to give my side the advantage. I had been praying that Elante's death and the extermination of twenty thousand soldiers would cause their king to do something rash.

Those prayers had now been answered. The enemy forces hastily assembled themselves in formation outside the walls.

Royal Brijitian Army

Manpower: 35,500 men

Morale: 90

Training: 80

Being a well-trained force, even this sort of rapid advance hadn't disrupted their battle lines. The first to arrive were the enemy's iron cavalry. That said, cavalry were of no use whatsoever in a siege battle. Not until the gates were open, at least. The iron cavalry wouldn't be doing anything until then.

Once they were fully deployed, the Royal Brijitian Army immediately began to assault the walls.

This was also good news.

I had been hoping they'd perform a forced march all the way here from Ronaf in order to seek revenge. This rapid advance was a blunder for them. Their supply train couldn't hope to keep up. That meant they'd had to leave their provisions at Ronaf and come with only their offensive units. The infantry would have run here carrying only enough food for their immediate needs. They likely planned to receive resupply from Ronaf if this turned into a protracted battle.

That was a grave miscalculation.

*

"That is the Rozernan capital, Your Majesty."

Bautore ground his teeth as he looked at the walls, still seething and wroth.

“However, I believe we should refrain from charging in until such time as we’ve ascertained just how the enemy were able to kill Elante.”

Advisor Isenbahan tried to convince Bautore to be cautious and not get ahead of himself. However, one of the Three Swordsmen, Ganeif the Swiftblade, glared at him and answered on his lord’s behalf.

“You insolent cur! We’ll know that well enough once we fight them!”

Bautore nodded in agreement with this outburst from Ganeif.

“He’s right. Don’t make me repeat myself, Isenbahan.”

“I’m terribly sorry, sire...!” Isenbahan hurriedly bowed in the face of Bautore’s glare.

“But we can’t afford to let our guards down. I plan to deploy Ganeif. Men, we’re going to take the Rozernan capital! Make them all bleed!”

At their king’s command, the Brijitian infantry all charged at once.

*

I met the enemy force on the castle walls.

The Royal Rozernan Army had a Morale of 92. Rinkitsu, which we had found in the treasury, raised Euracia’s Command score to 97, and that in turn had provided another +2 modifier to Morale.

Euracia led from the front again this time.

“Loose your arrows! Shower them with every bolt you have! And don’t forget the rocks too!”

In accordance with Euracia’s orders, the commanding officers all shouted her commands, and the men began firing in unison. The Runanese reinforcements did likewise. The situation was overwhelmingly in our favor.

In all honesty, the Rozernan and Runanese armies’ Training scores were pretty low, but the fact this was a siege battle was more than enough to make up for those low scores. With the walls as our shield, together with our high Morale, we had a reasonable chance of winning this.

If you grouped the Rozernan and Runanese armies together as the United

Army, then at the start of the battle it looked like this:

United Army: 29,443 men

Royal Brijitian Army: 35,500 men

Our forces held the advantage—they didn't have the numbers necessary to overwhelm us! We greeted our foes with a hail of arrows. The screams of charging Brijitian footmen spread far and wide across the land.

Their vanguard fell beneath the rain of arrows.

United Army: 29,443 men

Royal Brijitian Army: 34,230 men

That attack had reduced the Brijitians' numbers by eight hundred men. The enemy used their sacrifice to put ladders up against the walls. The United Army kept shooting, and rained rocks down on the men attempting to climb the ladders.

United Army: 29,300 men

Royal Brijitian Army: 32,110 men

By the time the United Army ran out of arrows, the Brijitian Army's numbers had fallen even further. However, with the archers unable to provide support, the number of enemy soldiers climbing the ladders went up.

The United Army fought desperately, throwing rocks and striking with spears and swords to keep the enemy from taking the walls.

The battle raged for over two hours.

Euracia, Jint, and I mercilessly slew enemies climbing the ladders. Obviously, the Royal Brijitian Army were taking nothing but losses. The situation was clear to see from up on the walls.

Underneath a Brijitian royal banner flapping in the wind stood the Brijitian

king in his shining armor.

If I can see him, I can learn his stats!

If I tried to use Crush, he was too far away, so I'd just get a message telling me the skill couldn't be used, but checking his ability scores was no issue.

Bautore Brijit

Age: 54

Martial: 93

Intelligence: 69

Command: 98

He's got a Command score of 98 from his high charisma and absolute state authority. He's the opposite of Euracia who inspires the soldiers to follow her because of her charm and personal affinity with them. His Martial's high too. But now that I've raised my Martial another rank, I should be more than able to fight him.

The man standing beside him had a rather high Martial score too.

Poholizen

Age: 29

Martial: 95

Intelligence: 4

Command: 5

He must be one of the Three Swordsmen that Euracia told me about, Poholizen the Blastblade. Given his nom de guerre is a bit different from the other two's, I naturally have to assume he's got some kind of skill.

In terms of recognizable traits, he had a larger frame than Elante. He was almost more like a beast than a man.

Yeah, a beast. I should think of him like a wolf or a bear.

He had a high Martial, but a piss-poor Intelligence. With a score that awful, it was like fighting a bear.

He's the kind of opponent who'd be easy to outwit. That's probably why he's the king's bodyguard.

Ultimately, he didn't pose a major problem. The slender man approaching the castle was another matter. He had four swords hanging at his hip and an odd air about him.

Ganeif Katekin

Age: 45

Martial: 97

Intelligence: 40

Command: 74

His nom de guerre was the Swiftblade, and he had the abnormally high Martial score you'd expect based on that. You could say that he lived up to Euracia's opinion of him as the strongest of the Three Swordsmen.

With a Martial of 97, if he could use mana skills, then that would definitely put him above A-class. He was unquestionably the biggest problem in this siege battle. He was the mightiest man in Brijit, perhaps even the entire south.

To think that Brijit had a commander who was the equivalent of Lu Bu from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

That was the man who'd just started climbing one of the ladders.

Bautore's plan was probably to send him in to cause chaos and make it easier for the rest of his troops to act as a result. A simple idea, but since he had someone this strong to execute it, the strategy was going to be a pain to deal with. That said, it wasn't like I hadn't prepared countermeasures.

"Pour the boiling oil and throw more rocks!" Fihatori commanded, seeing the look I shot at him.

"Erhin! That man there is the one they call the Swiftblade, Ganeif!" Euracia shouted, adjusting her grip on Rossade.

Ultimately, this battle hinged on whether or not we could halt Ganeif, but I wasn't wholly convinced I could defeat him myself. His ability scores were higher than I'd anticipated. Even so, there was no avoiding it. The man was a trial I had to overcome!

In order to avoid the boiling oil, Ganeif thrust his sword into a crack in the wall, unleashing mana through the blade to create a powerful recoil that sent him spinning into the air, far above the walls. But that wasn't enough to keep gravity from dragging him back down.

He was still too far away to land on the wall.

Or so I thought, until Ganeif started releasing mana as he swung his sword in midair. This created a blast wave that used to propel himself and land on the wall.

*

Euracia rushed at Ganeif, swinging Rossade, her attack timed to hit him the moment he touched down! Ganeif swung his sword to stop the strike. Thanks to her actions, he ended up landing on top of the parapet.

He wasn't able to get enough propulsion. He must've had to change direction at the last moment to block Euracia's attack.

"Everyone, rush him at once! Don't give him an opening!"

The soldiers rapidly converged on Ganeif. They attacked to keep him from getting down off the parapet where he would have more space to maneuver. Jint was there, leading the charge, wielding the Nameless Sword we found in the treasury that I'd given him.

Ganeif was visibly surprised by the weight of his attacks as they confronted one another, but there was no overcoming the difference in Martial scores. Even with the item equipped, Jint only had a Martial of 95. It goes without saying that he began to be pushed back.

This was the moment I had been waiting for.

Now's the time, while he's distracted fighting Jint!

Now that my Martial was 95 with the bonus factored in, Crush had a power of 100! I summoned Daitoren to unleash a skill, which had now reached the realm of S-class. As I did, Ganeif suddenly sheathed his sword while fighting Jint. Not one to miss such an opening, Jint swung.

I immediately triggered Crush.

At that moment, Ganeif drew his blade again, with a technique that moved faster than my eyes could follow! Was this one of his mana skills? Light erupted from the sword as he drew it!

Instantly, Ganeif's Martial broke out to 102.

There was no doubt that this was his special ability.

I reflexively used 30 Second Invincibility on Jint. Although we were putting our lives on the line in this battle, I had zero intention of losing him in another country's war. Once I had counteracted Ganeif's mana skill with 30 Second Invincibility, I would impale him using Crush.

That was the plan.

However, Ganeif instantly noticed Crush and turned toward me, changing the direction of his blade of light to hit it.

What incredible combat instincts!

But because he'd had to change direction so suddenly, he wasn't able to completely deflect Crush. As a result, Crush tore through his shoulder instead of his chest, blowing his left arm off. The skill he'd used had a power of 102.

If they had hit each other head on, he'd have completely annihilated Crush, but fortunately I was still able to injure him.

What's more, the force from Daitoren knocked him off the parapet!

As he plummeted, Ganeif drew the third of four swords he carried and swung it towards the ground, slowing his descent with a burst of mana. The result was that he was able to land without slamming hard into the ground, but he still collapsed. Blood spurted from the messy stump of his severed left arm like a

fountain.



Brijitian soldiers rushed to his side as he fell to the ground in a puddle of his own blood, the last of his strength spent. It was visible even from a distance, so

trumpets began sounding the enemy's retreat.

It was a shame I couldn't kill him, but I'd still blown his arm off, and judging by the amount of blood he'd lost, he wouldn't be recovering any time soon.

United Army: 28,700 men

Royal Brijitian Army: 30,110 men

It was a massive victory that reflected the advantages of fighting as the defender in a siege battle. The enemy force took mass casualties, but ours was barely harmed.

Our forces cheered as the enemy fled.

"What was *that*? He's not a monster, so how...?" Euracia forgot the joy of victory as she shook her head in disbelief at Ganeif's survival.

"I may not have been able to kill him, but we can still call this a success," I reassured Euracia before adding, "However, the most important part is yet to come. This is where the real battle begins," because I didn't want her letting her guard down just yet.

Euracia nodded firmly. Today's victory wasn't a big deal. Things were about to begin in earnest.

Of course, the plan originally called for Ganeif to die here. I'd predicted the King of Brijit would send him to attack the walls. It was a shame he survived, but I'd still injured the centerpiece of the enemy force, so the plan could go ahead without issue.

If I were to hesitate now, we'd probably lose any chance of a quick resolution to this war. To that end, I left Euracia in charge of the capital as we'd discussed, while I took a thousand cavalrymen out through the northern gates, which were the opposite side from where the enemy had set up camp. Their scouts would detect the move, no doubt, but I didn't care if they discovered us at this point.

The Brijitian Army was already a fish on the line.

*

“Damn them! How dare they cut our supply lines!” Bautore struggled to contain his seething anger when his advisor gave him the report.

A shadow had fallen over his once confident face. Of course it had. Even he, the king, had barely been able to eat today.

He ordered his men to search the fields, but there was no food to be had nearby. Yet if he sent his men any further afield, they would be ambushed. That was why he could only clutch his head now. Eating rice or wheat when it had just begun to grow and was still green was like munching on weeds. The unfamiliar food would just upset their stomachs.

“They’ve even wiped out the soldiers we sent to protect the supply unit. Still, if we keep on sending men, it will impede our attack on the capital!” Isenbahan said with a troubled look on his face.

Just then, a new report arrived.

“What now?!” Bautore roared.

“Well, you see...” Isenbahan opened his mouth hesitantly. “We’ve...lost contact with the iron cavalry unit that we sent out to secure the supplies...”

“What?! Curse them!” Bautore shouted. It only made him hungrier.

“Why don’t we send out Poholizen?” Isenbahan suggested “Surely he could...”

“No,” Bautore rejected the idea. “If I sent him, he might eat all the rations just to sate his own appetite. Worse yet, the enemy might deceive him and then he’d never return!”

Isenbahan was quick to agree. Poholizen was a poor choice for this kind of mission because of his tendency to rush forward without thinking.

Things were bad, and getting worse.

Even as they fought against their own stomachs out here, there was no progress in their siege of the capital. The assaults continued, but all they did was bleed them of more troops. In fact, all their siege weapons had been burned today. The king had been starving for three days now, so he hadn’t been letting the rank and file eat for even longer than that.

Their failure to make progress should have been a foregone conclusion.

Ganeif, who'd lost a lot of blood after his arm was blown off, still hadn't regained consciousness.

All Bautore could do was rage.

*

We won the three-day siege battle!

Our United Army's Morale actually rose after this battle. Due to the nature of siege battles, casualties were limited too.

United Army

Manpower: 27,300 men

Training: 20

Morale: 95

The Royal Brijitian Army, however, was greatly diminished.

Royal Brijitian Army

Manpower: 26,110 men

Training: 80

Morale: 50

They had less men than us now. That was thanks to the many casualties suffered from repeated defeats. In addition, their Morale declined precipitously from 90 to 50. It was obvious it would go down if they kept on losing, but this massive drop had to be due to starvation.

Bautore and the soldiers who had rushed in, enraged at the death of Elante, had been unable to receive supplies.

Now I was eating away at their Morale further.

Jint and I led a unit of a thousand cavalrymen, seeming to appear out of nowhere as we destroyed the enemy's supply units. The United Army had scouts watching Ronaf Castle, and whenever they sent a report, we crushed the

supply lines at once.

