
Only the Villainous Lord
Wields the Power to Level UP
III
Waruiotoko
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Only the Villainous Lord Wields the Power to Level Up: Volume 3 [Complete]

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Chapter 1: Company Conspiracy

Frann Valdesca, advisor to the Naruyan Kingdom and mage of rare talent, now stood just across the border of the Runan Kingdom with a small number of his subordinates, all of them disguised as peasant farmers. They'd abandoned their horses to avoid drawing suspicion, instead continuing the rest of the journey toward the Eintorian Domain on foot.

But for Valdesca, who lacked stamina, the trip was torture.

Normally, he stayed cooped up in his study working on magic and military strategy, so he could hardly be blamed for that. Even so, despite his subordinates attempts to dissuade him, he kept walking onwards, without rest, intent on his goal. And thus Valdesca finally came to the garrison in the Eintorian Domain. Frann Valdesca had crossed the border into this domain to see what they were doing with his own two eyes.

Why did this domain, of all the domains in Runan, have his special attention? There was a clear reason for it: Erhin Eintorian. The only foreign noble who had ever defeated him was the ruler of this domain.

When the next war with Runan came, he was sure to face Erhin again.

On top of that, his scouts had recently reported suspicious activity in the Eintorian Domain. That gave him the additional impetus to see it for himself. It was a mark of how highly Valdesca rated Erhin's abilities.

He wanted to beat him.

No matter what the cost, no matter what strategy he had to use, he was intent on avenging his past defeat and preparing for the war that would eventually come.

There was no rush, of course.

Preparations for the Grand Subjugation were proceeding apace. Their losses in the last war were negligible in the grand scheme of things for Naruya's army. If all went according to plan, they would be ready in another four to five months. In fact, if he were to let his drive for vengeance blind him, they would

no longer be able to unify the continent. Valdesca knew that very well, so he instead steadily amassed strength, though that didn't ease his concern about Eintorian.

"A barracks here? I don't believe it was in our earlier intelligence reports, was it?"

"You are correct, sir."

There was no way that his subordinate Milton could possibly know anything that Valdesca himself did not. Valdesca watched the soldiers training near the barracks. However, military facilities are always on guard against enemy scouts. As he might have expected, a lone soldier rode up to them on horseback, shouting, "Who goes there?!"

A surprised Milton quickly turned and answered, "Just some passing farmers."

The soldier let out a suspicious grunt before saying, "This is a military facility. Where are you going? Did you get lost on the road?"

"We're heading to Eintorian Castle."

"This isn't the way, then. Head all the way down there, and you should see it," the soldier told them. He'd explained it kindly because the number of migrants was on the rise due to Erhin's tax policy, but his expression quickly changed when he was done, gesturing to shoo them away. Valdesca was forced to comply.

Once the soldier went away, he remarked, "What high morale. Everything about these soldiers is impressive, including their training. Seeing the way they enthusiastically go about their training without complaint, even at an outdoor camp like this..."

He had only seen them practice for a short time, but Valdesca was still able to determine everything, from the state of their training to their high level of discipline.

"I knew there was something different about him."

Yes. There was a clear disconnect between the reports they received about the Runanese Army and what he'd just seen of the Eintorian Domain Army.

Valdesca continued moving forward. This time, a small village caught his attention. Oddly, the soldiers here were working the fields, and everyone who wasn't a soldier seemed to be a woman.

"Um, mind if I ask some questions?"

Before Milton could stop him, Valdesca went to query them about this without bothering to put on any sort of act. It was just so strange. Not that Valdesca had any great ability as an actor either way.

"Please, don't talk to them so carelessly!" Patrick rushed over to whisper in his ear.

"Oh, that's right," Valdesca said, realizing his mistake and rapidly shifting tone. One of the soldiers rose from the field and looked at Valdesca.

"Mind if you ask some questions?" the man repeated sarcastically. "What are you, some kind of big shot?"

You look like a peasant, though? the soldier's face said.

"Tch! It seems I said something I shouldn't have."

"Hmm." The soldier's eyes were suspicious. Valdesca cleared his throat, trying to beat a hasty retreat, but this time he tripped over a rock and fell.

The women couldn't help but chuckle at that. This pathetic display quickly dispelled the soldier's suspicion too. If this were something Valdesca had planned, it would have been brilliant, but...

"You really do have to watch where you're going," Milton said as he hurried to support Valdesca.

"Why must there always be rocks in front of me?!"

"Why's a man with such a broad view of world politics unable to see a rock that's right there in front of him?" Patrick mused with a sigh.

Despite all this, Valdesca turned to the women to ask another question. More politely this time.

"Is this a newly built village? I feel like it wasn't here before..."

"That's right. It's a new village, built to accommodate migrants. Were you

people intending to settle here as well?”

“Well, something like that.”

“There are some uncertainties, living along the border, but the soldiers visit all the time, so we’re very satisfied with the place.”

That meant Erhin was increasing the population of his domain. Valdesca couldn’t fail to notice that would have a large effect on the number of troops they had at their disposal.

Increasing his population. Increasing his manpower. Wasn’t he supposed to have sworn loyalty to Runan...?

Not only that, based on what they’d observed so far, many of the policies being pursued strengthened the domain, not the kingdom. Valdesca stroked his chin as he considered this.

Valdesca followed the road and entered Castle Eintorian. He already knew Erhin was away, so he had ample time to carefully look around the castle town.

As he did, he heard something unbelievable from the townsfolk. They’d been exempted from taxes for an entire year! It was unthinkable. Such a thing would cause the domain’s finances to collapse. They wouldn’t have the tax money to pay to the central government. Unless they were sitting on a vast amount of secret funds, it was impossible.

No, even if they *did* have such a fortune, they’d only draw the royal family’s attention to it. That was a negative, in the long term. His suspicions mounted.

The barracks outside the castle, the newly built village, and the construction he had witnessed on their way here...

Valdesca began bashing his head against a notice board. Finally, he felt he could concentrate a little.

What exactly are you plotting, Erhin Eintorian? What is it you’re strengthening your domain for...?

As he was pondering this, a shudder suddenly raced through his entire body.

“Hold on...”

“Master?” Milton asked in a whisper, but Valdesca didn’t respond. Instead, he just kept on talking to himself.

“What if he were taking aim at Runan...and at Runan’s king...plotting a rebellion...?”

Valdesca turned around.

“We’re heading home. We must capture Eintorian while their lord is away, before he can cause any trouble. Hurry!”

“Master...? What do you mean?” his bodyguards Milton and Patrick hurried after their master.

“As soon as we’ve returned, we advance on this territory with the forces of the Ducal House of Valdesca!”

Valdesca was well aware of how dangerous it was to suddenly lead a force to attack Eintorian, and how it might risk ruining their preparations for the Grand Subjugation. That’s why he planned to only use his own house’s troops. If Erhin became the King of Runan, the Grand Subjugation they were planning might drag on even longer.

Even if it meant sacrificing some of his own troops, he needed to crush Eintorian early, before their plans became unsalvageable... Or maybe not?

“No, hold on!”

Valdesca quit panicking and came to a stop again. It was because it occurred to him that this could be another trap.

“We’ll move our troops, but first we need to ascertain the situation in Rozern. Understood?”

Once he’d given new orders to Milton, Valdesca headed for the Naruya Kingdom’s Sentreet Domain, which was near the border with Eintorian. Should he attack Eintorian, even if that meant acting on his own initiative, or was this clear display of movement towards independence itself a trap?

After a long night agonizing over the question, he came to the decision to strike, but just as he had...

“Your Excellency! Your Excellency!”

“What is it?!”

“Urgent news from the Brijitian front! The Brijitian capital has fallen! Erhin has returned home to Runan!”

Valdesca stood bolt upright when he heard this.

“Pull our troops back at once. We’re going back to the capital!”

Eintorian had many troops, with good training and high morale. Any siege of the territory would take a long time. If Erhin were away, it would still be winnable, but now that he’d come back, it would be utter folly to proceed with the attack without a proper plan.

No, even before that, Valdesca felt a sense of awe toward his archnemesis.

How had Erhin taken the Brijitian capital in such a short time? Could Valdesca have done it if he were in the same position? It was absolutely impossible.

Valdesca had total confidence in his own abilities. Looking at things objectively, he would have been able to go as far as defending Rozern, but no further than that. Yet Erhin went on the offensive, and took the enemy capital?

Fists clenched, Valdesca ordered a thorough investigation of the circumstances, then turned back to the Naruyan capital as if fleeing from Eintorian with the thought, *Only Erhin Eintorian stands in my way,* graven in his mind.