As a result, today, after five days of unbearable hunger for Bautore, he began retreating to Ronaf Castle despite having the capital in sight. Of course, this was largely thanks to Euracia, who, with her Command score of 97, defended the capital without letting Morale fall.

There was only one thing the Royal Brijitian Army could do: gather their military supplies at Ronaf Castle, then march on Rozernan capital again with all their rations.

Of course, I could have taken Ronaf Castle before the Brijitians retreated. Yes, I could have taken it and burned all the food. But I didn't. Because there was hardly any point.

If I did, they would receive reports of the castle's fall and detour around it to some other occupied territory. Even if the Brijitians were starving, I couldn't beat their army with an ambush team made up of a thousand men. That meant occupying Ronaf would only cause the enemy to gather food in a different territory.

If that was what was going to happen, then I was better off settling things in Ronaf, the closest domain to the capital. That's why I watched as the enemy retreated there.

Of course, I wasn't *just* watching.

My next plan was already in motion.

*

Bautore was ambushed by the United Army right before entering Ronaf Castle, but Poholizen easily swept this ambushing force aside.

“Look! See how they run!” Bautore cackled as he watched them, seeing that they were no match for his elite forces.

Bautore had been in a terrible mood during the retreat. Without food for his men, he couldn’t take the Rozernan capital as soon as possible, which infuriated him. He’d been left gnashing his teeth because he knew rushing ahead was his own blunder, but now that he’d fended off the ambush, he was in higher spirits.

“Even without Ganeif, we can force the gates of their capital open once we have our supplies. We saw just how gutless the Royal Rozernan Army are when we fought them. How stupid too. If they’d taken Ronaf instead of only targeting our supply units, we would have had to retreat much further!”

“You have a point there,” Isenbahan agreed. “We only left a force of a thousand men at Ronaf.”

“They were so intent on cutting our supply lines that it never occurred to them to dispose of the stockpile at Ronaf. Imbeciles.”

Hoping to wipe away his own failure somehow, Bautore pointed out the enemy’s strategic blunder and laughed all the louder.

“This is all because we let our guard down. We’ll prepare our forces and return to the Rozernan capital as soon as possible. No more underestimating them. We’re going to destroy Rozern!”

There was no way out. Having already had his self-confidence damaged by being forced to retreat, taking the capital was the only thing he could think about now. The enemy were stronger than anticipated, so his advisor Isenbahan would have liked him to consider his strategy more carefully, but it was impossible to broach the issue. To do so would wound Bautore’s pride. Isenbahan didn’t have the courage to risk his life to offer that advice.

With no one to stop him, Bautore kept muttering, “I’ll destroy them,” like some kind of curse.

*

The reason I ambushed the Royal Brijitian Army in front of Ronaf Castle was incredibly simple: to infiltrate the enemy in the chaos. Jint and I put on stolen uniforms and joined the crowd of enemy soldiers to get inside occupied Ronaf Castle.

I temporarily delegated command of the United Army to Euracia and Fihatori with orders to wait a short time, then advance and surround the castle. No one inside Ronaf Castle took any note of us.

Soldiers in the Royal Brijitian Army only recognized the other people in their ten-man unit, or maybe their hundred-man unit at best. They had no idea what anyone in the other hundred-man units looked like. That was because the Royal Army were a collection of soldiers gathered from every region of their country.

“The provisions are stored in the warehouse beside the barracks. We can finally eat, everyone!”

Overwhelming hunger drove the soldiers to rush to the warehouse the moment they were inside the castle. It was total chaos. An army lives or dies by its discipline.

Obviously, Bautore couldn’t just stand by and watch this.

“This is a royal command! Restrain yourselves a little. Food will be distributed soon enough. You are to stand by at the positions designated for your respective units. I am issuing strict orders to behead any man who causes disorder. If you are not in the supply unit, move away from the warehouse immediately!” shouted the commanding officers who had been given his orders. The soldiers grumbled, but obeyed and backed away from the warehouse.

Now I had a chance to check out the warehouse for myself. The soldiers in the designated supply unit were carrying out the provisions. The warehouse was a rather large building.

“Hurry it up! Our orders are to set out for the capital again tomorrow!”

It sounded like Bautore was planning to take all the supplies and move again immediately the next day.

But I'm not going to let him.

"Hey! Go back to your unit! Are you looking to get killed?" the commanding officer shouted at me and Jint, who had been staring at the warehouse this whole time.

I signaled to Jint with my eyes. He nodded, and ran toward that officer. In an instant, he'd cut him down. At the same time, I used Earthquake on the piles of provisions and the soldiers of the supply unit. My skill set the front of the warehouse on fire, burning the men too.

"Jint, protect the door to the warehouse!"

Once I saw Jint nod, I left him there, heading inside.

My objective, of course, was to burn all their provisions!

*

When flames rose from the warehouse, Isenbahan rushed out of the castle in shock.

"What is happening?!"

"We believe it's the work of spies wearing our uniforms. They've infiltrated the provisions warehouse!"

"What did you say? Why didn't you kill them immediately?!"

"Well..."

Obviously, the officer he had asked was wondering the same thing.

His soldiers had, in fact, stormed the warehouse. But the one at the door was none other than Jint. The men who came at him only succeeded in getting themselves decapitated. They tried flanking him, they tried surrounding him on all sides, but the starving soldiers couldn't kill Jint.

"What's with him?"

An angry Bautore soon appeared on the scene, Poholizen at his side.

"How have you let just two men burn our provisions because you failed to kill them?! Damn it! Everyone, pull back! Poholizen, you go. I want that man torn limb from limb!"

The men made way at Bautore's command.

"I'm hungry! Hungry! Hungry!" Poholizen shouted, shaking his head.

"If you just kill him, you can eat all the food you want. Now kill him. Okay?"

"Him? I just have to kill him, and then you'll let me eat? Really?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I'll kill him!"

Poholizen raced towards Jint at the sound of the word "food." A loud grating sound echoed throughout the surrounding area as their blades crossed.

"Hurghhh! Die! I'm hungry! So, die!" Poholizen roared as he swung his sword.

Jint's actual Martial score was 93, but using the Nameless Sword boosted it by +2 for a total of 95. With such stats, Jint was more than a match for him.

His Martial was on par with Poholizen's, but Jint had the advantage against an opponent who charged in heedlessly. Jint's style was to instinctively calculate his enemy's moves. Not only did he refuse to die, he stopped all of Poholizen's attacks, enraging the enemy commander.

"Argh! Why won't you die?! You're such a pain. Die! You can't stop this one. Blast Wave!"

After saying this, he swung down his sword with both hands. When it touched the ground, there was an incredible explosion around Jint.

Kaboom!

Bautore nodded with satisfaction as the skill landed a direct hit on Jint.

"Surely, he can't withstand Poholizen's Blast Wave. Get to work putting the fires in the warehouse out immediately!"

Those were Bautore's orders, but the men who rushed through the smoke left behind by the Blast Wave to reach the warehouse came back out screaming. When the smoke cleared, Jint appeared. Although he was mildly singed, he'd used his sword to unleash all the mana he could in order to endure the Blast Wave.

Of course, Jint couldn't help but be surprised that he'd managed much more

mana than he’d expected. He gave the Nameless Sword a sideward glance. He’d been thinking there was something mystical about it, but this wasn’t the time to investigate.

He adjusted his grip and took aim at Poholizen.

*

There were a lot of provisions, so it ended up taking longer than I had planned to burn them all.



When I left the warehouse, Jint was in awful shape, as if he'd struggled. His clothes and hair were all burned, but his skin was comparatively unscathed. He

was up against Poholizen though. Of course he'd struggle. His opponent was one of the Three Swordsmen.

"Jint! Are you okay?!"

Jint immediately nodded.

"Okay, we'll use a flanking attack. Let's kill him and get out of here!"

We've done what we needed to. Escaping has priority now.

Jint and I jumped Poholizen together. Poholizen swung his sword around, trying to kill us, but I had a Martial score of 95 with Daitoren equipped. He didn't stand a ghost of a chance against me.

Crush would end this, but I didn't even have to use it, because I had Jint with me. While I used the Attack command to cross blades with Poholizen, it freed Jint up to circle around behind him.

He's fast!

He might not have been on the same level as Ganeif the Swiftblade, but Jint was still pretty fast.

"What? What's happening? When did you get there?!"

Obviously, Poholizen got distracted by Jint and turned to face him. He'd turned his back to me.

I'd expect nothing less from a commander with under 10 Intelligence.

I laughed mockingly at his ineptitude as I stabbed him in the neck using the Attack command. As blood spurted, Jint also impaled him through the chest. Run through from both sides, Poholizen fell, never to rise again.

"Hurry and kill them! I'll bestow a title on whoever does it! Kill them no matter what it takes!" I heard an enraged Bautore shout as he commanded his men from a distance.

I didn't expect him to be handing out titles.

That brought soldiers swarming at us from all directions. Giving noble ranks to commoners was almost unheard of. Conversely, that just showed how desperate our enemy was. If anything, this was an opportunity for us. I had

Bautore completely within my field of view.

If I can kill their king here, that would be the ultimate way to distinguish myself on the battlefield.

Yes, it certainly would be.

“But I need him to live for now.”

The Brijitian king can’t die here. If he does, Brijit will install his son or some other blood relation as their new king and go on the defensive.

Obviously, that would throw their country into disarray, but if I was going to occupy them, then I needed to kill the king on his home turf.

I’ll let him escape, but I’ll crush as many of his soldiers as I can to prevent them regrouping.

With that decided, I didn’t hesitate.

Will you use Crush?

I activated Crush and threw Daitoren—with the effect set to incapacitate! The soldiers between me and Bautore were all blown away by Daitoren wrapped in white light.

“Urgh...!” Bautore hurriedly drew his sword.

But he can’t stop it. Bautore has a Martial of 93.

He’s a powerful foe, no doubt, but my Martial score is 100 when using Crush!

I put on a smirk, assured of my victory... Until, at that very moment, a blade of light appeared and collided with Daitoren. My sword was knocked skyward, spinning through the air before it stabbed into the ground.

“You’re kidding me...!” I shouted angrily.

Deflecting Crush would take an overwhelmingly powerful foe with a Martial score of over 100. There’s only one of those in this war.

I looked in the direction the blade of light had come from. Of course, there stood Ganeif, wrapped in bandages, with his left arm obviously still missing.

Leaning on some other soldiers for support, he glared at me. He must have been on standby inside the carriage because of how weakened he was by his wounds.

I respect his pure martial prowess and terrifying loyalty, but I don't need any subordinate who could just follow orders and massacre innocent, unarmed people without remorse.

Capable or not, this man was strictly my enemy. And he was already badly injured.

I expect he used up the rest of his mana with that skill. No matter how high his Martial score is, the guy isn't any threat to me right now.

That didn't stop him from talking a big game, though.

"Defend His Majesty. We don't need to protect the walls. If we kill these guys, we win! Form a layered encirclement around them right now!"

He was no match for me or Jint, but he was trying to move the men to action by keeping up the appearance of Brijit's strongest warrior. It must have reassured the men, because they recovered a little from the Morale hit I'd dealt them by killing Poholizen and started moving around more proactively.

First order of business is to kill Ganeif, then.

"Jint, the enemy's numbers are basically inexhaustible. We're going to kill that guy and then pull out in the confusion!"

If we kill Ganeif, the enemy will have no one left to rely on. If we can just escape after that, it's all over.

"I'll carve you a path out of here. No matter what it takes!" Jint nodded in agreement and charged at Ganeif.

Uh, wait, hold up. We were supposed to go together*.*

In a troubling development, Jint was quickly surrounded by enemies, and I lost sight of him.

*

Jint didn't even see Ganeif appear or notice the soldiers gathering one after

another. He would make a path out of here even if it killed him. He was entirely focused on risking his life to carry out the mission he'd tasked himself with.

If Erhin could withdraw safely, then he didn't mind dying himself.

"Jint, is it okay for us to be this happy? I still can't believe it."

Mirinae said that to him every single day as she studied for the first time in her life. She told him that reading books was interesting. That learning was fun.

It was the same for him.

He'd been the lowest of the low, but now the other soldiers looked at him with respect. No one in Eintorian ever looked down on Jint.

They could live like human beings. Live as humans ought to. Even if he were to die here, Erhin would look out for Mirinae. His faith in that allowed him to offer up his life without the slightest hesitation.

Jint kept on running.

"Loose your arrows!"

Even as arrows began raining down on him at the order of the thousandman commanding the archers, Jint charged on undeterred.

"Jint!"

Erhin had been planning to issue more orders, but Jint went and ran off before he could. Erhin tried shouting again, but Jint had already turned into a battle fiend, and Erhin's voice didn't reach him. The hail of arrows couldn't stop Jint. He swatted them aside, closing in on Ganeif.

"Damn you!" Ganeif bellowed, drawing his sword.

The mightiest man in all of Brijit, known as the Swiftblade, and a battle fiend who had earned no such name, but had distinguished himself in war. The collision of these two powerful men ended so quickly it was somewhat disappointing.

Ganeif didn't have the mana left to stop Jint. It was only his pure indomitable spirit kept him standing on the battlefield at all.

"Step aside!"

As their blades were about to cross, Jint suddenly changed the angle of his and lopped Ganeif's head off. Weakened as he was by not having had time to recover his mana, Ganeif's blade was no match for Jint's.

"Damn you! How dare you kill Ganeif! Damn youuuuu!" Bautore shouted in impotent rage. From a distance, of course. It looked like Crush had surprised him.