*

Exhaustion rushed over me when I awoke in the morning. It was like all the fatigue that had built up before now hadn’t gone anywhere. Even though my stamina ought to have recovered. I sat up, yawning.

The room looked the same as ever. The posh interior of a lord’s bedroom. Outside my window, the domain was at peace. The scenery hadn’t changed, but my reputation as a lord was completely unrecognizable at this point. It hadn’t been long since the people stopped calling me a villainous lord, and yet rumors of my tax policy and land development had brought refugees flocking to the domain.

Indeed, the largest change during my time in Rozern had been to the population.

It had gone from two hundred and twenty thousand to two hundred and thirty thousand over the past two months. An increase of ten thousand people.

I might not have been at my goal of three hundred thousand yet, but the important thing was that the numbers were going up. Opinion sat pretty at an impressive 80 too.

If I can maintain that score, it's good enough. I just need to avoid doing anything to lower it.

The newcomers flowed here with high expectations of their new lord, so they hadn't had a negative impact on public sentiment. In my absence, training continued for the army that was now twenty thousand soldiers.

Eintorian Domain Army

Manpower: 20,000

Training: 89

Morale: 80

They were operating on a much higher level now. Those numbers were made possible by some of the high-Command personnel that I had in my camp.

If I have twenty thousand elites who'll just follow my strategies, then these scores are more than good enough to get results.

The training would continue, as would the policy of rewarding my people to raise morale. I could never stop those.

I'm level 25. I reached level 22 when I killed Poholizen, then went up another 3 whole levels for defeating Brijit.

Killing a commander with a Martial of 98 had had a major effect. Commanders with a Martial of 95 or higher had a positive modifier to the experience they gave. Those three level-ups had given me a total of 900 points.

150, 150, 150, 150.

Setting aside three hundred points for any skills I might need to use, I spent the other 600 on raising my Martial score 4 whole points from 65 to 69. Because Daitoren got powered up during the war, I could fight the strongest warriors on the continent, albeit with a time limit of thirty minutes.

My Martial will be 99! That time limit is unfortunate, but there's no getting around it. This is a game. The management team may dole out bonuses, but they have to balance them. This is probably how they chose to make that balance.

There were also the spoils of war I got from the treasury after occupying Brijit's capital. There was nothing from the Ancient Kingdom, unfortunately, which meant that none of the items were on the same level as the Nameless Sword that he had found stored in Rozern's treasury. None of the treasures of the Ancient Eintorian Kingdom that were supposedly shared between the Twelve Houses were in Brijit.

Brijit was one of the Twelve Houses, so they definitely would have received some of the Ancient Kingdom's treasures. Did they manage to misplace them?

Not even their king had used any special items. I asked the head chamberlain in Brijit's royal palace about it later, but he didn't know anything. The same went for the rest of the royal family.

Well, the ones in Rozern had been left sitting around, their importance forgotten there too. It's been a long, long time since the Twelve Houses founded their own countries, so maybe there's no helping it.

I thought the treasures of the Twelve Houses held great significance. Like there might be a secret of some sort, or maybe more bonuses, since this was a game. A secret felt more likely than another bonus. That made me all the more eager to find them, but the fact was that I had no method for doing so. There were no hints whatsoever.

Maybe I'll find a lead in Runan's palace.

Runan was approaching its end of days. If things went as planned, I would have a chance to investigate Runan's treasury eventually. I just had to hope I found some kind of hint there.

Well, setting that aside, next it's time to distribute items.

There might not have been any treasures from the Ancient Eintorian Kingdom in Brijit's palace, but there had been some that the system identified as items. Two of them could raise ability scores:

Jade Sword

Martial +1

A jade sword handed down since antiquity.

Black Armor

Command +2

Jet black armor that raises the user's majesty.

I didn't need either myself, so I decided to try using them to raise my retainers' stats. I immediately called up the system and had it display all of their ability scores.

Hadin Meruya: Martial 60, Intelligence 57, Command 70

Bente: Martial 49, Intelligence 38, Command 82

Jint: Martial 93 (+2), Intelligence 41, Command 52

Yusen: Martial 82, Intelligence 60, Command 90

Gibun: Martial 70, Intelligence 34, Command 76

Euracia Rozern: Martial 87 (+3), Intelligence 57, Command 95 (+2)

You can't equip more than one sword. That rules out me, because I use Daitoren, and Jint, who's using the Nameless Sword.

I plan to have Yusen do big things in the future. His stats are good across the board and he's highly loyal to me, so it'd be good to give him the Black Armor to raise his Command. Not as sure what to do with the sword though.

I expected that I would be getting more and stronger commanders later, so I decided to hold onto it for the time being. If there was one inconvenience, it

was that because this wasn't a game I was playing on a screen, ability scores didn't automatically go up. A weapon would only have an effect once they were able to fully make use of it.

This world really is a mix of game elements and reality.

*

Heina Berhin visited a slave trader in the capital. Even in this world where slavery existed, making a living off of human trafficking was strictly prohibited... Only on paper, of course.

In every era, there are things the powerful are drawn to precisely because they're so forbidden. Owning people was the ultimate pleasure for stimulating the nobles' human greed. And in Runan, where their avarice destabilized the country, there was a rather large-scale network of slave traders working in the shadows.

Of course, even with the protection of the ruling class, slave traders couldn't operate out in the open. Their headquarters in the capital was in a top secret location.

"Well, well. What do we have here?"

This organization, called the Droy Company, specialized in underworld jobs like human trafficking, abductions, and assassination. They were a massive company with their tendrils extended all across Runan and even into Naruya. The master of the Droy Company, Gensema, was always in Runan where his main customer base was clustered.

As befitted a slave trader operating in the darkness, if a customer had the money, he would enslave anyone, wealthy or not, and present them to his client.

However, the Droy Company's greatest power lay with their assassins. Because they had taken so many jobs, the nobility couldn't lay a hand on them lightly. Gensema identified Heina at a glance. He knew everything there was to know about the nobility.

He welcomed her with a sly look on his face.

“You know me?” she asked, surprised.

“Information is power. Of course I know you. Heh heh!”

Heina furrowed her brow at his crude laughter, but chose to endure in the name of her objective. “You seem to be using that power to do other things behind the scenes, though?” she said.

When Heina cut straight to the point, Gensema played ignorant, cocking his head to the side.

“Doing ‘*other things*.’ Hah hah hah! Whatever could you mean...?”

Suddenly, he stopped laughing and his expression grew serious. With an expression that looked every bit like the scoundrel he was, he said, “But that is what you’ve come here for, isn’t it? Please, ask away, Your Excellency Heina. If you are looking for a male slave, just tell me your preferences...”

“My interest with you lies elsewhere. There’s a man I want to kill. I want it more than anything!”

“Oh, do you? Heh heh heh! Then you’ve come to the right place, Your Excellency.”

Heina clenched her fists. Having lost Ronan’s trust, the other nobles looked down on her even worse than they had before. She’d completely lost any chance to distinguish herself. Heina loathed Erhin Eintorian, the root cause of her troubles.

She would never forgive him for ruining her and her clan.

But she stood no chance if she challenged him in any orthodox manner. That fact was an affront to Heina’s great pride, and only served to strengthen her determination to end Erhin’s life. If he were gone, the position of advisor to the Runan Kingdom would return to her. There was still a thin sliver of hope that Ronan might call her back.

That was why, much as she hated to stoop this low, she had come to visit Gensema.

“They say there’s no one you people can’t kill.”

“Tee hee. What are you saying? There are some beings that even we cannot

kill. We wouldn't be able to slay the five New Stars of the continent, for example. Anyone else, though, I'm sure we can manage."

The five mightiest people on the continent. In game terms, these would be the only S-rank characters. People called them the New Stars out of a sense of awe. The greatest among them was the King of Naruya.

"We manage a special organization of assassins, Your Excellency. We raise them from a young age, and many grow up to be excellent at their craft, so you have nothing to worry about."

Showing his absolute confidence, Gensema let out a low chuckle.

"If we are talking about someone on the level of Erheet Demacine, then things become more difficult, but...not all assassinations need to be carried out by the knife. Poison is effective against any target, and we can also have ways of making it look like an accident. Tee hee. Although, it'll cost you an arm and a leg. There aren't many nobles in Runan who would be willing to pay it."

Gensema brought up the Runan Kingdom's mightiest commander. He was boasting that, while Erheet was strong, he was not one of the five New Stars, so they could kill him. The Droy Company were confident that they were the largest organization operating in the shadows of the continent.

"So, who would you have us kill? The cost changes depending on the class of the target, so could I ask you to tell me who that is?" Gensema rubbed his hands together.

"Erhin Eintorian," Heina replied without hesitation. "I want him dead."