I actually had two more things—in addition to my go-to skill, Crush—which I could rely on while Jint and I were carrying out this operation to destroy the enemy's provisions.

The first was 30 Second Invincibility. This newly acquired skill would be seriously useful for retreating at a key moment. I still had Daitoren available, so if I used the sword to get close to Jint, then used 30 Second Invincibility to give us time to get on horses, we could probably make it a good distance away.

But that's not going to be enough on its own. Thirty seconds is short.

That's why what I needed right now was the second tool that I'd received from Euracia.

I should be able to use the powerful explosion from this tool as an effective means of escape.

Of course, I couldn't use it now, with Jint isolated and surrounded.

First, I need to join up with Jint. No matter how far their Morale's fallen, I need to be careful when there's this many enemies around. Daitoren has a clear time limit on how long I'm able to use it. I'll use the tool to clear a path, then we'll run to the wall, using 30 Second Invincibility to protect us from arrows!

That was my plan as I ran over to Jint. At that moment, Jint had been caught in an infinite loop of fighting and killing.

"Why are you here?! It's dangerous! Hurry up and retreat!" Jint, who had kept on going without losing any of his vigor since killing Ganeif, shouted when he spotted me.

The soldiers had started attacking me too, so I used Daitoren to fend them off, but I was quickly fenced in on all sides.

Their numbers seemed endless.

“I wasn’t ordering you to charge in alone before. We were supposed to go together,” I explained, preparing to use the tool here. Of course, the enemy kept attacking the whole time, so Daitoren never rested.

That might’ve been why Jint shouted, “Urgh...! I’ll carve a path for you no matter what!” and swung the Nameless Sword with a pained look on his face.

That’s when it happened!

Jint’s Nameless Sword released a white light, and the land began to shake like there was an earthquake. The ground went brown—the same color as Jint’s Nameless Sword. Earthen swords shot out of it, catching me off guard. Its area of effect wasn’t large, but all of the soldiers caught in range of this bizarre skill fell had their feet and legs skewered, leaving them to topple over. Even the soldiers who fled were chased down by the earthen blades as if they were some kind of guided missiles.

Jint’s Martial increased by +1

At the same time, his Martial rose from 93 to 94. My retainer was growing! Although he was an A-class commander, Jint couldn’t use mana skills. When Erheet faced Jint, he’d asked why he didn’t use them.

It seemed that the question had been bothering Jint ever since, but in the end, he hadn’t been able to do it. Now, one had just triggered for him.

Was it because of the Nameless Sword, or his resolve in the face of death? Or was it his incredibly selfless desire to save me? I didn’t know, but what I did know was this: it had just created a far better situation for our escape than the tool would have.

I pushed through the confused enemies to mount a horse that had belonged to a now dead officer.

“Jint, get on! Hurry!”

I rode the horse over to Jint who stood there, surprised by the fact he had just used a skill. The soldiers, who were shocked by the power of it, were unable to

do anything as we made it all the way in front of the gates.

Bautore had been out of range of the skill, but he pulled back even further out of surprise at its power, so there was no one to order anyone to pursue us.

We'd put some distance between us and the enemy. Discarding the horse, we climbed up onto the walls. This was faster than trying to open the closed gates.

Once we got up top, I shouted, "Jint! Get on my back!"

"Huh?"

"There's no time to explain! Just ride!"

Once Jint climbed onto my back without having any clue as to why, I jumped down from the wall. Then I triggered 30 Second Invincibility.

I happened to have just 100 skill points left.

This is my trump card!

Normally, my legs would've shattered when I hit the ground, but thanks to 30 Second Invincibility I was completely invulnerable. That let me land without issue. The soldiers who'd chased us onto the walls were so shocked that they didn't even try to pursue us any further.

Of course they didn't. Just ahead were our forces, who had completely surrounded Ronaf Castle. I'd leveled up for killing Poholizen, which earned me more points. I put off spending them for now as I met up with Fihatori who was rushing over to us.

*

Rejoining our army after jumping from the castle walls, I sent Jint off to see the doctor, then gave orders to my forces which had encircled Ronaf Castle.

"Surround the entirety of Ronaf Castle! Once you've sealed off the area, don't approach under any circumstances. Hold your positions even once the enemy comes out. We'll use the line formation!"

The enemy couldn't hold out inside the castle. They had no provisions, so they'd starve to death. As such, they had no choice but to come out, having

already been starving for five days. If they'd had provisions, the enemy would have waited to recover before sallying out to meet us, so there would have been no point in surrounding them like this. That would actually have made us rush things, since the enemy's morale would be recovering as time passed.

But them having no provisions turned things around. The enemy needed to hurry. The lack of food alone was enough to make them panic. Especially when they'd seen it burned with their own eyes.

Royal Brijitian Army

Morale: 10

The result was that their Morale fell to 10. Of course, the enemy would come out to break through our encirclement and flee. When they did, we'd have the advantage. No matter how big the difference in Training was, with this big a gap in Morale, we could win a field battle.

The tables had turned.

In short, we were now in a situation where we could aim to wipe out the enemy when they emerged from Ronaf Castle. Morale aside, they had been starving for over five days.

They had no strength left to fight.

Naturally, the Royal Brijitian Army understood that the longer they stayed inside the castle the worse their disadvantage.

That's why they made their decision fast.

The enemy eventually came out of the southern gates. They had no doubt headed in the opposite direction of the capital, which was to the north, realizing the futility of attacking it without provisions. They'd try to withdraw to another occupied territory and secure a supply of food there.

"Maintain the line formation at the southern gates. And form a second line behind the first one on each side!"

The line formation was not complicated. They'd be able to maintain it even with their low level of training. Fortunately, we were in a situation where we

only needed to use the most basic of formations.

“Loose your arrows at the enemy as they attack!”

If they had higher morale, the enemy front line might have been able to hold formation, but with only 10 it was just impossible. The enemy’s numbers fell precipitously as arrows rained down on them before they could assume defensive positions.

Royal Brijitian Army

Manpower: 19,231

Training: 80

Morale: 5

Only 19,231 enemies remained.

“Wipe them out! The enemy is starving! You have nothing to fear from them! But don’t kill their king, Bautore. Let him go.”

Once all our arrows had been loosed, I gave the order to attack. My forces collided with the enemy.

It was truly intense, witnessing the Royal Rozernan Army grit their teeth and follow Euracia as they fought to avenge their fallen comrades. After about three hours of head-on conflict, the result was already clear to see.

United Army: 24,931 men

Royal Brijitian Army: 4,311 men

A major difference had emerged in the size of the two opposing forces. The enemy fled, demotivated, and the gap widened as a one-sided pursuit began.

It was a truly overwhelming victory.

My strategy this time had been to trap the enemy in Ronaf Castle and wipe out everyone but Bautore. Obviously, it put my own life at risk. This was when I realized I needed to act a little more carefully. For now, though, the crisis had

passed, and victory was electrifying.

Of course, I had no intention of letting it end here.

Chapter 4: Getting Closer

I didn't join up with the pursuit unit organized to chase Bautore after he escaped from Ronaf Castle.

I had deliberately let just Bautore escape after the battle that wiped out the Royal Brijitian Army. It was part of my plan to occupy Brijit. Yes, this was to be the last operation—the one that put a period on this war.

It was also the first one that came to mind after I boasted about occupying Brijit in front of the King of Runan. Once I was able to raise Rozernan morale and secure a victory, it was just a matter of using the enemy's retreat to my advantage.

It's a gamble, of course.

It wouldn't be possible to occupy Brijit in such a short time without gambling. No matter how great our victory was, if we chased our fleeing enemies into the Brijitian Kingdom proper, we'd be forced to take a number of domains one at a time.

Unlike that straightforward approach, this plan will let us take Brijit all in one go, if we succeed! Gamble or not, it's worth giving it a shot!

I gathered the commanding officers of the Runanese reinforcements for a meeting about my plan.

"As I'm sure you're all aware, the Brijit Kingdom lies to the south of Rozern, and there is a huge mountain range between the two countries."

When Brijit and Rozern were formed after the fall of the Ancient Kingdom, they drew their border along the mountain ridge. These impassable mountains were known as the Kryl Mountains.

"Trade between Brijit and Rozern used to be conducted along the eastern edge of the mountains, and that's where the defeated Brijitians retreated to."

The capital of Rozern was in the northwestern part of the kingdom. Bautore had to head southeast first in order to retreat to Brijit's royal capital. On top of

that, the capital of Brijit was in the southwest of their territory. With the Kryl Mountains to the north and the coast to the south, it capitalized on the land as natural barriers to repel invasion.

Because of that, the King of Brijit had to detour far to the east to go around the impassable mountains, before heading west again.

“I intend to overtake our enemies as they flee. The plan is to head due south from the Rozernan capital, occupy the Brijitian capital before they get there, and greet the retreating enemy as they arrive.”

I planned to take the capital with a ruse, which amounted to this: basically, we would pretend to be the fleeing Royal Brijitian Army in order to enter the capital before the enemy could arrive.

Enemy uniforms littered the ground after the intense battles we’d fought.

“But Commander! The Kryl Mountains are famously impassable. We’ve even heard of them in Runan!” Fihatori sounded concerned.

“Consider it a challenge. If we can cross the border first, we can occupy the Brijitian capital, kill their king, and throw the entire nation into chaos all at once. The Brijitians were our targets all along, weren’t they? If you consider what will happen if we’re successful, you’ll see it’s worth taking on the challenge. Besides, I believe we can do it with our current morale. Listen to me, Fihatori. Whether the men can cross the mountains or not will ultimately rely on the skill of their commanding officers. This is a job for you and me. Don’t you have any desire to push your own limits?”

Fihatori seemed to chew on what I’d said for a moment.

“If you insist, then I’m ready to try. It’s certainly true that if we succeed, then it will only be a matter of time before Brijit falls. With their king dead, the Three Swordsmen slain, and so many of their men having fallen in battle...”

“There you have it. Include that in your report to the duke, would you?”

“You knew about that?!” Fihatori asked, surprised.

“In your position, it’s only natural you would be sending reports to him. Do what you have to do, and then start getting ready. I’ll bet it gets incredibly cold

up near the mountain ridge, so make sure that we have warm clothes. Our battle's only just begun, Fihatori."

"I'll use everything I've learned in my military career to prepare for it."

Fihatori nodded, then left the meeting room with the other officers.

It won't be simple, of course. But crossing the Alps won Hannibal crushing victories during the Punic Wars, and I can't imagine the Kryls are any steeper than the Alps. So, we've got to do it! So that I can make this world mine.

As I was thinking this, Euracia opened her mouth to speak, as if she had been waiting for the other officers to leave first.

"May I go with you?"

"You?"

"Yes. Please, let me come!" Euracia nodded forcefully.

I wasn't too keen on the idea, though. It wasn't a battle worth dragging her along to. Besides, her wounds from before still hadn't healed, the bandages she wore still in place.

"Rozern's already won the war. So I don't think a princess like you needs to risk her own life for this. Besides, you're injured. Wouldn't crossing the mountains in that state...be a bit much for you?"

"No. Brijit is Rozern's enemy. They massacred the people in the border towns before this. When you look at it that way, I feel it's naturally my duty to see this through to the end. Please. I can rest after it's done!"

Well, she's got a point.

Whatever the case, no one could deny she'd played a huge role in this war. Without her raising their morale, it would have been difficult to get the Rozernan soldiers to act, and we wouldn't have been able to push the enemy into a crisis so easily.

If she was this eager to come, I couldn't justify saying no.

*

Thus began the advance on Brijit.

The temperature fell as we climbed into the mountains. This cold was going to be the greatest obstacle to crossing the Kryls. Soldiers and low temperatures did not get along. This world generally had temperate weather throughout the year. Even the winters were warm. That's why they were so weak against the cold.

In fact, I suspect that the reason the Kryl Mountains were considered impassable was because of this cold. Frankly, though, I felt like Japan's winters were chillier. That's why I could handle it just fine, but the soldiers couldn't.

They shivered as they tried to bear the cold. I could tell they weren't used to it at all. I'd heard the mountains were steep, but they weren't as bad as I'd expected. They weren't as high as the Alps. Maybe two thousand meters or thereabouts.

That's way lower than even Mt. Fuji. Sure, the terrain was treacherous. I had my 30 Second Invincibility, but some of our men fell to their deaths off the cliffs, or were crushed under the weight of rocks crumbling from the mountains above.

Our troop numbers had dropped a little because of this. With their wits dulled by the cold, they ended up doing things that led to them slipping to their deaths.

When we stopped our march for the night, Fihatori and the other commanding officers had shrunk into themselves for warmth. This was wreaking havoc on the Morale that we'd worked so hard to build up.

At some point, their Morale score had fallen to 70. The promise of enough reward money that they'd be set for life once we occupied the Brijit Kingdom seemed to keep them enduring, though.

We lit campfires, but they still had to get pretty close to the flames in order to feel any warmth. Even Jint made himself small and kept quiet.

"You okay?" I asked him.

"Yeah. This is no big deal."

"You're shivering, aren't you?"

“No. I’m deliberately moving my body. Not shivering.”

“Okay, then.”

It seemed pretty obvious he was shivering, but whatever. He clearly felt like acting stubborn. As we were talking, Fihatori came over.

“Commander, perhaps you should use this...” he said, offering a heavy blanket.

“Fihatori.”

“Yes?”

“What do you think is most important in a commanding officer?” I said, asking him a somewhat sudden question.

“Bravery, I think. There’s nothing a commander can do if he’s frightened.”