"Oho... Why, if it isn't the man everyone's been talking about recently," Gensema said with a chuckle, rubbing his hands once again. "Now, if we are discussing Count Erhin Eintorian, he is a rather capable man, is he not?"

"What do I care how competent he is?! I'm asking if you can kill him."

"It is as I've already told you. Would you suggest that, even though we could kill Erheet, we couldn't kill Erhin? War and assassination are two separate things, Your Excellency Heina. Of course, given his high class, the cost will be exorbitant."

“How much?”

“Let me think...” Gensema put on a creepy smile and held up five fingers. “Around five years of your domain’s income, I suppose.”

“What are you saying?!” Heina exclaimed, scowling at Gensema over this outrageous sum.

“He is a gifted strategist. The high price should have been a given. The rare thing about our Droy Company is that we *always succeed* at the jobs we take on. If you can’t afford it, then please give up this charade. Let us simply pretend you never said anything.”

Gensema’s firm stance on this made Heina tremble with rage, but the money mattered less to her than her wounded pride.

“You really can kill him, right?”

“Certainly.”

Gensema nodded firmly. Heina bit her lip.

“You’ll be paid *after* you’ve disposed of him.”

“But of course. We here at the Droy Company are famous for collecting our payment only once the job is complete, after all. Heh heh!”

Erhin Eintorian.

He was known for being an excellent strategist, but his martial abilities were not well known. The people of Runan hadn’t seen his battles in Rozern and Brijit for themselves, and even in the war with Naruya he hadn’t displayed his ability to fight except at Lynon Castle, where he fought alone.

Because so few people knew about Erhin’s martial prowess, he was sorely underestimated.

*

As the sun dipped down below the horizon, I found myself at my office desk after I returned from inspecting the Eintorian Domain. I had a mountain of other things to do on top of that, the most important of which was approving expenses. While we did have a great fortune under the castle, it would rapidly dwindle if I spent it frivolously.

I picked up my pen to begin filling out paperwork, and then it happened.

Suddenly, I was interrupted. My glass window shattered.

“Huh...?”

A team of five men clad in black rushed in through there, each one carrying a sword or knife.

Without so much as a hello, they dashed in to begin their assault.

Four of them had C-class Martial scores, and the last boasted an A-class Martial score. There were only about forty A-class characters across *the entire continent*, which meant if this team of assassins had one with them, they were pretty experienced.

This surprise attack is dangerous.

Without Daitoren equipped, my Martial was still low. I only kept my cool like this because Euracia sprang through the window at almost exactly the same time as they did.

“Who are you people?” Euracia interposed herself between the assassins and me before taking a merciless swing at the nearest of the black-clad men. Blue mana pierced the masked man’s chest as she swung her blade in a wide horizontal arc, neatly cleaving the man beside him in twain.

Blood rained in the office.

“Er, Euracia... You don’t need to go to such violent lengths.”

The corners of her eyes turned up angrily for some reason, and she didn’t bother to respond as she took on another of the masked men who came at her. I couldn’t just sit back and watch.

There's an A-class talent with them, after all.

Said A-class talent must have decided to kill me first, because he left Euracia to his subordinates and sprang at me.

With a Martial of 90, he's probably the best assassin in their entire organization. But I have a Martial of 99 with Daitoren equipped. That's higher than any of the forty or so A-class characters on the continent. So this guy's no match for me.

I faced the enemies with Daitoren held at the ready. It only took two swings of my blade before the enemy fell. That's what they got with the overwhelming difference in Martial scores. The man died with a look of disbelief in his eyes.

"Wait, Euracia!"

I wanted to keep one of my assailants alive to find out who they were, but Euracia had wiped the enemy out by the time I spoke.

She has a Martial of 90 with Rossade equipped. I probably should've expected this.

"What is it?" she replied, her expression oddly pleasant.

Is it just me, or does she look like she wants to be praised for a job well done?

"I wanted to keep one of them alive so I could ask who sent them after me."

"Huh?" Euracia's cheeks puffed up a little.

She must have seen the logic in what I was saying, because she crouched down and slapped one of the fallen masked men with a blank expression on her face.

That's not gonna wake him up. He's deader than a doornail.

Her cheeks inflated further, and she rose to her feet, giving up on the dead man in the mask. "I was just so mad I couldn't control my power."

"What made you so upset?"

"I just sort of felt that way."

Now that she'd said her piece, Euracia vanished out the window she'd come in through.

*

My retainers gathered in the office in Eintorian Castle. Naturally, since their lord had just been attacked.

Seeing the bodies, Yusen scowled and asked, “Were they talented?”

“Yeah. They were fairly skilled.”

“Oh, no...! We’ll have to assume that someone with considerable power sent them after you then... Do you have any idea who that might be?”

Any idea, huh? I’ve killed everyone I ought’ve. Ronan and the king still need me, so they wouldn’t have pulled a stunt like this.

Of course, there were those who resented me. It’s not like I had *no* idea who it might be.

But I shook my head. “No one in particular.” Without concrete proof, I’d just have to hold my tongue for the moment. There was no point in making any accusations just yet.

“We’ll have to look into it.”

I nodded in agreement with Yusen.

At that moment, Jint, who had been examining the bodies with a serious look on his face, lifted one of their wrists. “This...” he said darkly.

“What is it, Jint?”

“You said that they were assassins, but it’s really just like I suspected... I had to check just to be sure, but it’s them.”

There was a spider tattoo on the man’s wrist.

“‘Them’?”

Jint showed his own wrist in response to my question. It bore the same spider tattoo as they had. Once I saw it, it hit me.

“You don’t mean the slavers who took Mirinae, do you?”

Jint nodded firmly, a fire burning in the depths of his eyes. That was to be expected. The slavers were old enemies of his. In order to get Mirinae back, he

joined the assassination group they managed, and shuttered his emotions under lock and key in favor of living like a robot.

"They were called the Droy Company."

The Droy Company, huh?

I knew the name well. They were famous in the game too. After the fall of Runan, the scumbags worked underground in Naruya and the Matein Kingdom, engaging in human trafficking, abductions, and assassination. Because of their great size and connections to people of influence, they never vanished from the stage of history. But their name wasn't known to the general public, only to the powerful, because only nobility ever utilized their "services."

"The Droy Company? What's that?"

Of course, a commoner like Yusen was hearing about them for the first time. My other retainers had similar responses. Apparently, even a rural noble like Hadin knew nothing of them.

"Think of them as a shadowy cabal. As far as I know, if the Droy Company are out for my blood, it must be because a noble from the capital sent them after me."

"You're saying a noble from the capital tried to have you assassinated, Your Excellency?" Yusen asked with a look of surprise.

"That is what it means, yes. So I'll need to go there and ask about it directly."

It wouldn't be tough to wipe out the Droy Company. After destroying the Brijit Kingdom, something like that would be a piece of cake. They might slink around in the shadows, but they weren't on the same level as a nation state.

If someone was targeting me, I definitely need to find them and take revenge, and these guys deserve to disappear anyway.

Also, there was one more thing: if my guess was right, then I should be able to use them to pull Erheet over to my side too.

The Droy Company has deep ties to Runan's nobility. I don't know precisely how high up any of their clientele go, but Duke Ronan and the king can't be unaware of it. If the honorable Erheet were to learn of the slave traders, I'm sure

he'd oppose them.

If I could create the seeds of discord between Erheet and the nobility, I could possibly manage snagging him.

Either way, I need to find the Droy Company's home base and prove they're involved with the Runanese nobility before this can go anywhere.

Fortunately, I had some idea where that could be already.

In the game, the Droy Company move their base once Runan falls. It was in Runan up to that point, but when you're chasing down the Droy Company in the game, there are a number of locales within Runan's borders where you can fight battles to mop them up. In the original timeline, they would have relocated their headquarters already, but unlike in the game, Runan hasn't been destroyed, so their main base should still be here.

I'll bet one of those locations is their current headquarters.

I stared at the map and began plotting which spot was most likely.

*

Mirinae was reading a book.

Ever since Erhin gave her the opportunity to learn to read, she read whatever books she could get her hands on. Mirinae had said she'd sew or do anything to repay her debts, but instead Erhin had her learn to read. She'd always thought reading was only for the nobility, but the man was their savior, so she did as he asked, and to her surprise she was starting to find it interesting.

This is what her stats looked like when she came to Eintorian:

Mirinae

Age: 21

Martial: 5

Intelligence: 59

Command: 10

But they changed after she learned to read.

Mirinae

Age: 21

Martial: 5

Intelligence: 70

Command: 20

Her base Intelligence was good, but she'd never known how she could put it to use before. Learning to read boosted her Intelligence by a full 11 points, and her Command score went up by 10 points at the same time. Her ability scores were like children—they grew up fast.

"Mirinae."

"Oh? When did you get back?" Mirinae looked up from her book, surprised, then rose to greet Jint.

"Just now."

"I've been reading this. I don't know if it will be of any help to our lord, though..." Mirinae said with an apprehensive smile.

Jint felt nothing but happiness seeing her like this. Because, after living on the run for so long, she was able to have such a good life. During the war in Rozern, there was a moment when Erhin's life was in danger. Jint tried to throw his life away for their benefactor.

But he was the one who saved me instead.

This was the second time Erhin had ensured he would come back to Mirinae's side.

And today he gave me the opportunity to take revenge on Mirinae's enemies, and my own.

"Jint? Did you mess up again?" Mirinae said in a loud voice, putting her hand on her hip as she noticed the change in Jint's expression.

"I didn't do anything...! I'm sure your studies will help him. He's not been wrong about anything so far."

“Well, you’re right about that.”

“Anyway, I’m going to the capital on his orders. I’ll be away for a while again.”

Jint didn’t tell her about the slavers. There was no need to bring them up and retraumatize her.

“I see. Well, I’ll need to pack you a lunch to take, then. I’ll get right on that!”

Mirinae rushed off to the kitchen without ever noticing Jint’s clenched fists.

*

“Okay, is everyone here?”

After deciding to head out to deal with the Droy Company, I gathered my retainers. It was important to clarify their orders before I left.

Hadin Meruya: Martial 60, Intelligence 57, Command 70

Bente: Martial 49, Intelligence 38, Command 82

Jint: Martial 93 (+2), Intelligence 41, Command 52

Yusen: Martial 82, Intelligence 60, Command 90 (+2)

Gibun: Martial 70, Intelligence 34, Command 76

Euracia Rozern: Martial 87 (+3), Intelligence 57, Command 95 (+2)

I called the only noble among my retainers first.

“Hadin!”

“Yes, Your Excellency!”

“The checkpoint at the border has been fixed, I assume?”

“Indeed it has, Your Excellency!”

“And has construction of a castle wall in the direction of the capital been moving forward?”

“That will take a while still.”

I was in the process of building a castle wall not just on the side facing Naruya, but at key points in the direction of the Runanese capital as well. Considering

the chaos to come, there was no point in only being able to defend the Naruyan side.

“I see. Continue focusing on the construction. And be careful not to do anything that would lower the people’s opinion of us. Keep accepting refugees, give them jobs, and provide them with as much food as you can manage. Don’t forget to keep developing more farmland.”

“Yes, Your Excellency!”

I had no fear of Hadin exploiting the people of the domain. That’s why he was such a good pick for this.

“Yusen!”

Yusen was a man of many talents. He was the most exemplary of my retainers, with strong ability scores across the board.

“I want you and Gibun to go to Bertaquin, the place I told you about before. I’ve asked Count Fihatori, who is garrisoned in the former Brijitian capital, to send some troops. You’ll go there as my magistrate. I need you to secure shipping routes for iron ore.”

This was the most important task of all, but I didn’t have time to go myself. That’s why I chose to leave it to Yusen, who I could trust because of his cautious approach to everything.

“Understood. We’ll set out at once!”

Finally, it’s time for me to head out.

“Jint and Bente, you’ll come with me!”

Will you deploy?

Available Troops

Eintorian Domain Army: 20,000 men

Training: 89

Morale: 80

I don’t need that many men. It would be a problem moving around with such a

large force.

Cavalry Unit: 100 men

I chose to set out with a hundred men—elites with 89 Training and 80 Morale. I wouldn't be able to train any iron cavalry until I had iron from the mines in Bertaquin, but there was no issue paying the upkeep for a hundred cavalrymen.

"I'll go too."

At this point, Euracia made her appearance. She wasn't officially my subordinate yet, so I'd been letting her do as she pleased. She could come in handy, though, so I nodded, and...

Morale of deployed soldiers has temporarily increased by +10

...suddenly, the soldiers I was deploying got a boost to Morale.

Is this the power of her 97 Command?

*

A boy and two girls were imprisoned behind iron bars. Emaciated, all of them, wearing filthy, tattered rags. They all came from the same village. Having lost their parents in the war, the villagers sold these unfortunate waifs off so there were less mouths to feed.

"Lilian."

One of the girls weakly raised her head at the sound of her name. It was the boy, Sedick, calling out to her.

"Are you cold?"

"I'm fine..."

Lilian shook her head, but she was shivering. Sedick took off his coat for her. Once he put the sleeveless, vest-like garment around her shoulders, Lilian didn't quiver quite so much.

"You gave your coat to Frill, so you must be cold yourself, right?" Sedick said

with a gentle smile.

Frill was sleeping with Lilian's coat as a blanket.

"If only we could be as carefree as Frill..."

"Yeah," Sedick replied, his shoulders slumping.

"Do you think it'll be as bad as they say, being slaves...?"

Sedick and Lilian were already fifteen. They knew what kind of treatment slaves faced, and what kind of fate that awaited them too. It was Lilian's seven-year-old sister Frill who remained blissfully ignorant of what lay ahead.

At that moment, there was a clatter as the cell door opened, and two men entered. The captives' eyes all turned towards them.

"I hear we have newcomers?" Gensema asked his men as he looked through the bars.

"Yes, three of them. Here they are," one man responded, leading Gensema to the cell that held Lilian and Sedick.

"Ohhh, that girl shows promise," Gensema says, pointing to the sleeping Frill. "Well, he should be satisfied with a girl like this. He's quite particular in his tastes."

With a treacherous smile, Gensema went to pick up Frill. Lilian moved to stand between them, having figured out the situation.

"I-I'll go instead. Let go of my sister!"

"Oh, is that right...?" Gensema looked at her, intrigued. "I'm sorry, my precocious young lady, but you're a little too *mature* for my client."

With that, he casually shoved Lilian aside. Unable to watch this any longer, Sedick sprang at the man.

"Let go of Frill!!"

However, before he could even get close to Gensema, one of the other men kicked him to the floor. Emaciated as he was, he had no strength to resist.

"Hey, you. Don't rough up the merchandise. There's demand for boys too these days," Gensema scolded his subordinate before picking up Frill. As he did,

the little girl drowsily opened her eyes.

“Sis?”

Gensema patted Frill on the head as her eyes wandered in search of Lilian.

“There, there. You’re going to live well from now on, I’ll make sure of it. You’d like to eat tasty food, wouldn’t you?”

“Tasty food?”

“No, Frill!”

Lilian tried to rush Gensema, but was immediately restrained by the man beside him.

“Frill... Frill...!”

The girl was her only kin, entrusted to her by her parents before they died. She *had* to protect her precious little sister. Lilian cried and kicked and screamed, but the men around her simply looked on, smirking.

As the heavy iron door closed behind him, Gensema pressed his close associate Lutri, who was waiting for him there, on another issue.

“You’ve made sure Count Erhin is dealt with, I hope?”

“I sent Hog just to be sure. Even your average general wouldn’t stand a chance. I’m sure he’s on his way back from the job already. Don’t worry about it.”

“Hog? Isn’t that a little excessive?”

Gensema furrowed his brow at the mention of the name of their strongest assassin. At that moment, having finally fully woken up, Frill looked around, searching for Lilian.

“Where’s sis...?”

“She’s already gone on ahead. Heh heh!”

Gensema flashed the girl a fake smile and melded into the darkness.

*

The Droy Company’s secret base was located daringly close to the royal

capital, inside a long-abandoned fortress. The company's private troops and the assassination group seemed to be stationed here at all times. Large carriages came and went frequently, so it likely doubled as a holding area for their slaves.

I had every intention of destroying this fortress, of course.

In order to move covertly, I had the hundred cavalrymen I had brought with me disperse, and then meet up again in the mountains where the base was located. It would be bad if any of the nobility in the castle caught wind of what we were up to. Fortunately, thanks to their training, we were able to assemble near the fortress without incident.

Standing at the vanguard was Jint, burning with an even greater hunger for battle than usual.

"Listen to me, Jint. No harm must come to the innocent people they've abducted or who were sold to them."

"Of course. They're just like Mirinae. We have to save them."

From the sound of his response, it wasn't going to pose a problem.

"Okay, we're going in!"

I immediately ordered an attack on the fortress. The Eintorian elites intrepidly charged in. Thanks to all their training, their movements were incredibly swift. They moved so fast that Jint's charge demolished the fortress's main gate.

"Who're these guys?!"

The Droy Company's private troops drew their blades and began to fight back against our sudden raid, but my forces were on a whole different level from the sad excuse for a military that was the Royal Runanese Army. They never stood a chance against us.