“Bravery’s important too, of course. But the most important thing is the trust of his men, wouldn’t you say? With trust, they’ll naturally come to obey him. So I won’t be needing that blanket. The men need every last one they can get.”

If the commander was the only one with a blanket, all that would do was earn him the resentment of his men. If anything, I needed to show them I was suffering just like they were.

I needed to stop their Morale from falling any further, after all. I went around to each thousand-man unit, moving together with the soldiers. We ate and shivered together. Obviously, I never used a blanket. I slept together with them, shivering in the cold. I also gave speeches to each unit to boost their motivation.

“You must all be tired from walking today. I am too. I’m sorry to gather you all like this when we’re finally able to take a break, but there’s something I should make clear. We’re all suffering here. Me too. Even so, I’m managing to endure the same conditions as all of you. So I’m sure you can take it too. If you can endure, Brijit will be ours. That means the reward will be yours too. Your names will be recorded in history as the soldiers who crossed the mountains to occupy Brijit. Become witnesses to a history your descendants can pride themselves on!”

I went around encouraging the men with talk of the rewards and glory they would have once they returned. It definitely lowered the number of soldiers complaining. The look in their eyes changed, and their Morale score never fell any further below 70.

We went off the road, forging our own trail by breaking branches and cutting down trees. We endured the cold and kept on walking. I lived alongside my men until it was over. It was tough, of course, but I sucked it up and tolerated it because I wasn't going to get my hands on Brijit otherwise.

But unless I showed up with a whole pile of blankets, things weren't going to get any better. I'd halted the precipitous decline in Morale, so then I got to work on practical steps to remedy the situation.

Is there some way to conserve warmth until we can make it past this area near the summit?

I was reminded me of a video that I'd seen online ages ago. I didn't know if it would work, but it was worth a shot. So, I went around to each unit again.

"Fihatori! We're going to heat rocks the size of a man's head in the fire. I want you to take the men and gather as many as you can!"

"Wait, Commander! You want us to carry those heated rocks? We'd burn our hands! That sounds kind of dangerous..." Fihatori shook his head in shock at what I was asking of him.

"That's not a bad idea either, you know? Do you want to try it?"

"I-I'll pass." Fihatori was confused.

"Obviously. If you were to carry them directly, you'd burn yourselves. Once the rocks are up to heat, we'll gather them all in one place and then put out the campfire. Then, once a new fire has been built, dig a hole where the old one was!"

I started digging with the other soldiers at once. We stopped quickly, though. It wouldn't be good for the hole to be too deep.

"Throw all of the heated rocks into the hole!"

Heated rocks take a long time to cool. Which means they can hold their heat.

Especially under the ground heated by a campfire.

“Cover the hole with dirt!”

The rocks were soon hidden from sight. I tried touching the dirt over top of them. It felt like things had worked out pretty well.

“Try lying down here.”

Fihatori was quick to do just that, far more convinced by this idea than when he thought they’d be carrying heated rocks.

“Commander... It’s warm!”

“Oh, it is? But you were just saying we didn’t need the rocks, weren’t you?”

“No, if this is what they’re for, then that changes things!”

“Now that you get it, it’s time to get up. We have appearances to keep up as nobles.”

“B-But...”

“Neither you, I, or the other officers are to use it. This is for the men!”

I dragged a reluctant Fihatori to his feet, then had the soldiers heat rocks and bury them the same way.

Obviously, no matter how well the rocks held their heat, it still only lasted for a limited time.

“Take shifts heating as many as you can. If you can lay down for even ten minutes that should warm you up.”

It’s important for the commander to show he’s doing something, even if it’s not actually all that useful, right?

As I went around letting the thousand-man units see this, Morale improved, rising another 5 points to a score of 75.

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Thanks to doing everything in my power to encourage the soldiers, we made it over the peak and started working our way back down the mountain. The further we descended, the warmer it got.

Obviously, we lost some men to the precipitous terrain, but that was well within the range of expectations. But even though we'd been able to cross the mountains, under ordinary circumstances, it would have been hard to move right on to invading Brijit. Normally, the Brijitian capital would be defended by a massive garrison.

Not now, though.

I'd destroyed the massive army that Bautore personally led in the invasion of Rozern, and also killed the Three Swordsmen. With Bautore still working his way around the mountains to retreat, he wouldn't be making it back to the capital for a while yet.

That meant Brijit's capital was practically unoccupied.

So, as long as we got there before him, we'd won.

The enemy capital was right at the base of the mountain. As we hurriedly descended towards our goal...

"Huh...?" Euracia, who had been following us through this cold so silently I almost forgot that she was there, suddenly cocked her head to the side.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Um... The ring suddenly started shining. It's only shone when opening the treasury before now..."

There was, indeed, a white light emanating from her ring.

That's when it happened!

The ground began to tremble like an earthquake, the tremors sending cracks through the ground beneath her feet. The land crumbled out from under her, and she fell.

If she falls from here, she'll surely die!

"Fihatori, keep advancing! Prepare for battle in front of Brijit's royal palace! I'll catch up once I've saved the princess!"

Shouting that in the spur of the moment, I immediately leaped off the cliff without a second thought.

“Commander!”

Obviously, I wouldn’t do something like this without a plan. I’d have been an idiot to throw myself off such a high cliff if I wasn’t totally confident in my ability to survive it.

I’ve got a skill, after all. A skill that lets me survive any fall!

Once I’d jumped, I quickly found her, still falling. But she was far away.

We’re falling at roughly the same speed, so it’s going to be impossible to catch up to her like this.

And so I summoned Daitoren and used Crush on the ground. But this time, I didn’t throw the sword, just performed the motion. Empowered by my use of Crush, Daitoren dragged me along with it. As a result, I was able to catch up to her in midair. Just before I did, I nullified the effect, and took her in my arms.

“Euracia!”

“Erhin...? Why?!”

“Don’t ask! Just hold on tight!”

Timing’s going to be key here. The invincibility only lasts for 30 seconds.

Timing it so that I triggered 30 Second Invincibility as we hit the ground, I landed with no more trouble than if I’d taken one step down a flight of stairs.

There was no physical shock to my body, so obviously Euracia was fine too. She looked at me in utter disbelief.

“Wh-What in the world...?”

“It’s a mana skill. Like a skill that lets me land anywhere, maybe?”

“Oh, the one you used when you jumped from the castle walls! But still... How could you jump with so little hesitation? It’s too dangerous!”

“You’d believe me if I said the sun will rise in the west, right?”

“Huh?”

“Well then, believe this. Believe it no matter what. I jumped because I knew I could save you. It would be unthinkable not to save a comrade who’s fought

alongside me when I was perfectly capable of doing so.”

“Wh-Whaaa... But...”

Euracia puffed up her cheeks a little and stared at me. I felt like her face had gotten a lot more expressive than it used to be. But I couldn’t stand the silence when she was looking like that, so I set her down on the ground.

Euracia’s legs must have been shaking, because she immediately sat down. I left her there and looked up at where the cliff had collapsed.

A massive gate had appeared in the cliffside, and it was still shaking as it emitted a white light. That’s what had caused the earthquake on top of the cliff.

“More importantly, do you know anything about that gate?” I asked.

“No... It’s my first time seeing it,” she replied, looking at her ring, which shone as if resonating with the mana circle of the massive gate.

The ring reacted to it, then. That probably means this gate is deeply connected to the relics of the Ancient Kingdom. In that case, I can’t afford to overlook it.

“Well, let’s go up to the gate, then,” I suggested. “It’s not like we can climb the cliff...”

“That’s a good idea!” Euracia nodded, perhaps having managed to regain some of her composure after sitting down, and stood up.

Together we approached the gate which was still vibrating.

“Do you mind if I try opening it like the treasury?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Once I nodded, Euracia pressed the palm of her hand against the gate, her expression tensing slightly. The mana circle drawn on the gate let out a burst of light and the shaking stopped as the gate opened up.

“Huh?! It really opened!” Euracia exclaimed. “But this is Brijit Kingdom territory, so why would the key to Rozern’s treasury work...?”

“That ring is a treasure from the Ancient Kingdom, so maybe current domains have nothing to do with it? The Ancient Kingdom covered the entire continent.”

“Oh, that makes sense!”

The Nameless Sword I gave to Jint was from the Ancient Kingdom too. There might be something useful in here.

The place had aroused my curiosity.

“Equip your sword, Euracia. Let’s check out what’s inside the gate. Exercise all due caution, okay?”

“Understood.”

I stepped through the gate cautiously, since there was no guarantee that this place was safe like the treasury. As I did, the passageway leading deeper inside lit up, cutting through the darkness. Little mana circles shone on the ceiling.

“Huh...” Euracia followed with a tense expression on her face, looking around the cave as though she were mystified.

“It’s a good thing there were lights... It looks like there aren’t any side paths, so let’s head straight towards the back.”

Once Euracia nodded her agreement, we walked down the passage for a while. It was a straight corridor with nothing particularly out of the ordinary. The mana circles on the ceiling continued all the way. It had been far more than half an hour at this point, so now I had to use an ordinary sword in place of Daitoren.

That leaves 30 Second Invincibility as my only lifeline, and I’m only able to use it one more time.

The situation was far from reassuring, but as we kept on going without encountering danger or a way out until finally something changed.

There was a wide, open space at the end of the narrow tunnel.

We looked at one another, both nodding.

With a gulp, we set foot into that space.

That’s precisely when it happened!

“Eeeek!”

“Whoa!”

Suddenly, the ground opened up and we fell.

A pitfall!

Infuriatingly, we had just stepped into a classic trap. Unable to tell how deep it was in the darkness, I activated 30 Second Invincibility despite myself. That used up the last of my skill points, but I had no choice. If there were metal spikes or bamboo spears at the bottom, I'd be skewered to death otherwise.

I also took Euracia in my arms, like when we'd fallen from the cliff earlier.

We had been walking pretty close together, so it was easy to get my arms around her even without using a skill like Crush this time.

I may have been imagining it, but it felt like she was clinging to me up until, eventually, my back impacted the ground. For better or for worse, my preparations all proved to be in vain—there was nothing on the ground where I landed.

The hole that had opened up in the floor quickly closed, leaving us in darkness.

It was pitch black, making it impossible to see anything.

The walls were smooth, without anything we could grab onto, and from what I saw before the hole closed up, the ceiling was high enough up that we couldn't reach it by jumping.

What a perfect hole for us to starve to death in.

"Are you okay, Euracia?"



I couldn’t see in the darkness, but I had fallen back-first while holding Euracia after using 30 Second Invincibility, so she had ended up lying on top of me. It

was that position that seems to happen all the time in romcoms. I also felt something soft and bouncy asserting its presence.

“I’m fine. How about you? You seem to have ended up underneath me...”

“I’m all right too.”

As I sat up, despite not meaning to, we ended up hugging one another in a seated position.

On top of that, I was touching something voluminous. This had to be the softness of a breast. Her assertive bosom sent my brain into a tizzy, and I seemed to have surprised her too, because we both pushed each other away at the same time.

“A-Anyway!” Euracia stammered. “What is this hole? It’s too dark to see anything down here... It’s kind of...”

“Scary because it’s dark?” I suggested.

“That’s not it. But being trapped in the darkness...”

Yeah, that makes sense. The darkness itself isn’t a problem. I mean, she had no problem spending the night out in the mountains. Is she claustrophobic, then?

“It’s not scary, but I don’t like it. Not being able to see anything makes me feel more lonely... I feel like I’ve been living all alone ever since my father passed away. I mean, I haven’t been able to treat my brother like a little brother ever since he became king...”

“It’s okay. You may be trapped, but you’re not alone, right?”

“The way you say that...! Honestly... You’re such a bad man! I should have expected no less from a villainous lord.”

“Wait, how does that follow? All I said was that you’re not alone.”

When I asked that...

“N-Never mind!” Euracia hurriedly stammered.

Not being able to see her expression, I couldn’t tell what had gotten into her all of a sudden.

“You sure are an odd one, Your Highness. Well, anyway, maybe we should count ourselves lucky to have a quiet moment like this in the middle of war?”

“Erhin. What are you talking about? How is falling into a trap good luck?”

If it weren’t for the darkness, I would probably have gotten a good look at Euracia being genuinely confused, but instead I only heard her voice.

“Being trapped here is giving us a chance to talk like this, isn’t it? Time alone together, huh? I’m pretty happy about it, actually. We’ve always been moving around with the soldiers, so we haven’t had any chance for this sort of thing.”

“Stop it, you dummy! What am I supposed to think when you say something like that...? Anyway, I don’t like it when you call me ‘Your Highness.’ Call me Euracia instead.”

“Huh? Haven’t I been calling you Euracia all along?”

“You just called me Your Highness earlier...!”

Because I was joking with you.

“That was just me fooling around, emphasizing how weird you were acting. I don’t want to treat you like royalty, so I call you Euracia when we’re not in public. That’s my right, since I won the bet we made in Eintorian.”

“Do you *want* me to stab you with Rossade in the darkness?” Euracia replied coldly.

Please don’t do that. In this situation, I’d die because I couldn’t defend myself.

Despite her tone, the fact we were still so close our shoulders were touching was probably a sign of our mutual trust for one another.

I trust her because I’ve seen how she lived in the game, as well as everything she’s done since I met her, but I don’t know how much Euracia trusts me. It’s got to be at least a little, given how close we are. Honestly, that doesn’t feel half bad.

“But...”

“Hm?”

“You’re the first person who’s been willing to call me by name and not treat

me like a princess. Honestly, you're such a villain."