Eintorian Domain Army Cavalry Unit

100 men

Droy Company Private Troops

250 men

We might have been at a numerical disadvantage, but we had a Training score of 89, and Euracia boosted the men's Morale to 90. My cavalry were handily beating the company's private troops. Of course, since the assassin organization was based out of this fortress as well, some of them did have a high Martial. But since I'd killed the Martial 90 assassin they'd sent after me, their combat potential was already obviously degraded.

"How dare you trade people like cattle," Euracia spat.

Even Euracia joined the fight, alongside Jint, who had turned into a battle fiend, resulting in a one-sided massacre. However, at the same time, there was chaos behind the iron doors where people were being held.

The private army had opened the doors in order to cause confusion. As a result, the prisoners ended up witnessing the battlefield outside. I immediately sent my troops toward them. Taking the captives into our protection was top priority.

Of course, the company's soldiers gathered there too.

Eventually, the area in front of the door became the spot where the most intense fighting was taking place. No, that's not quite right.

The battle was completely one-sided.

Eintorian Domain Army Cavalry Unit

100 men

My forces' numbers hadn't dropped, but...

Droy Company Private Troops

87 men

...the number of private soldiers had rapidly dropped.

Our side had some wounded, but Jint and Euracia's efforts at the forefront

sapped the enemy's spirits, and we made it through without any fatalities. In the chaos, even children started running out from inside.

I was beside myself with fury when I saw them.

Even going as far as trading children...

I'd known this logically, but actually seeing it for myself made me seethe with rage.

*

In the middle of all the chaos, people were cowering, not sure what to do with themselves. But Sedick was different.

"Lilian! Let's run. *Now.* I don't know what's up, but this is our chance!"

"But what about Frill?" mumbled Lilian, scarcely louder than a whisper from her spot on the floor slumped against the wall, still in a daze.

"You dummy. We can't search for her if we don't get out of here!"

With that, Sedick took Lilian by the hand and raced out of their cell.

"It's dangerous out there, kids! You'll be safer here!" one woman who had been locked up in another cell shouted after them, but her voice was lost amongst the din. With their command structure in tatters, the private soldiers were now killing the fleeing slaves so they couldn't get away.

Thanks to that, the captives stayed quivering inside their cells. But Sedick worried that they would be locked in again if they didn't act now.

He'd made the wrong call.

"Sedick!"

As he ran, dragging Lilian behind him by the hand, a blade flew out and stabbed Sedick in the back—another victim of the private army's indiscriminate killing. Lilian fell to her knees, screaming his name and crying.



Crimson flowed from the wound in a cascade, his life leaking out with it.

“Sedick! Sedick...! No, don’t die. I can’t lose you too! Not after they already

took Frill!”

At that moment, the private soldier who’d spotted them making their escape was already swinging his blade. The sword came down, but it didn’t meet its mark. A loud clang rang out as it was deflected by Bente who’d forced his way into the jail.

“Get back in your cell for now! It’s dangerous outside!” Bente shouted, but Lilian wouldn’t stop clinging to Sedick, desperately trying to keep what little warmth she could from escaping his gradually cooling body.

*

And so, with the Droy Company fortress having fallen in short order, Bente led Erhin to the prison. This was where the captives were, so there were things that he needed to do here.

“Your Excellency, I’ve gathered them all up!” said Bente.

Erhin nodded in response. Then he addressed the people gathered before him.

“I am Count Erhin, Lord of Eintorian. In order to exterminate slave traders and stamp out their vile business, I’ve come to rescue you all. Anyone here who has been abducted, please raise your hand. If you have somewhere to go back to, we’ll see to it that you get home!”

A number of women, looking around anxiously as they tried to judge the situation, hesitantly raised their hands.

“Good. Could you all gather in one place? I will make sure you get home, no matter what. This must have been horrible for all of you.”

Dozens of women gathered at Erhin’s instructions. The remaining captives murmured, never taking their eyes off of Erhin.

“The rest of you were likely sold as slaves. If you go home, you’ll either be oppressed or sold off again. So let me give you a choice. If you want to go home, you can. But if you want a new life, then all of you should come to the Eintorian Domain. We are currently developing new land in order to welcome refugees. Those of you who can’t go home ought to build villages in Eintorian

and live there. My land is a border domain, so there are risks, of course. But have no fear. I will protect you. I swear it. If you don't want to lead a miserable life any longer, then step forward!"

The people whispered after Erhin spoke.

"Count Eintorian... Isn't he the one who ended that war?" a recently abducted woman said, her voice rising with surprise. Having been abducted in the conflict region, she'd heard rumors about Erhin. It also helped that rumors of his talent as a strategist had already spread all around Runan.

"Yes, that's right." Erhin nodded, prompting the woman to step forward immediately.

"After being abducted like this...even if I did go home, I'm sure that people would talk about me behind my back. I want to go. Will you take me with you?"

"The choice is yours to make. It's up to you."

Nine tenths of the captives were women. That's why they seemed worried they were about to be carted off somewhere else, but this woman's words set off a chain reaction. Their trust in him suddenly rose. Soon the women were racing to step forward first.

Following that, more than half of the people who originally said they wanted to return home said they would go to Eintorian. Eintorian's weakness was that it had a low population due to it being a borderland region. Of course, refugees had begun drifting there due to Erhin's recent fame, but it still wasn't enough.

For a border region, their rise and fall was tied to the flow of migrants.

Meanwhile, Lilian, who had been forcibly dragged away from Sedick's corpse and brought here, just stared vacantly at Erhin, not stepping forward or even standing up. The woman beside her took Lilian's hand, her eyes full of pity.

"You have nowhere to go either, right? Your friends are dead. I saw it all. You poor thing... This is a good opportunity. Why don't you come to that Eintorian place the man was talking about and live with me?"

Lilian's gaze shifted to the woman. "Is he someone important?" she asked.

"Yes! I don't know much about him myself, but it sounds like he's a very

important person.”

Lilian saw the confidence with which Erhin carried himself. She saw the other men, the ones who’d killed all of the scary men, and she saw the one who’d shouted orders to those men.

Maybe he could save her little sister?

That thought dominated Lilian’s mind. With Sedick dead, Frill was all she could think about. She’d made a promise to her parents. If he’d saved all these people, surely he’d save Frill too.

As Lilian was thinking about it, Erhin shouted some more orders.

“Bente, I’m going to the capital, so stand by here with the men. Once I return, we’re taking everyone back home!”

Having watched him all this time, Lilian raced to Erhin’s side.

She was prepared to do anything if he’d just save Frill.

*

Gensema visited Duke Ronan's son, Cervil, who was also his most important client. The idea was that, with his son as one of the company's customers, Duke Ronan couldn't lay a hand on Gensema.

"You called for me, Your Excellency?" Gensema said.

The ducal title still belonged to Ronan. As he had the rank of count until he inherited his father's title, Cervil's address was Your Excellency. Cervil looked incredibly unamused.

"I don't like the slave you brought me last time."

"Y-You don't?! We don't normally accept returns, but...if the slave was not to your liking, then I will, of course, prepare another!"

"Heh heh. That would be most appreciated. Once I become duke, I'll mobilize the country's resources in order to support your company."

"We can only swear our loyalty to you as we eagerly await the day. Hah hah hah!" Gensema politely agreed with Cervil.

"Bring me a replacement at once, then. Heh heh heh."

Cervil drained his glass of wine and rose from his seat.

"Understood. I will present one to you right away." Gensema left the room with his head still bowed. On his way back, he grumbled to his subordinate, "That scoundrel. A replacement? Slaves aren't things you can exchange for a new one."

"Isn't that why you brought the child from the fortress?"

"Well, yes, it is. But it hurts my pride to hand her over so easily... Tch! There's no other choice. I'll bide my time now in order to make a puppet of him later."

With that, Gensema headed towards his secret base in the capital.

*

Because I'd known more or less where the Droy Company's secret base was, I was able to mobilize the cavalry and find it immediately. The issue was that the master of the company hadn't been at the fortress, nor did they keep any

accounting records there.

I need the ledger. It's sure to have a record of their transactions with the nobility. I won't be able to move Erheet without it. Since it's a secret document, if it's not here, then the master must keep it on his person at all times. I'll just have to search for the master.

With that in mind, once I finished interrogating the survivors, I used the information I had obtained from them to withdraw my forces temporarily and visit their secret base.

Since it's a secret base within the capital, there can't be all that many enemies inside it. Jint, Euracia, and I can take it on our own.

Following the map I was holding in one hand, we arrived at a simple two-story building. The survivors claimed the base was in the basement here. The upper floors weren't being used now, and it seemed that they had chosen not to post guards so as not to arouse suspicion.

"They're awfully unguarded," Euracia remarked.