It sounded like she was praising me, but what was with that bit at the end there?

"Why do you keep calling me a villain? This, after we saved your country together!"

"I respect you for that!" Euracia shouted emphatically.

Respect, huh? If making a capable woman like her my retainer was all that I wanted, then that respect wouldn't be a bad thing. In fact, it's something to be welcomed.

But somehow, that didn't feel like enough. No, it wasn't enough at all.

"But more importantly, Erhin..."

"Hm?"

Suddenly, Euracia's tone grew serious.

"If you have a skill that will let you escape on your own, please, just go, and don't worry about me! I wouldn't want to hold you back."

Obviously, I was confused how to respond to that. Where was I supposed to go by myself? Was this what she'd been thinking?

"Did you forget what I've been saying all this time? If you say something like that again, I'm going to get mad."

"But...!"

"When I said that it might have been lucky we got trapped here, it's because I have a way of getting us out. We can escape from here. Obviously, it'll take some time because I need my mana to recover first. In five hours I'll be able to use my skill again and I think it'll let us escape."

"Is that true?"

"I wouldn't lie about this."

"Well, okay then."

Yeah. Five hours. In five hours, I'd be able to use Crush again. Once it

recovered, I planned to use it to smash through the ceiling and escape.

“But, ‘I’m going to get mad’... Pffft!”

At that moment, I heard a slight laugh in the darkness. In all this time before now, her expression had never changed. She had been the very picture of a lonely princess shouldering the fate of her kingdom all by herself. And now she was laughing?!

“Euracia, you just laughed, didn’t you?”

“Oh, come on! If you’re going to say stuff like ‘I’m going to get mad,’ how am I supposed to maintain any sense of tension?! No one’s said that to me since my father when I was a little girl... What have I been putting on this act for all this time...?”

“Did you just drop an incredible revelation like it was no big deal? You’ve been putting on an act all this time?”

“Yes. You might call it the act I needed to put on in order to live as a princess. My father told me to always act with dignity, so that no one looked down on me. At some point, my expression became all stiff, and I started putting on an act when I was in front of other people.”

“So, if you just laughed, does that mean you’ve stopped acting?”

“Just in front of you, for now.”

“Only in front of me?”

“Yes. If you’re someone I can respect more than my father...then I don’t mind. That’s something I decided a long time ago. I obey the people I’ve decided to trust. I chose to trust you when you commanded it, so I’ll obey you. So, don’t run away, okay?”

“As if I’d run away. I’ll be by your side no matter what.”

Her high Command and Charisma will be a great help in war. But even without those I’d be grateful to have her at my side.

“H-Hold on... I’m not proposing to you!”

“Oh...! Yeah. I take it back, then!”

Now that I think about it, she's right. What am I talking about, saying I'll always be by her side?

I didn't know what to say now. There was a long silence between us.

"Hold on, did you just laugh again? You just stifled a laugh, didn't you?!"

"I did not! I was just at a loss for words. I'm always so weird when I'm around you... Ever since you pulled on my cheeks to try and force me to smile!"

"I shouldn't have done that."

Yeah, I wanted to see her smile. But to think she'd laugh in the darkness like this. I feel like I'm missing out, not being able to see it.

"I'm sorry. Well, anyway, let's rest a little for now. It will take another five hours for my skills to recover, so it's a good opportunity to recuperate too. I know I'm tired, but you probably haven't slept properly after our march through the cold mountains either, right?"

It wasn't cold here, so it was a perfect place for a rest. Although we were trapped in the darkness, that also meant that there were no other threats.

"Let's do that."

Hearing her approval, I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes.

Waves of exhaustion rolled over me, and I was overcome by drowsiness.

*

When I awoke, Euracia was sleeping on my shoulder. It probably happened naturally as she drifted off.

“If she’d just be like this more often, she’d feel more like a princess...”

To be fair, she has to be even more worn out than I am. She hasn’t slept much during our trek through the mountains, or at any point during the war, really.

Leaving her be so as not to wake her, I called up the system. The text itself lit up so that I was able to read it without issue. On checking, I found Crush had recovered. That meant we could escape now. Possibly because of me moving, Euracia slipped off my shoulder and fell.

“Ah...!” Her eyes shot open as she made a noise like a high school student who had been close to falling asleep in class.

“You’re awake?”

“Was I sleeping?”

“Yeah. Like a log.”

“I-I was... Is that so...?”

“But more importantly, my mana’s recovered. It’s about time we got out of here.”

With her awake now, there was no reason to stick around. I stood up immediately.

I’m going to bust a hole in the ceiling with Crush. A pitfall is a trap where the ground opens up beneath you, so I’ll crush the bit that opens and break us free!

I aimed Crush at a forty five degree angle.

“Euracia. Hold on tight to me. And don’t let go no matter what.”

“Is this good? Or should I go higher?”

“There’s fine. Now hold on tight!”

I immediately activated Crush. The motion instantly took us flying up through the hole it blasted in the ceiling. At last, we were free from the trap. The light of

mana circles on the corridor ceiling welcomed us—no sight could've been more gratifying after all that darkness.

"Wow! That was incredible! I never would have realized you could use your special attack this way."

"I know, right? But don't fall for me, okay? You aren't my type," I said with a shrug of my shoulders. Euracia raised her hands in anger.

"What's this, out of nowhere?! You aren't my type either!"

Something was clearly different. She was more open about her emotions than before.

"Did you realize there's drool on your face, Your Highness?"

Euracia looked shocked at this revelation before quickly turning away. Shocked and embarrassed. It was a natural human expression. It had been too dark for me to see when she'd laughed for a brief moment inside the trap. So this was the first time I was seeing her face so expressive. Like I'd expected, her face looked totally different when it was full of emotion compared to the stiff expression she'd had up until now. It had been like looking at a cute doll before, but now it felt like the doll had come to life.

"Th-That can't be right!"

"You're tired. It happens. Anyway, I think this is the first time I'm seeing your face look like that, instead of your usual tense expression... You know, you're way cuter like this."

"That is not true! And 'cute'...? First you say I'm not your type, and then this?! It's not fair! And my name is Euracia, not 'Your Highness'!"

"I just called you that as a joke, you know? Didn't you get that? Your Drooling Highness!"

"Urgh... You're such a villain!"

Even the way she raised her hands angrily was adorable in this situation.

"Anyway, let's head in deeper. Test the ground with your sword as we go, just to be safe."

I began moving cautiously. After some time, we came to a massive hall. The floor of this chamber was dominated by a gigantic mana circle, making it clear at a glance that it was no ordinary place. Euracia's ring was silent—apparently it only responded to the gate. As she entered alongside me, Euracia cocked her head to the side.

"This place is kind of strange," she said.

"What do you mean, strange? Do you sense something?"

"The amount of mana in the air is different. Denser, you might say..."

It's dense with mana? Does she mean there's more here than elsewhere? I can't sense mana myself, so I wouldn't know.

"Isn't it good that there's a lot of mana? Seems like it'd be useful for training."

"When there's a lot of mana, your mana recovers quickly, but the maximum amount of mana you can store in your body is determined by your natural talent for wielding it. Of course, even without talent, it's possible that you could potentially raise that limit by training diligently for a long time, but I've never heard of it happening in a short time just because the air was particularly dense with it..."

Yeah, that makes sense. Increasing the maximum amount of mana your body can store would mean raising your ability scores. A-class or B-class commanders can store way more mana in their body than your average person. It's on an entirely different level like that.

"Whaaaaa?!"

But this time, her reaction was even more strange. The way she responded to things was changing moment by moment.

"It's weird. The mana... It's violently shaking inside of me...! Huh? Wha?"

Euracia closed her eyes, still standing. At the same time, the gigantic mana circle on the floor shone white! Euracia abandoned herself to the flow, putting her hand out in front of her. As she did, a round blob of energy appeared over her hand. It was blue, the same color as her own mana. There was a change to Euracia's ability score as the blue mana was sucked into the palm of her hand!

Her Martial rose from 87 to 89. An incredible +2 increase.

"Your maximum mana just went up, didn't it?"

"Yes. I felt the mana flow into me...and increase my capacity. What in the world...?"

Euracia looked at me with considerable surprise. *How should I know?* Not even being able to sense mana, I had no answer for her.

"By the way," she added, "after that sudden increase, I don't sense mana anymore."

"None? At all?"

She gave a firm nod.

That would mean this mana circle has the effect of raising a person's maximum mana value. That wasn't a thing in the game, but maybe it's something like a bonus quest, or a bonus item?

The mana circle began to shine again. That meant it could raise another person's mana—mine, specifically. But it wasn't like I used mana myself. That's why, unlike with Euracia, it changed nothing for me. I opened up the system and kept staring at it, but nothing changed.

"How is it for you?" Euracia asked, approaching me. I didn't know how to respond.

What about Daitoren? It's an item with white light. And it has its own level too.

This mana circle also gave off a white light. So they were the same type. Both the bonus item Daitoren and this mana circle were created by the game's management team! I thrust Daitoren into the mana circle. *Well, if it can't do anything for me, I might as well try it on this.*

That changed something.

Usually, Daitoren only shone with white light when using Crush.

But it emitted a powerful white light as it resonated with the mana circle, and also spawned countless little white lights that filled the space around us.

Daitoren is now level 2.

Daitoren's Martial cap is now 105.

Messages popped up one after another!

True Crush had been created.

Instantly kills or incapacitates an enemy with up to +5 Martial.

Also neutralizes the opponent's mana skills.

A Martial cap of 105. Daitoren boosted my Martial by +30 for half an hour, but up until now that +30 could only bring me to a maximum of 100. That meant if I equipped Daitoren when I had a Martial of 70, it would raise my Martial to 100, and if I equipped it when I had a Martial of 71, it would only raise it to 100 not 101. That cap was just raised by 5 whole points.

In other words, if I equipped Daitoren when I had a Martial of 75, it would raise my Martial to 105. That would put me on the higher end of S-class.

Of course, if I equipped it with a Martial of 76, my Martial would still only be 105. If Daitoren goes up to level 3, that cap would probably rise again too. So far, this all made sense to me. But as for the new skill it had generated, it said that it could neutralize an enemy's mana skills, but what exactly that meant was unclear.

Did it neutralize them and attack? Or just neutralize them?

Although, come to think of it, the game never had abilities that were both offensive *and* defensive.

"Hmm... How mysterious."

Euracia looked at the shimmering white lights that had filled the hall, a contented look on her face. With all those motes as a backdrop, she shone almost like a goddess. How could I have told her she wasn't my type? Honestly, that was a total lie. Was there a man in this world who wouldn't have been captivated by her charms? If she had been born into my old world, she was

attractive enough that she could have aimed to become a top-class celebrity. On top of that, she also had a certain nobility to her. Her regal nature elevated that pretty face of hers several times over, making her feel unattainable.

Yeah, she's out of even my league. This world is like a game. Uniting the continent will have to come first. I don't think I can achieve unification also pursuing romance on the side. That's why conquering this world has to be my priority for now.

Once that's done, then I can look to the future.

Will I go back to my own world? Or keep living in this one? Yeah, that's the question. Maybe I'll get the choice once I finish my conquest? This world used to be a game. They'd better at least give me the chance to make that decision.

Anyway, this goddess looked on, mystified, standing by my side as she watched Daitoren absorb the light motes.

"That has to be a hundred times more light than for me... Did it just get a hundred times stronger?!" she asked, her eyes full of hopeful expectation, as if my gain was her own.

"No, of course not. Just a little, okay?"

The mana circle vanished after Daitoren's level went up. It was no longer active. Did that mean it had a limit of two people? We must've used up all the mana the circle was releasing. In that case, maybe there were places like this in other kingdoms.

It seemed highly probable. Since it responded to Euracia's ring, that meant it was built by the Ancient Kingdom. And if that was true, it was unlikely they'd only ever built one of them, here in Brijit, the southernmost territory. What if there were even more incredible facilities in the capital of the Ancient Kingdom?

That would be excellent.

If I could find them, wouldn't I be able to raise not just my abilities, but those of my retainers up to the limits of their talent? In the game, I was able to boost their abilities with items. Did this mean that kind of fun character raising feature was still in play here? If so, I figured this was all part of the bonus.

Everything related to the Ancient Kingdom was.

The problem was I didn't know where they were.

Come to think of it, could it be that the treasures that the Twelve Houses split among themselves—the twelve treasures, including Jint's Nameless Sword—are hints to their locations? No, hold on. Those twelve treasures can't just *be hints. Hmm. I have absolutely no idea.*

It was Euracia's ring that found this place. The pendant-shaped item that I used to access the gold vault under Eintorian Castle didn't react to this kind of facility at all. That likely meant that the facility inside the castle wasn't built in the time of the Ancient Kingdom. It was a treasure amassed by generations of Eintorians, seeking to regain their former glory after the fall of the Ancient Kingdom. That being the case, as things stood, Euracia's ring was my only means of finding places like this one.

"Euracia. That ring of yours... Could I borrow it sometime?"

"This? Of course, I wouldn't mind lending it to you..."

"Oh, great!"

"But I can't."

She wouldn't mind, but she can't? What's that mean?

As I was wondering that, she held the ring up in front of my eyes.

"Ever since I first put it on, I haven't been able to take it off. Father tried to remove it, but couldn't..."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes. We always thought this ring was the key to the treasury, so it should have gone to my little brother, the king... But once I put it on, it wouldn't come off. I guess you could say that, after that, it was decided that I would be the one to hold onto it..."

Sure enough, it didn't want to budge. It was like it had merged with her finger.