"If they looked like they were on guard, it would kind of defeat the point of hiding in the first place," I explained to her.

"Is that how it works?"

Euracia tended to be more aggressive than necessary. If there had been any guards standing around, she would have cut them down without question.

"By the way, have you ever seen the master, Jint?"

"I've never seen him myself. He's supposedly so cautious that he doesn't reveal his face to anyone but those he can genuinely trust."

"I see."

Well, I'll be seeing his face soon enough anyway.

On my signal we began heading downstairs, a casual kick from Jint smashing the basement door to splinters. Inside, there was a group of seven nasty-looking men sitting around drinking alcohol. The men looked at us and the demolished door in shock.

“Who’re these guys?!”

“Don’t they know what this place is?!”

Jint was silent for a moment before howling, “I’ll kill you!” He whipped out his sword, but the company’s men just sneered at us.

Euracia scowled, but I signaled with my eyes for her to stop.

“What a bunch of jokers. They charged in here knowing what this place is. What, did we nab your sweetheart? Gah hah hah hah!”

It was the worst thing he could have possibly said.

Jint’s eyes went bloodshot.

In an instant, the sneering man’s head said goodbye to his body, and then the severed head was further cleft into four pieces.

“Bro!” the remaining thugs shouted, glaring at Jint, but the battle was over before it had begun.

In less than a minute, every man in that basement had been decapitated without even having time to scream. It was a total massacre. Crimson pooled on the floor, fed by the blood gushing from seven headless corpses.

His shoulders heaving with each breath, Jint lowered his sword.

In the middle of this grotesque display, someone came up from an even lower level.

“You’re making a racket,” a middle-aged man said, sticking his fingers in his ears as he came up, followed by a young man and a little girl matching the description that the girl Lilian had given us of her sister. Fortunately, it seemed she hadn’t been sold off anywhere yet.

I turned to Euracia. “Could you rescue the girl and protect her?”

“All right,” she answered. The men scowled at us.

“Master Gensema, it looks like some crazy people are attacking us.”

“That it does.”

Age: 49

Martial: 71

Intelligence: 66

Command: 70

Lutri

Age: 26

Martial: 94

Intelligence: 20

Command: 30

It looked like the middle-aged guy was the boss of the Droy Company, while the tall man was his bodyguard.

He's probably the strongest they have. The assassin they sent after me was their number two, and this guy's their number one. Well, he's still no big deal.

Euracia wasted no time before rushing at Gensema. When Lutri tried to stop her, Jint charged in and locked blades with him.

"Wait, you're not Jint, are you?" Lutri recognized him.

Jint recognized Lutri too, and glared at the man, shouting, "You... You're from the assassin team!"

"Long time, no see. I worked you hard because there was something in your eyes that told me you were going to amount to something, but then you went and ran away like a coward. Unbelievable, huh? If you've come back here on your own, I imagine it's not just to commit suicide, right? Heh heh heh!"

"Shut up!"

Jint took a vertical swing at Lutri, who easily swung back.

But it left an opening for Euracia to take advantage of, closing in on Gensema, kicking his arm aside, and getting his hands off the girl. Lutri meant to make quick work of Jint and then defend Gensema, but Jint was far stronger now than he had been back during his days in the assassin group.



They were more or less evenly matched, with neither able to strike a decisive blow.

Perhaps sensing that, Lutri's face twisted into a snarl, and Euracia pulled the girl close to her and held her tight.

"Who are you?" Gensema demanded.

"Me? Just the man you tried to have killed...Count Erhin Eintorian."

"Eintorian? What?! And Hog? What happened to Hog?!"

I guess Hog was the name of the assassin who tried to kill me.

"He's dead."

"Hog, dead? That's absurd! It can't be true!"

Gensema still didn't understand the situation.

"You don't seem to understand there are people in this world who you should *never* piss off," I said, causing Gensema to snort derisively.

"So this guy killed Hog, did he? If he can face Lutri on even terms, then maybe it's possible. But Lutri is many times stronger than Hog!"

Gensema seemed to have great faith in the man called Lutri who was currently fighting Jint, not realizing that his faith was meaningless.

"Tell me who hired you. You do that, and I can spare your life, at least."

Well, not that I plan to do that either way.

Taking my words at face value, Gensema trembled with rage.

"What's taking you, Lutri?! Finish him off and come kill this one already!"

Of *course* that would be his response. Up until now, with a Martial of 94, there hadn't been anyone in the Runan Kingdom other than Erheet who could have dealt with him. That a mere slave trader like him was able to have continent-spanning influence was likely because of how superb Lutri and the organization of assassins he'd trained were.

But that was *only* when it came to assassination.

"Jint. Stand back, would you?"

In order to crush Gensema's confidence, I summoned Daitoren and attacked Lutri just once. I didn't even have to use Crush on him. Lutri was immediately

bisected. The assassin who had never known defeat was reduced to two hunks of meat without ever learning fear.

“Wh-What...?!” Gensema shouted, spittle flying everywhere. It must have been awfully shocking to him after having been able to rely on Lutri and the assassins to support his evil ways for all this time.

“Wh-What’s happening?! Lutri is the strongest in Runan! He can’t lose...” Gensema sputtered, backing away, as it finally dawned on him that things had changed.

His once confident features twisted with terror.

Then, he sprinted for the lower basement.

There was likely a passage there he could escape through, but...

“Have some shame, you scum,” Euracia said coldly, covering Frill’s eyes with her hand as she tripped Gensema with Rossade, sending him tumbling down the stairs.

That’s just the kind of thing I like to see happen to scumbags like him.

I strolled over to Gensema and lopped off one of his arms. It flew through the air, brushing the ceiling before falling back down to the floor.

“Gahhhhhh!” Gensema screamed, his face contorting with pain as he clutched at the bleeding shoulder his arm was once attached to.

“Do you want me to spare you?”

Gensema nodded frantically as I leveled my sword at his eyes.

The bastards who hurt others the most are always real tenacious when it comes to preserving their own lives.

“Okay, take me wherever you were going to bring the girl. If you don’t, the next swing parts your head from your body. Oh, and I’ll be having your ledger too. Also, it’d be wise to tell me who it was who hired you to kill me.”

“...”

“You still need to think about it in this situation? Fine, I guess this is how it has to be, then.”

I took hold of Daitoren without a shred of mercy.

“W-Wait! You’re really going to spare me? You’re saying that you’ll spare me so long as I do as you say, right?”

He really seems to think he’s got a chance of revenge if he makes it out of here alive. Not a chance.

“Well, that’s certainly something I *could* do. You have five seconds to decide.”

“F-Fine, I’ll take you where we were going! I’ll give you my ledger too!”

Ultimately, Gensema confessed while nodding his head.

“And Heina Behrin hired us to kill you.”

*

Yusen and Gibun finally made it across the mountains to Bertaquin.

“I never thought the new domain would be so remote...” Gibun, exhausted by the long journey, shook his head in dismay. It wasn’t that far in terms of actual distance, but having to cross the mountains to get here made it feel a whole lot further.

“It may be a frontier territory, but it’s an incredibly important one. Assuming, of course...” Yusen looked around, confirming there was no one else to overhear him before continuing. “That there’s iron.”

“Yeah, sure, but is there really iron here? Well, there *are* a lot of mountains, so I guess there could be.”

“Shh! Hey, you’re talking too loud!” Yusen smacked Gibun lightly upside the head.

“Come on, there’s no one here!” Gibun grumbled, frowning. “And you said it first, Captain!”

Silencing Gibun with a look, Yusen turned his gaze back to the lord’s castle which was visible up ahead. This domain was on the level of a village, practically speaking, so the castle was small in scale. The vast majority of the land was mountainous, after all. It wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to call whoever owned Bertaquin a mountain lord.

“Anyway, let’s head to the castle.”

“Yeah, yeah, let’s go.”

Yusen and Gibun moved on to the castle. The flag of the Runan Kingdom was flying there. Noticing the Runanese guards, Gibun approached them.

“Hello there, Mr. Runanese Soldier. Good day to you.”

“Who’re you people?” the soldier replied, scowling at Gibun’s cocky attitude.

“You dolt!” Yusen whacked Gibun upside the head again. “We’ve come from Eintorian. I believe you should have been informed...”

Once Yusen politely showed him the standard which bore the Eintorian crest, the man dropped his suspicious expression and nodded.

“Oh! *You’re* the ones from Eintorian! Please, wait just a moment!”

The soldier rushed off somewhere. Gibun smiled with satisfaction. “Yeah, that’s right. That’s how you do it. Gah hah hah hah!”

“I swear, you are *such* a pain in the ass. How did I end up with a subordinate like you?”