Does this mean she was the key to all the bonuses? Assuming there's only one

ring, that is.

“Do you need it so badly you have to look so serious?”

“Uh, well...”

Because it was connected to the bonus items, the urgency of my need for it must have shown on my face.

“Then allow me to cut it off. Losing a single finger won’t kill me,” Euracia said plainly, taking hold of Rossade.

“Wh-Whoa there, settle down. What’re you saying? You just need to help me when I need it. No need to chop your finger off.”

“Are you sure?”

“Uh, yeah. I’m sure. Don’t say crazy stuff like that. I don’t want your finger...”

“Hmph! You want to say you don’t need a finger from a woman who’s not even your type? Is that it.”

Uh, no this isn’t about that. I don’t need any *fingers.*

She kept on staring at her hand. If I left her like this, she might really cut it off, so I decided it was time to change the subject.

“Anyway, let’s get out of here. If this was really made in the time of the Ancient Kingdom, there must be an exit on the Brijitian side too.”

If this facility was like the treasuries in the Eintorian and Rozern Domains, this place was likely connected to somewhere in the Brijitian capital too. If so, and if we could infiltrate the city through that point, that would be a far more certain deathblow to Brijit than us going back and trying to chase after the United Army. It might be a risky bet, but it was one I was strangely convinced I would win.

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After that, we walked for another half a day before finally reaching the exit. As I’d predicted, it was connected to a wall in Brijit’s royal palace. Nobody had ever imagined there was a hidden corridor behind the wall, so everyone was shocked by our sudden appearance.

“Intruders! Assassins!”

The palace guards moved into action, but they were no match for Euracia’s Martial, or for mine when I was using Daitoren. Given that our goal was just to run away, not to wipe them out, it was impossible for them to stop us.

“Are you okay, Euracia?”

“Yes! I’ll have my revenge for Rozern!”

“Okay, let’s keep going all the way to the gates.”

We escaped the palace and fled to the castle gates. Because that secret passage was connected to the inside of Brijit’s palace, it made things simple. Even more so than when I fought to hold the gates open at Lynon Castle. That’s because Bautore had taken the vast majority of the Brijit Kingdom’s manpower with him, leaving the palace with far less defenders than Lynon Castle had.

I’d given Fihatori orders to descend the mountain and set up camp in front of Brijit’s royal palace. In a way, this had ended up serving as a test of his capability. Would he be able to lead an army and be of assistance to me? Jint lacked any talent for leading forces. That’s how I was feeling as we fought our way to the gates, anyway. We slowly started to open the massive gates of the Brijitian capital. This was a castle bereft of its lord. It was basically empty.

“Euracia, we probably don’t need to fight anymore. Look outside.”

Once I saw what was out there, I was convinced. Even if Fihatori was part of Ronan’s faction, he was still a highly capable commander.

“Oh?” Euracia came over to where I was standing and looked outside.

She must have seen it too. Fihatori, standing at the front of the army, with the massive flag of the Runanese Army. My eyes met with his, and I nodded.

“Everyone, advance into the castle!” he commanded the Runanese forces that had crossed the mountains.

Jint was already rushing forward before he gave the order, and the open gates of Brijit welcomed the battle fiend inside. The result was that we occupied the Brijitian capital in less than half a day. It was a hollowed out shell, with only the palace garrison left to defend it. There was a large noble class in Brijit, but

they were only nobles. There was nothing they could do without troops to command. Obviously, our main enemy was still out there, swimming free, so I left their flags flying from the castle towers as I returned to the palace.

Now all that remained was the big fish—the king of Brijit.

There was just one last battle to go.

*

In order to make sure she looked good for the final battle, I suddenly pointed out that Euracia's hair was an awful mess. I wanted her to look properly majestic.

"Hey, do you plan on showing yourself in front of the enemy looking like that? You've got an image to maintain. Shouldn't you go into the final battle looking awesome?"

"Huh...? Do I look strange somehow?"

"There's a mirror in the room over there. You should see it for yourself."

After giving me a dubious look, Euracia trudged off to the room I'd pointed to. Then, after some time...

"Huh? Whaaaaa?!"

There was a cry of disbelief. She totally looked like a ghost. She had messy hair like the famous one that came crawling out of TVs. Yet she was still beautiful.

"Wh-What in the world...?"

Hands trembling, Euracia began brushing her hair in front of the mirror. But she was making a mess of it. This was a woman who'd lived with nothing but a sword in her hand. Her maids had always done her hair for her.

"You're not brushing it properly... Do you think you can get it back to how it was that way?"

"I-I can manage that much...!"

It was only getting worse, so I snatched the brush out of her hands.

"Our intel says that the King of Brijit will be arriving soon. There's no time, so

I'll do it for you."

"Huh? You will?" She looked at me uneasily.

Obviously, there were maids in this castle. But we couldn't trust them in the slightest. It wasn't completely out of the question that they might suddenly try to assassinate Euracia while brushing her hair. That was just an excuse, though. I mostly just wanted to do it myself.

"Just sit still and give me a chance."

I gently stroked her hair from top to bottom with my palm. Her pretty hair swayed in my hand. Then I used the brush, gently working my way down. Little but little, I got all the flyaway hairs under control. The best thing would be to wash it, but there wasn't time for that, so the best thing to do was to either tie it back or braid it.

"I'll braid it for you too, like you always have it."

"You can do that...? Unbelievable. Even I might not be able to do that part!"

She wouldn't come right out and say she couldn't do it. Only that she *might* not be able to. Even though there was no way that she could. Well, it was only thanks to my little sister that I knew how. My mother was busy with work, often leaving me to look after my sister, and I'd learned how to do her hair thanks to that. I'd had to do it for her all the time when she was in elementary school.

Now she was over twenty, and could look after herself, but back then she'd always been asking for complicated styles. She was a real pain in the butt.

Little sisters are the worst.

Anyway, that's why I was confident I could do her hair for her. I set to work, doing the best job I could.

"Well?" I asked.

"It looks nice... But... Just how many women's hair did you have to touch to get this good?"

She looked at me suspiciously. Clearly this was a misunderstanding.

"That's not how it is. You're the first one outside of my family. There may be

lords out there who have a bunch of women serving them at their leisure, but I'm not one of them. Love is important to me."

"Huh...?" Euracia looked at me with disbelief.

What's going on with her image of me?

"Liar."

"I'm telling you, it's true."

"What kind of love?"

"What kind...? The kind that makes my heart race just thinking about them, even when they're not around?"

"Hmm... You're that pure, are you?"

"Yeah. What, are you the type that could marry or go out with just about anyone?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, how about throwing away your status as princess for love, then? If you stay in Rozern, you're eventually gonna get married off to some noble or royal from another country that you've never met. You know that right?"

"That's the one thing I don't want. If that ever happened, then I'd slit his throat on our wedding night and kill myself too!"

She'd kill herself? Extreme, much?

"Uh, or you could just reject the political marriage in the first place. Or run away if that wasn't an option!"

"You mean run away after I killed him?"

Obviously, I mean you should run away before *you end up going to his place at all. And you know that too. Honestly, this woman...*

"You wanna fight?" I asked.

Euracia looked away.

"You...smiled just now, right? Like you're enjoying it!"

"Whatever do you mean? I did no such thing."

I tried to call her out on her blatant smiling, but she was back to her usual princess face, denying it, in an instant.

*

Faced with the terrible results of his invasion, Bautore had been left with no choice but to give the order to retreat and run for his life. Less than two thousand men were able to escape with him. It was clear to anyone that continuing the war was impossible. Because of that, he was retreating to his own domain now.

“We’re going home to Brijit! We’ll be back! We’ll never forget what happened here! Never...!”

Bautore gritted his teeth and ran for home. Obviously, the Royal Rozernan Army gave chase. Escaping his pursuers with great difficulty, Bautore returned to his own country.

The Rozernans didn’t keep following across the Brijitian border. Bautore snorted at their timidity.

“They really are no big deal. These cowards can’t cross the border because they fear to tread on Brijitian soil! Gah hah hah hah!”

Bautore still believed this defeat had been caused by his own bad planning. The enemy weren’t particularly impressive! With his usual self-confidence, he believed that so long as he didn’t let his guard down, he still could reoccupy Rozern.

Obviously, he recognized that his losses were considerable. Seething with rage and with a single-minded focus on how he would absolutely be coming back for revenge, Bautore shouted, “Isn’t that right, men?!”

His men, however, felt differently. They didn’t want to see any more of the Runanese reinforcements that had crushed them at every turn. These soldiers, with bellies filled with nothing but water, couldn’t possibly be of one mind with Bautore.

“What’s wrong?! Why can’t I hear your voices?!”

Enraged, Bautore cut down the closest soldier.

“We can’t do anything without spirit! Now, let me hear you raise your voices!”

When they saw this, the nearby soldiers forced themselves to cheer out of a simple desire not to be killed themselves. But it was the worst thing he could have done. His Command, which had been maintained by his personal charisma up until now, rapidly plummeted. From 97 all the way to under 70.

Obviously, he didn’t realize this.

He’d led his men in this heavy handed way, enduring starvation until they reached a domain on the other side of the border. He was thinking about it simplistically, believing the problem would be solved once they had eaten.

“We’re going back to the capital! We’ll prepare our forces and then have our revenge!”

“Of course, sire! I swear we’ll have our revenge!”

Isenbahan agreed with him in order to protect his own life. Internally, he was thinking that maybe he would be best to make plans to flee the country as soon as they got back.

And so, Bautore finally returned to the Brijitian capital. However, he was met with silence at the gates.

Seeing this, Isenbahan cried out in surprise. “Why has no one come out to greet His Majesty on his return?!”

That’s right.

It was normally expected that not only the nobles, but all the servants of the palace would greet the king when he returned. They had sent a messenger ahead when they arrived in a nearby domain. Because they weren’t returning victorious, there was no need for a grand celebration, but tradition demanded they at least all come out to greet him.

This was nothing less than an affront to his rights as king. Obviously, Bautore’s face turned red with indignation as he approached the gates. For some reason, the massive gates of the Brijitian capital were unmanned, without the garrison or even a gate guard anywhere to be seen.

It was awfully quiet inside the capital too.

No one walked the streets. His people were nowhere to be seen.

The soldiers gazed around as they entered the silent city. They looked to one another, cocking their heads to the side in confusion. Their commanders did the same.

“What in the world...?” Isenbahan murmured, a look of suspicion on his face.

Once they had all entered the capital, harboring these doubts, the gates suddenly closed behind them. At the same time, the soldiers lying in wait came rushing out of the alleys and other places they’d been hiding. Men who had been hiding atop the castle walls also came down in front of the closed gates, cutting off their escape route.

These soldiers were not Brijitian. Incredibly, the uniforms of the Runanese Army had suddenly appeared in the center of the royal capital.

“Y-You curs! How...?! How are you here?!”

Bautore was speechless at this unbelievable development. Of course, Erhin was standing at the vanguard of the Royal Runanese Army.

*

It was finally time to put an end to this war.

The gates were closed, and surrounded by soldiers. There was nowhere to run. The King of Brijit had no hope in this situation without Ganeif. He couldn't fight against twenty thousand men in the completely enclosed space of the walls. There was no denying he was completely surrounded.

"A mere cur like you, stop me? Impossible! I am the master of this continent!" Bautore bellowed in my direction.

I wasn't even looking at him anymore. He was just a genocidal maniac. Nothing more, nothing less. Unlike Valdesca Frann of Naruya, he wasn't a strategist, or a man of great character who could have still inspired awe and respect in me.

"Attack! Wipe out the Brijitian remnants!"

At my command, the Runanese troops that were surrounding the Royal Brijitian Army rushed out from all over. A one-sided battle soon commenced. Euracia ran toward the King of Brijit. Her Martial score was already about equal to his, but Bautore also needed to take on the rank and file soldiers at the same time.

In other words, he was no match for Euracia.

This is the price for your massacres in Rozern!

Euracia impaled Bautore through the throat with Rossade as if she were there to make him pay.



“Yeahhhhhhhh!” The Runanese soldiers cheered at the death of the enemy’s king.

The Brijitians who saw it began surrendering here and there. No, they'd never had the will to fight to begin with. That's why this war essentially ended the moment their king perished.

"Wooooooooooo!" The Runanese soldiers let out an even more excited cheer.

Standing among them, I shouted, "This is all thanks to you people. I am sure you'll be paid your due reward. So feel free to grow drunk on victory. I'll even allow you to drink alcohol today. But you mustn't lay a hand on the people of Brijit. I intend to prosecute war criminals to the fullest extent of the law!"

*

Fihatori slammed his hand down on the table. The King of Runan had ordered Erhin to return.

Hearing news of this before Erhin, as a retainer of the Ducal House of Ronan, Fihatori shook his head. He didn't like the king's decision. There were another fifty thousand troops being sent to reinforce them, so it was only a matter of time before the domains of Brijit surrendered.

As such, the king wanted to recall Erhin before the occupation began so that he could give all the credit to a member of his dynasty.

"I never realized our country was *this* rotten."

As far as Fihatori was concerned, at this point Erhin was a comrade who'd fought alongside him. Not only had Erhin been open with him, he'd even entrusted Fihatori with command of the front line, where it was easiest to distinguish himself.

That's why Fihatori had opened his heart to Erhin. He only meant to monitor him at first, but he'd totally changed his mind now. Fihatori had also fought alongside Erheet Demacine, a fellow retainer of the Ducal House of Ronan. He respected Erheet too, of course, but Erhin had something Erheet didn't.

The power to unite his troops, and a strategic mind.

To that end, Fihatori burst into the provisional office with the intention of persuading them to change their minds.

Even if that ended up going against Duke Ronan's wishes.

*

I started preparing to go home. There had been a rapid shift after we took the Brijitian capital. The King of Runan, hearing reports of what happened, had dispatched an impressive fifty thousand more troops. He'd only given me thirty thousand to protect Rozern and destroy Brijit. Once he saw that it was becoming a reality, he'd hurried to send more.

Was that his greed, causing him to focus on the big prize dangling in front of him instead of the danger of Naruya?

I predicted this, of course. His greed will be the ruin of Runan. If he sends troops to Brijit, that will make it all the harder to fend off the impending Grand Subjugation from Naruya. And once Naruya takes the capital, I plan to absorb the leaderless domains of Runan!

That would mean conflict with Naruya, surely, but it would all come down to a battle of strategy. As such, I didn't have time to waste here now that my objective was accomplished.

Of course, I hadn't fully occupied Brijit. But that was a job for the newly dispatched Runanese troops.

And the king of Runan wants it that way too, I'm sure.

It defied common sense to replace the commander who had taken care of the most vital and dangerous work, but I was actually appreciative of the snub.

Naruya is the real enemy—one that a minor opponent like Bautore isn't even worth comparing to. I've done what I set out to accomplish, so I can go home without regrets. I can always retake this domain later.

"They're ordering you to return to Runan at once as soon as the fifty thousand men arrive!"

"If that's what they want, I guess I'll have to return, then."

Noticing my utter lack of emotion about this, Fihatori frowned.

"Once they've recalled the commander who occupied the Brijitian capital, I expect Duke Ronan's subordinates to arrive en masse. You're not going to tell me you don't know that means, are you?"

What it means, huh?

There was no way I couldn't have known. The king and duke meant to occupy all of Brijit, then steal the credit for my accomplishment.

"Before I answer that, you're one of Ronan's men, aren't you? I'm surprised to see you're so concerned about me."

"No... This is different!"

Fihatori unexpectedly shook his head. It was as if he truly thought what they were doing was beyond the pale. Fihatori Delhina was a talented man, to be sure. The problem was that he was a retainer of the Ducal House of Ronan.

He was a count, but without a domain of his own, which meant he was lower ranked than I was in the peerage. There were a lot of landless counts. Especially serving as retainers to high nobility, like the duke.

That's what he was.

If he kept his mouth shut, this might even be an opportunity to receive a domain of his own. Unlike me, who wasn't part of Ronan's lineage, he was one of the duke's retainers. Most of the credit for what I'd done was probably going to him. If he was saying this to me in spite of that, did it represent a change of heart?

That's not a bad thing. I always welcome talented people.

Fihatori had been an upstanding leader in the battles we fought.

He's shown me he can do wonderful work.

He also excelled at following orders precisely.

But it's too soon.

Considering his circumstances, I can wait a little longer before having him join me.

With that thought, I shrugged. "Well, it's fine. I have no desire to get embroiled in political struggles. Anyway, I expect you'll be getting a domain in Brijit after this. Congratulations. Heh heh."

"I don't think it's any laughing matter! And I could never! I won't accept such

a reward while you receive nothing, Commander!”

“That’s not the way to do this.” I shook my head. “If you’re really concerned for what’s in my best interest, then stay in Brijit. If you’re given a domain, take it. And continue to swear loyalty to Duke Ronan. If you’re able to amass power in your domain, then I’m sure you’ll be able to help me out someday.”

“What are you talking about...?”

“There’s more important things right now. The rewards to be paid to our men, for one thing. I kept talking about how they’d be rewarded to keep them motivated.”

“But will His Majesty make good on that promise? Based on what I know of his personality...”

Fihatori’s eyes suggested it might be impossible.

Yeah, that’s right. There’s no way that the King of Runan’s ever going to pay the soldiers that reward.

“He likely won’t. But it’s important to be true to your word. If I don’t keep my word, then I doubt the soldiers who served me so well this time will ever listen to me again.”

It’s incredibly important to win the men’s loyalty. Especially since I mean to absorb Runan’s manpower later.

“If His Majesty won’t pay, I’ll have to reward them personally. I’ll send the money, so could you make sure the men get it for me?”

“Of course I will. By my honor, I swear to make sure the other nobles can’t embezzle it. But are you really going to head back like this? If you were to stay, then...!”

“Look at the big picture. There’s a bigger picture here. If you get too caught up on the little things, you’ll miss out on it.”

As I said that, shaking my head, Fihatori looked back at me with his mouth hanging open like an idiot.

*

He wasn't the only one questioning things. Euracia was too.

"Erhin, I wanted to ask you something."

"And what might that be?"

"Um... What is your objective? I want to learn about your ideals. Because I can't imagine you're the kind of person who'd be satisfied as nothing more than the lord of a small domain."

She picked up on that, huh? She's got a better eye than I gave her credit for. Fihatori didn't seem to have figured it out, though.

"What is it you dream of? Could it be..." Euracia looked both ways to check that no one else was around. "You hope to become the King of Runan?"

Honestly, her words surprised me. Because while she was wrong, she also wasn't too far off the mark.

"I don't know what to tell you, but you're thinking too small."

"Huh...? Did you say small? Runan is small?"

"Now to answer your question, my ideals are nothing too grand. Happiness for me and my comrades. That's all I want. The continent is in a state of chaos. Most nations will invade each other if they see the slightest opening. That's why the havoc of war never ends. The only way to find happiness in an era like that...is through unification. If the continent is united as one, then peace will naturally follow."

This was just me saying things in a grandiose manner. My actual goal was to beat the game. That meant unifying the continent. But wouldn't it be wonderful if we got peace as a result?

It was obvious, looking at history, that the era of unification that followed the Sengoku Period was better for the people. Comparing life in the Sengoku Period to life under the Tokugawa Shogunate in the Edo Period, the shogunate was obviously better. A world where war raged every day was totally different from one where there was continuous peace, even if it was only on the surface.

Especially since this continent was originally one country.

"That's why I intend to fight. To end all war. Of course, even after unification,

there will be another war someday. But between a country where there's times of peace, and a land that's at constant war with itself, anyone should be able to see that the former is preferable. Wouldn't you agree?"

Once the land was united, it wouldn't be easy for another war to start. Assuming that the unified kingdom was governed by a reasonable administration, peace would probably last for centuries. That's how it was in Earth's history, after all.

Euracia just stared at me. "Peace for Rozern..." she said at length, "...and for everyone on the continent... Is that what you're talking about?"

"Yeah, that's right. Everyone, without distinction."

"Is that possible?"

"Who can say? It's what I'm going to work toward. So, if you want to cast aside the Rozern name, and work with me as just Euracia, you're welcome anytime."

Euracia blinked for a moment at this proposal.

"The scale of this discussion has gotten a little too big for me. Who in the world *are* you...?!"

"More importantly, Euracia."

"What? Please, don't confuse me any more...!"

"No, no, this is about something else. Come to Eintorian anytime you'd like. You're always welcome. You have no friends, right? I'm offering to be your friend."

"What are you saying?! Of course I have friends!"

"Oh, yeah? Who?"

"There's...maids I get along with!"

"Can you call that having friends?"

"Urkh...!"

Euracia began shaking. It seemed I'd hit her where it hurt.

“I don’t know!” she shouted angrily and stormed out of the room.

*

In Runan’s royal palace, the king of Runan greeted me with great satisfaction. “Gah hah hah hah!” he bellowed. “I always believed in you. Excellent work. Just marvelous. You really did it!”

“You did well, Erhin.” Duke Ronan didn’t hesitate to praise me either. The problem was that praise was all I was getting.

They seemed disinclined to give me any reward. Their intentions were so transparent. Honestly, they surely thought I was a sucker.

“Won’t all of Brijit fall into Runan’s hands soon, Your Majesty?”

“I suppose so. The extra troops I sent seem to be doing well. Gah hah hah hah!”

“No one can deny that I was the one who made it possible for them,” I declared to the king’s laughing face.

The king and Duke Ronan looked to one another, as if the moment had finally come. The smiles faded from their faces. It felt like they were already planning to dispose of me once the war ended.

“Hmm, couldn’t they, though? You never know, really. It might have been possible without you. Perhaps Fihatori could have done it by himself.”

The king was spouting nonsense. They didn’t come greedier than this.

“Sire, I won’t ask much of you. And I know it’s my fate to keep fighting on your behalf. I may not have done much of import, but could I ask for some reward, no matter how small?”

When I mentioned future wars, the king coughed a little. He looked like he’d realized, like it or not, he had no choice.

“Yes, I suppose so. You’ve accomplished something. Nobody’s denied that. You’ll have to be rewarded. Yes, a reward. Will a gold bar do?”

Oh, screw you. I’ve got all the gold I need. More than Runan’s economy.

“You are the one who can use that gold best, wouldn’t you agree, sire? Could

I, perhaps, have a domain on the Brijitian coast instead?”

“A domain on the coast?”

“Yes. There’s a place called Loctoin. I hear the coast is beautiful there.”

“Loctoin? Hey! Fetch a map at once!”

Soon, a map was spread out in the audience chamber, one on which I could point out that domain for them.

“Why a domain on the coast?” Ronan asked, seemingly reluctant to give me even this tiny scrap of land.

“I’ve always wanted to own a domain on the coast. A quiet, little stretch of land by the seaside. I intend to set it up as a resort. I’d say that will lure in some fine women, wouldn’t you?”

“Ahh, right. I’d forgotten you were so excessively fond of women. Well, it seems small enough we could give it to you, but...”

“Then could I ask to have a document to that effect made here and now, pressed with the royal seal?” I asked.

“Sire, I don’t believe there’s any need for such haste. Erhin, could you return again tomorrow?”

Ronan’s greedy. He won’t let even a small domain slip away so easily.

I nodded, not having any other choice. The next day, I came for another audience with the king. It was obvious what Ronan had been up to the night before. He’d ordered a thorough investigation of the land I requested.

He knew that they were going to have to give me something to keep using me in future wars, but he had no intention of giving me a domain from which I could expand my power base.

“I discussed the coastal domain you requested with His Majesty,” Ronan said, pointing to one spot on the map. “I’ve picked out an even better place than the one you mentioned. A domain by the name of Bertaquin. There really is nothing there, so you’ll be able to blow off steam there without attracting public attention. Heh heh heh. A secluded beach, completely surrounded by mountains. No matter what you do there, no one can easily flee, right?”

He pointed to a spot in a remote corner of Brijit. A little seaside city. Honestly, you couldn't even call it a city, and the domain was totally surrounded by mountains. Really, mountains were about all the domain had in it.

"I can have that domain?"

"Yes. We've prepared a rescript pressed with the royal seal. It took a lot of work to find the best domain for you. Do you not like it?"

"P-Perish the thought...!" I said, laying it on thick.

The two of them both looked at me as my expression clouded over.

"I gratefully accept, Your Majesty."

"Oh, you do? I'm glad you like it, then. Gah hah hah hah hah hah!"

The king let out a roaring laugh, thinking he'd managed to fob off a worthless domain on me in place of any real reward. Mentally, I sneered at him as I accepted the rescript and left the palace. Yeah, that's right. The joke was on him.

Bertaquin, which had seemingly nothing to speak of, was precisely the domain that I'd wanted all along.

I had predicted that if I asked for a seaside retreat, they'd give me the most worthless piece of land on the Brijitian coast. That's just how the king and Ronan were. Ronan was probably laughing at my mistake in mentioning using it as a resort when he picked this domain for me. He figured that, given Bertaquin was ideal for my stated purpose, I couldn't possibly say no. Obviously, I never had any intention of refusing.

In fact, Bertaquin had the most abundant iron mines on the continent.

Eintorian had to import iron because of a lack of it, but those imports were managed by the royal family. That had made iron rather difficult to come by. Iron was a strategic resource, and every nation managed it judiciously. As such, being able to harvest it from my own domain was a massive gain.

Of course, Brijit hadn't known about the iron in Bertaquin either.

In the game, the mine was only discovered once the territory was developed, and then it overflowed with iron. So only I knew about it at this point.

Yes, indeed.

This iron was what I’d wanted more than anything from this war.

Final Chapter: Heroes' Respite

Jint had a rare smile on his face as we were about to arrive back in Eintorian.

"You're in awfully good cheer. I don't see you smile often, Jint."

The man remained impassive no matter what I gave him, but it was a totally different story when it came to Mirinae. We had found a lot of stuff in Brijit's treasury, and I'd allowed Jint to pick something out as a present for her. There was enough there that I could have let him take as much as he pleased, but receiving a large amount all at once wouldn't have as much of an impact.

But giving a man returning from war one beautiful treasure? That was far cooler, right?

"I wasn't smiling!" Jint insisted. "I was just practicing the expression."

The heck does that mean?

"But more importantly, the problem is you can't take off these bandages yet."

Jint's chest wound hadn't healed yet, so it was still bandaged.

"What're you talking about? It's fine. When a man comes home from war, you expect him to have some wounds!"

"Oh, yeah?" I challenged him. "You can talk big right now, because you're with me, but you won't sound so tough in front of Mirinae."

"That's not true," Jint firmly denied it. I mentally scoffed at his bravado.

Anyway, that's how Jint and I returned to Eintorian. There was much more to do still. I needed to get that iron mine developed, after all.

"Master! Welcome home."

When we arrived at the gates of the domain, the head chamberlain and all my retainers, who had learned we were coming somehow, were there to greet us.

"Your Excellency!" My retainers bowed before me.