He could trust his war buddy with his life on the battlefield, but Gibun was always saying things that caused problems. As Yusen gave Gibun an earful, the soldier soon returned with a man wearing armor that denoted his high rank in tow. Those of hundredman rank and above were able to wear armor. It was only natural that someone of commander rank would have been sent to occupy the domain, but what surprised Yusen was that this man wore noble armor.

“I am His Excellency Erhin’s retainer Yusen. Might I ask who I have the honor of addressing?”

Seeing the confusion on Yusen’s face, Fihatori scratched the back of his head awkwardly as he replied, “You’re the one His Excellency Erhin sent? It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Fihatori, commander-in-chief of the Runanese Army in Brijit.”

Yusen was surprised to hear this. Erhin had told him about Fihatori. Fihatori was supposed to send soldiers to Bertaquin, but he never expected the man to come here himself.

“I’m sorry to ask, but what are you doing here, Your Excellency? I was told you would be sending some of your men, but...”

“I couldn’t delegate a direct request from His Excellency Erhin to my subordinates. His words that I have a role to play are engraved deeply in my mind. I was also interested to see what it is he plans to do here.”

“Y-You were, were you?”

Now it was Yusen’s turn to scratch his head awkwardly. Bertaquin was originally Brijitian territory. There had been a need to have Runanese soldiers take the domain from the existing Brijitian forces and lord because Eintorian didn’t have the resources to spare. Yusen was under orders to send the Royal Army home and then begin searching for iron mines in secret.

“The truth is... His Excellency Erhin gave me instructions to maintain only the minimum number of guards necessary and send the rest of the soldiers home. I will defend this place. I know you’ve come out of your way to be here, but orders are orders, so I can’t say any more than that...” Yusen said with a look of disappointment. Because it was all he could do.

“Well, that’s fine. You don’t need to look so troubled. I’ve only done my best to do as His Excellency requested. This was the only place that he requested for himself after the occupation of Brijit’s capital, so I came here to put things in order for him personally. I’ve already persuaded the residents of the domain for you, so he can go ahead and manage the territory as he sees fit. I’ll leave you with as many guards as you need when I head home. Please just inform His Excellency that I was here,” Fihatori responded as if it didn’t bother him.

*

I couldn’t help but let out a sigh when I looked at the ledger I’d seized from Gensema.

Go figure.

The thing was packed full of the names of influential Runanese nobility. At the very top of the list was the highest member of Runan’s nobility, Duke Ronan himself.

This meant Ronan was involved with the Droy Company.

Regrettably, however, the duke hadn't purchased slaves himself. The one dealing with slave traders was his son, Cervil.

"So you were going to give that girl to Duke Ronan's son, then?"

"That's right."

"...Screw you."

I kicked Gensema and sent him flying. What an absolute piece of human garbage. Jint walked over to the fallen Gensema and pulled him up by the hair.

This is why it's been impossible to eliminate slavers from Runan. If even the highest of nobles like Duke Ronan has his hands dirty, who would dare touch them? This means, ultimately, I'm the only one who can eliminate these guys from Runan, because I don't need to be concerned about the king, Ronan, or anyone anymore.

I didn't need to visit Ronan now. This ledger was detailed enough that I was already perfectly set to head towards my goal. Because the duke's name appeared in it so unambiguously, I immediately went to visit Erheet instead.

"Is this true?! You must be joking...!"

Erheet trembled with rage as he looked at the ledger.

This guy's the rare noble who isn't *involved with slavers.*

In fact, if anything, he was the type who couldn't abide such injustice. Because of this personality of his, the other nobles were desperate to hide their involvement with the slave trade from him. That was how he'd languished in this state of total ignorance.

"I traced the assassins to find out who tried to have me killed. That led me to a fortress their organization was based out of, and then I found a ledger in their secret base inside the capital. The evidence is all here, Your Excellency."

"Then His Highness knew about all this and left them alone?" Erheet asked again, unable to believe it.

His face begged me to deny it, but I couldn't do that.

"In fact, His Highness Ronan has been using their services. Look at just what

his son Cervil has done, and you'll see how vile it is."

I pointed to Frill, who was playing in Erheet's garden. She was picking flowers, a look of innocence on her face. Euracia was sitting next to the garden, putting flowers in Frill's hair.

"..."

Erheet watched that peaceful scene in silence.

"His Highness Ronan has the power to wipe out the slavers while still keeping it under wraps, but he didn't do that. Instead, he introduced other nobles to the slavers and used their weaknesses in order to control them. It's all right there, plain as day, in the ledger."

"..."

Erheet slammed his fist into the table. He was infuriated.

"I can't believe it. I just can't... How could he do something so filthy...!"

Well, given he's sworn loyalty to Runan all his life, this kind of reaction was probably to be expected.

I needed to turn that reaction into a distrust for Runan.

"I'll give the ledger to you, Your Excellency. I don't mind if you give it directly to His Highness Ronan. I'm not able to act on the information it contains myself."

Even if I showed it to the king, nothing would happen. Nothing would change. That's just how far the rot had progressed. That's why all that could be gained from this was this man's anger. It wouldn't be enough, on its own, to tear Erheet and Ronan apart.

But this is enough of a spark for what will come later.

*

"Is this true, Your Highness?"

Erheet was a very straight-forward man. So he immediately took the ledger to Ronan.

"Cervil has lived a sheltered life. He makes mistakes sometimes. I needed to

have that sort of dirt on the nobles if I was going to rally them together. Are you not so broad-minded about such things?”

“But human trafficking? That changes everything!”

“Human trafficking? I never ordered any such thing. What are you talking about?!” Ronan’s voice grew angry, causing Erheet’s eyebrow to twitch.

Not even he could believe the duke. Everyone knew that slave traders were engaged in human trafficking.

“So it’s true that you deliberately left the slave traders to do as they pleased, sir?”

“Where did you even come across that ledger?”

Erheet shut his mouth. Erhin had said it was okay to talk about it, but Erheet was not the sort to name names so easily.

“I came by it by coincidence, but I didn’t believe it was real until I saw your signature for myself.”

“I see. I understand what you’re saying, so hand over the ledger. You’re to leave the handling of this matter to me.”

“But, sir!” Erheet rose from his seat.

“You dare defy your master? Erheet, you cur!” Ronan shouted angrily.

That shut Erheet up. He had no choice but to be silent.

“I will give you the ledger. But as for the punishment of the nobles named in there...”

“You had best go and cool your head for a while.”

Erheet’s mind had gone blank. He’d completely lost sight of the idol he’d pledged loyalty to all his life. Ronan genuinely desired to protect the country, and unlike all the other dukes he had gone off to war himself. It was only because of him that Erheet had pledged loyalty to Runan.

But to think that he would employ such a vile method in her defense...

It was little wonder Erheet was left in a total daze by this revelation.

“You will go to a fortress on the border for the time being.”

No matter how loyal the general, Ronan couldn’t stand anyone speaking against him. And the slave traders were a sore spot for him too. Now that Erheet had touched it, no matter how close he and his subordinate were, Ronan couldn’t overlook the affront.

*

Fihatori was true to his word and really did leave with the soldiers. Yusen was impressed by the man.

“Hmm, so there’s nobles like him, huh?” Gibun said, apparently feeling the same way.

“Well, anyway, we have things to do. Let’s leave defending the domain to the guards while we go to the mountains,” Yusen said, unfurling a map inside the office at the lord’s castle. “His Excellency said it would be around this area. We need to do a thorough search here. First, let’s ask the residents who are familiar with the local terrain.”

Erhin only knew the rough location where it appeared in the game. Of course, there was a huge difference between knowing that and knowing nothing. This, fortunately, allowed him to narrow down the search area to a degree, and he passed that on to Yusen.

“Gather up the village chiefs. There aren’t many villages, so there can’t be that many of them.”

“Understood.”

Gibun went to carry out Yusen’s orders. Fihatori had already taken steps to protect the residents of the domain, so he was able to do it without any interference.

Some time later, the elderly chiefs came to see Yusen.

“Have you seen iron anywhere in these mountains?”

In an isolated domain like this, it was hard to imagine word of this conversation leaking to the outside. Even if it did come out, it would probably be after Erhin declared independence. They couldn’t talk to the Runanese

soldiers yet, so they had no choice but to seek the cooperation of the domain's residents. Those were Erhin's instructions.

"Iron, you say? I wonder. This is the first I've heard of it. But that area is..."

"Is there something about it?" Yusen asked, detecting something strange in the man's expression.

However, the chief shook his head. "The mountainfolk are there, so I've never gone."

"The mountainfolk?"

"Yes. That has always been the mountainfolk's domain. We've handed down warnings against approaching them for generations, so none of us have been there."