"You don't need to greet us like this. On your feet, everyone!"

I dismounted from my horse and patted all my retainers on the back. Not that there were that many of them.

“Oh, right, Hadin. Did anything happen in the domain while I was away?”

Nodding to acknowledge the question, Hadin said, “No, sir. Nothing of particular note.”

“What can you tell me about the state of the domain’s forces, Yusen?”

“They’re improving, little by little! But before that, I heard about what happened. Hard as it is to believe...”

“We’ll discuss it at length later. I want to survey the domain starting tomorrow. Get things ready so I can.”

“Yes, Your Excellency!”

“Okay, you’re dismissed!”

I left behind my retainers who all looked eager to talk to me about one thing or another. I was dead tired. I didn’t have the energy left to start managing the domain right away. I couldn’t remember a good night’s sleep since going to the war zone. That’s why, with my home, the castle, in sight, there was no room left in my head to think anything but this: *I just want to sleep!*

“Your Lordship!”

Mirinae, who had been standing at the back of the group, rushed forward. The moment she did, Jint, who’d been standing behind me, looking a little out of it, burst into a grin. I’m sure she probably wanted to call Jint’s name first, in all honesty, but called out to me instead because she knew how to read the room.

“Jint didn’t cause you any trouble, did he?”

“Of course not. It’s thanks to Jint that I made it back in one piece. But I got him hurt out there. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be! We have a greater debt to you than you’ll ever know, my lord! It’s only natural he’d put his life on the line to protect you!”

After saying this, Mirinae approached Jint.

“You dummy. You’ll need to train harder! How could you let yourself get hurt after boasting you’re the strongest all the time?! Come with me!”

“Hold on, Mirinae! What about our touching reunion...?”

“Oh, shut up!”

Mirinae dragged Jint off by the ear. Battle fiend or not, he couldn’t fight back against her.

And he was just saying it wouldn’t be like this too. What a laugh.

Well, even with the two of them acting like that, Jint had looked overjoyed to see Mirinae again. I have to confess I was jealous, honestly.

“Let’s head to the castle, Head Chamberlain. I’d like to put everything aside for the moment and get some rest.”

“Understood!”

I climbed into the carriage he’d prepared, planning to get some sleep. Leveling up, sorting items, it could all wait. When the carriage finally came to a stop, my one and only home, Eintorian Castle, stood before our eyes. When I went inside, all of the maids were there, bowing their heads in unison.

“Welcome home, Master!”

It was a sight anyone would envy, but one I had become so used to that it stopped even registering at some point. This was probably what it meant to become numb to something.

“Just get back to work already. I’m going to my room.” I coolly ignored them as I headed toward the stairs.

I want to rest. I desperately want to rest!

“Actually, Master, there is a guest waiting for you,” the head chamberlain called after me.

A sudden visitor?

“A guest? I’m too tired today. I’ll see them tomorrow.”

“Is that so?”

“Hold on? Head Chamberlain... You haven’t prepared women and had them sent to their room, by any chance, have you?” I asked with a harsh look, reacting to the word “guest.” The head chamberlain hurriedly shook his head.

“Certainly not!”

“Good then. I’m going to sleep, so see to it no one interrupts me until I call for them. Understood?”

Having given these strict orders, I climbed the stairs. I had only gotten solid rest a few times in recent memory. Most days all I’d been able to get was a nap. Ironically, I had the feeling that the only lengthy rest I’d been able to take was the five hours I spent in that trap with Euracia. As a result, my feet quickened their pace of their own accord.

The bedroom was finally in sight.

I opened the door!

I saw the bed, at last—my bed, the place I could sleep!

This was the bed where I first awoke in this era.

It was the only place I could sleep soundly now.

This was the home where my heart was in this world.

I jumped into bed without delay. Threw the covers over myself.

So comfy. This is it.

Soon my eyelids were growing heavy, and my body sluggish.

But that’s when it happened.

Suddenly, the window shattered with a loud smash.

Just as I was drifting off!

“What *now*?”

I sat up and looked toward the window. Wind came in past the shattered glass, along with an uninvited visitor. The same one who’d destroyed my window before. The moment our eyes met, she gripped Rossade, facing me in the same fighting stance she had used that time as well.

“Are you...a villainous lord?”

She asked me the same question as then too.

Oh, yeah. That’s right, huh?

I dropped by the Runanese capital. And then I was delayed there for a few days. So it wasn’t impossible, time-wise, that she got here before me.

“And what if I am?” I asked.

“I’ll kill you,” she replied, much like back then, leveling her blade at me with a bloodthirsty look on her face.

“Whoa, hold up! Hold up! Seriously? Stop it! Euracia!”

“Hmph! This is your punishment for ignoring a guest.”

“You’re saying that merits a death sentence?”

“...”

Euracia’s sword hand stopped. Although, the fact that I could feel it pressed up against my throat was still a bit of a problem.

“You’re treating me far too coldly after saying you’d welcome me as a friend!”

With that, she lowered her blade. But because she’d jumped onto the bed with a lot of force, we suddenly found ourselves very close together.

“Besides!” Euracia exclaimed.

“Huh? There’s still more?”

Euracia started acting coy when I asked that.

“Once I returned to Rozern and thought it over, you were the first person to ever joke with me, and it was my first time ever being treated that way...”

“You’re going to kill anyone who *jokes with you*?”

“I lowered my sword, didn’t I?! Anyway, that’s how it is!”

How what *is? What is she on about? How did she come to that conclusion?*

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Like I said, it means *that*!”

“Like that tells me anything!”

Euracia’s cheeks got a little flushed. Then, with a somewhat frustrated look, she continued.

“I want to be somewhere where my heart feels at ease! In Rozern, I’m not me, I’m the stern princess. Unable to laugh or cry...”

“Huh? So you’re saying it feels more natural around me?”

With a meek nod, Euracia graciously admitted it.

What’s going on?

“You don’t like that?” she asked.

“Uh, it’s an honor, actually,” I replied.

Yeah. I mean that genuinely. Of course it’s an honor.

“I said before that I’ve decided to trust you, and I’ll obey you. That’s why I came. And I want to see what becomes of your ideals... Won’t you let me be with you?”

“Hey! Whoa, hold up!”

“What is it?”

“Why’re you gripping Rossade again? Are you gonna kill me if I say no?”

Euracia twitched a little, letting go of Rossade, then begun to play with her hair with one hand. Then she burst out laughing. She was showing me a rare smile! Despite all the time we were in Rozern together, I’d only heard her laugh like this twice. Once in the darkness, and once just now.

So, I’d never seen it properly before. I’d tried pulling on her cheeks to force a smile once, but that had ended in a colossal failure. To think she was smiling naturally. Because I’d wanted to see it so badly, I found her smile somewhat dangerously charming.

On top of that, Euracia moved closer to me.

“It’s not like that! I want to ask you something. I was thinking I might threaten an answer out of you.”

“*Another* question? Didn’t you ask me everything back then?”

“It’s a *very* important question,” she stressed, moving closer again.

She was so close I could hear her breathing.

Scratching her cheek with her index finger, Euracia took a deep breath.

“You said I wasn’t your type, didn’t you? Well... What is your type, then?”

Martial 92.

Command 97.

A person of considerable talent was suddenly asking me my type.

Epilogue: What Makes a Person Your Type

I woke to the sound of birds chirping.

I feel well-rested.

There was a simple reason why I was so happy about that: because this wasn't my room. It was still my castle, though, so it wasn't hard to sleep here.

There was, of course, a reason why I had been sleeping in another room and not my own bed.

*

"My type?"

"Yes...!"

"Why are you suddenly asking?"

"Because...!"

Euracia got that far and then looked away. Then, looking at the bed, she rubbed her eyes slightly. First with one hand, then with both. Did she still look anything like the icy princess of the battlefield like this?

"I'm starting to get sleepy."

Then, without answering my question, she lay down in bed. In *my* bed. In short, she was dodging the conversation. Thankfully, she wouldn't be pressing me about my taste in women. If I was this exhausted, then she must have had it even worse. She'd slept even less than I had, after all. And yet she'd come all the way to Eintorian in that state.

I don't understand the need for such a forced march.

Euracia had gone back to Rozern. She could have rested up there first.

"Hey, Euracia! Are you planning to sleep here? You already have the room in the castle you were using before! Wake up!"

This elicited no response. She kept dozing away, breathing softly in her sleep.

Did she just change the topic and then pretend to fall asleep?

I couldn't understand why. It was a fact that we were both dead tired, and that I'd gotten sleepy as soon as I saw the bed too. But still, could she really fall asleep so quickly in my bed?

If this is just one manifestation of her feeling relaxed around me, then, well... That's not a bad thing.

This was the woman who'd skewered the King of Brijit through the throat in order to settle her country's grudge against him. She never hesitated to use her sword. Showed no mercy when it came time to hold true to her convictions. She'd told me that was just a face she put on for others to see.

But the way she was acting now was too far removed from that. Realizing I had been staring at her for a while, I shook my head.

If she trusts me so much, then I can't possibly betray that. If I were to lay a hand on her just because she fell asleep in my room, then I'd be back to being a villainous lord. And if she's really just sleeping here because she's tired, then touching her would be a crime. She's vitally important to me.

There's nothing else for it. I'll have to go to another room myself.

I tried to move, but then realized she was clutching my clothes.

"Euracia? Listen, it's okay if you want to sleep here. But could you let go of me?"

She didn't budge.

Seeing no other option, I took hold of her hand and tried to open it up, but she had such a death grip on me that I couldn't.

Ultimately, it turned into a bit of a battle.

*

And so, that's how I ended up waking in another room. I yawned and stretched. My stamina had recovered pretty well thanks to a good night's sleep. So, I headed out into the corridor. I was concerned about Euracia, so I headed straight to my bedroom. I rapped lightly on the door.

Knock, knock.

“Yes!” came the reply from inside. She was apparently awake.

Euracia was sitting on the bed when I entered. Her long hair was still a mess, and her expression was a bit dazed.

“You awake?”

She stared vacantly in my direction, blinking repeatedly before she slowly opened her mouth.

“Why am I sleeping here? And in your bed...?”

Why do you sound like someone who got black out drunk?

“You’re telling me you can’t remember?”

Euracia blinked some more before nodding.

“Yes.”

“You chased me out. You were sleeping so peacefully, so I slept in another room.”

“Th-Th-Th-That can’t possibly be right!”

“But it is. Now how about you wipe that drool away.”

“Huh?”

Euracia brought a hand to her mouth.

“Eeeeeeek!”

She ran right out of the room. Thanks to that, I was able to reclaim it for myself. The bed still smelled faintly of her lingering fragrance. Feeling stupid for thinking about that, I went over to look at the broken window. The weather was fine—neither hot, nor cold. So the lack of a window didn’t bother me that much.

Once I had basked in the sun for a little, starting into space, Euracia returned.

“Ohhh, I’m so exhausted. Listen, it sounds like a lot happened, but please, forget all of it!” she shouted, possibly out of breath from running.

Her previously sleep-addled features were now keenly awake.

“Uh, you can ask me to forget all you want, but it’s not that easy...”

“For-get a-bout it!” she demanded again, enunciating every syllable.

But what am I supposed to forget? The sight of her face when she’s just woken up?

“I already saw drool on your face when we fell into the trap, so...”

“Oh, you’re right. It did happen then too, now that you mention it. How odd.”

“What’s odd?”

She cocked her head to the side, seemingly perplexed, then explained, “I’d never slept in front of another person. Which means I hadn’t let anyone see me like that before... I can’t sleep all that well normally, so the idea of me falling sound asleep in front of another person is just impossible!”

Come to think of it, she felt the need to ask me if she’d really fallen asleep when we were in the trap too.

“You feel relaxed around me, right? Maybe that’s why?”

Euracia fell silent and stared at me. She soon nodded.

“You...may be right. Because I can’t find any other reason.”

“Seriously?”

She accepted that so easily I didn’t know how to respond.

“What’s that reaction for?! Anyway! That’s how it is! I’m going now!”

With that, she vanished, as if she were running away, even though I still had more to ask her. Like why she was clutching my clothes in her sleep. She was holding on awfully tight for it to be a coincidence.

But Euracia was gone, and I’d missed my chance to ask.

“Oh, well.”

I sank into the bed that still smelled faintly of Euracia and indulged in the luxury of going back to sleep for the first time since coming to this world.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the second volume of *Only the Villainous Lord Wields the Power to Level Up*! I am the author, Waruiotoko.

I thought that it might end after the first volume, but thanks to everyone's help we were able to release this second volume too!

My previous work, *My Real Life is a Dating Sim? Is What I Thought, But it's Actually a Death Game*, only got subsequent volumes for its manga adaptation, so I was incredibly happy to get a second volume this time.

Personally, I felt that having Euracia appear earlier than she did in the Narou version left it feeling like there wasn't enough of her in volume 1, so in this second volume I wrote as much extra material as I could to make up for that.

I even wrote a side story for her that you can't read elsewhere, so I hope you'll enjoy that.

On top of all that, this work is getting ready to have a manga adaptation.

That will be happening after the release of volume 2, so I hope we'll be able to bring you a *Villainous Lord* that's different from the novel version.

Lastly, some words of thanks.

I would like to start by thanking the Famitsu Bunko editing department. I would also like to offer my deepest gratitude to Raken, who has continued providing illustrations for this volume as well. It's so moving to see Euracia drawn with such charm!

And more than anything, this is all thanks to all of you who read and support this work.

Please keep enjoying *Villainous Lord.*

Waruiotoko