Yusen suddenly rose to his feet when he heard that. He instinctively knew they had it, especially since the domain of these mountainfolk overlapped with the area that Erhin had told him. Yusen asked the chiefs for directions to the mountain where the mountainfolk lived and then set out with Gibun.

"But what *are* the mountainfolk?"

"An indigenous tribe, I'm sure. They seem to be protecting something, so there ought to be something there. Let's hurry."

"You were never this sharp before, Captain... Were you imitating His Excellency just now?"

"Shut up and follow me."

Gibun earned another cuff to the head for jabbering. After a desperate climb up the mountain, they set foot in the area the chiefs had told them about.

When they did, three men with just their lower halves covered and their faces painted green dropped out of the trees, blocking their path.

"Karagatel!"

"What's he saying?"

The words were incomprehensible. All that was clear was that they definitely were not welcoming.

“Captain. This is just a guess based on how they’re acting, but maybe he just told us to get lost immediately?”

“You could be right. Well, it seems they aren’t friendly.”

It was at just that moment that the mountainfolk attacked. Yusen drew his sword reluctantly.

“Gibun, don’t kill them under any circumstances. It could make things worse if we kill indiscriminately.”

The battle started right after Yusen gave his cautious orders. Given that he was a commander who boasted considerable martial prowess, Yusen was naturally able to take care of the three mountainfolk in no time.

“Who are you people?! Invading our lands and attacking us!”

At this point, another man dropped from the treetops. This one, fortunately, spoke the common tongue of this continent.

“This is all a misunderstanding! We only fought back after you people attacked us first!”

“You started it by trespassing!”

Ultimately, there was another fight. This man was built completely differently from the three who’d attacked them before. It was obvious just looking at him that his martial prowess was on a different level. Yusen crossed blades with the man for some time.

When Gibun tried to step in and assist, Yusen shouted, “Don’t get involved! Stay there and watch!”

The battle went on for a while after that. At the end of their long struggle, Yusen emerged victorious, but he was pretty exhausted.

“We don’t mean you people any harm. We just came to ask you something!”

When Yusen caught his breath and said that to the man he’d just bested, Gibun let out a sigh of admiration.

“Captain, ever since you put on that black armor, you’ve looked so much more dignified!”

“Oh, yeah?” Yusen chuckled. “You don’t have to say that just because it was a gift from our lord... No, no, that’s not important now. Did you see that, Gibun?!”

“See what?”

“The man was wearing something like iron armor. It would take incredible craftsmanship to make iron that thin.”

“Huh? That’s iron?” Gibun’s voice raised with surprise.

Then the fallen man suddenly got up and ran away.

“Captain, let’s go after him!”

Yusen shook his head.

“It’s obviously a trap. If we were to go after him, they’d surround us and attack from all sides. That’s just basic strategy. It’s dangerous to chase him.”

“But...”

“We’re taking the long way around. That way.”

The two took a side route in the direction the mountainfolk man had fled. This led to them wandering the mountains for hours. At the end of it, they arrived somewhere mysterious.

“What...is this place?”

There was a massive stone wall in front of them, on which there was a mana circle.

“What’s this doing out here in the mountains?”

As Yusen approached the mana circle with a surprised look on his face...

“Balkarka!”

...the mountainfolk appeared again from the opposite side of it. This time they were in a rather large group.

“This is no good. We can’t kill them, so let’s fall back for now!”

Fortunately, because they had taken a side route, they were able to go back the way they came and escape without being surrounded. Once they had

retreated some distance, the mountainfolk stopped chasing them, perhaps unwilling to leave their own territory.

Once they were sure of it, the two men sat down to catch their breath.

“Gibun.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Are you tired?”

“Of course.”

“I need you to work anyway. Head back to Eintorian at once.”

“So soon?”

“Tell His Excellency everything that we just saw exactly as it happened. I’m not able to make any decisions here. There was something strange about the thing they’re protecting too. I didn’t expect to see a mana circle. This is already beyond the scope of anything I can decide. That’s why you need to go inform His Excellency directly. I couldn’t leave such an important task to anyone else, could I?”

“Well, that’s true, but... What will you be doing in the meantime, Commander?”

“I need to gather more information. That’s why you’re the one going to ask His Excellency for instructions. Got it?”

“Understood.” Gibun nodded at Yusen’s order.

*

In the royal capital, the size of a noble's residence changed depending on where they fell in the hierarchy. The more powerful a noble, the closer their home was to the castle. The mansion in front of the castle, for example, belonged to the duke. Those nobles who lacked power, however, had their houses on the outskirts of the capital.

I was visiting one of those residences in the outskirts. It wasn't an official visit, so I'd asked Euracia to help because of her special ability that let her move along walls using mana. Using that power, we crept into the office of that house.

"What are you planning to do here?"

"To settle things."

Euracia shook her head in dismay before vanishing out the window. She'd seen too much of the corrupt side of Runan recently and had an expression on her face that looked like she was fed up with everything.

Jint stood behind me quietly.

He's a reliable bodyguard.

After waiting for some time, someone entered the office. The room lit up as they came in. The only people who could enter a countess's office were the maid who cleaned it or the lady herself.

And cleaning was done during the day.

Naturally, only the countess herself entered at night.

"Who's there?!" Heina shouted, immediately attacking Jint.

Jint instantly forced her to her knees and put a gag into her mouth. His speed increased continually as his Martial rose. At the rate he was growing, he'd outstrip the Swiftblade who gave me trouble in Brijit soon enough.

"It's been a while, Your Excellency," I said, earning a glare from Heina.

Frankly, I was being pretty tolerant, all things considered. She tried to have me killed. Normally, I'd have gone further than this.

“This simply won’t do. This whole business of you sending assassins to kill me and all that.”

I couldn’t raise a ruckus, so I whispered those words in her ear. Her features twisted with indignation.

I have no idea where she gets off being angry at me in this situation.

“I am not here to ask, ‘Why did you do it?!’ or any other such nonsense, Your Excellency.”

Yeah. I wasn’t here to confirm what I already knew. Of course, with a gag in her mouth, she couldn’t answer my questions.

“You must have looked into my accomplishment more than anyone. The battles in Rozern and the ruin of Brijit. You investigated all of that, didn’t you? So you must have known I wouldn’t go down to mere assassins. Looking at their ledger, you promised them an outrageous sum. Although, I’m sure you never intended to pay it.”

Heina twisted around, a look of surprise on her face.

“You have the intelligence to have worked as advisor to the army. I would like to credit you for that much, at least.”

Heina was struggling to say something, but I didn’t intend to listen to obvious falsehoods, so the gag stayed right where it was.

“You were aware that Ronan’s name was at the top of the ledger. Your true aim was to create enmity between the duke and myself. Right? Were you not able to predict I’d come here to kill you like this?”

Heina let out a muffled cry as I showed some blood lust.

“Ronan doesn’t like me. He’s simply using me. When you learned that, it must have made you all the more eager to get your job as an advisor back. You wanted to win yourself back into Ronan’s good graces, then regain the seat of advisor and use it to rebuild your house. I understand you have strong feelings about this, but you have to use your head. You chose the wrong person to fight. I think you would have done better currying my favor rather than Ronan’s, you know?”

With that said, I removed the gag. I didn't care if she shouted at this point. I'd said my piece.

"The fact is, I've put cracks in your relationship with His Highness, haven't I?!" Heina crowed. "His Excellency Erheet has been sent off to the borderlands, and His Highness has figured out that you were the one who gave him that ledger. He'll never let someone who's openly opposed him run free!"

"Oh, yeah?"

Well, it'd have been pretty easy for him to figure that out if he really wanted to. It sounds like Erheet didn't tell him, though.

"If you're going to kill me, then kill me! You're finished too! Revenge is mine!"

"Finished, huh? I don't know what mistaken impression you're under, but I don't care one bit what Ronan thinks of me. Nor do I care what happens to you."



“What?!”

“If anything, I’m actually grateful. You created a rift between Ronan and

Erheet. I was aiming to do that myself."

"What?! Do you think you can survive in Runan when Duke Ronan has it out for you? My father died a miserable death after Duke Ronan cut him loose!"

Avenging her father. Rebuilding her house. It wasn't that I didn't understand her motivations, but she was going about it all the wrong way.

"Try to take a broader view of the situation. And by that I mean, look at the continent. How long will Runan last, as rotten as it is? Ronan's not even a consideration for me. I intend to seize this entire world for myself. Destroying Brijit was only a small part of that. I haven't hitched my cart to Runan's by any means. Maybe you should consider a new path too, Your Excellency? Let me let you in on a little secret. Naruya will be invading again soon. This time, Runan won't be able to stop them, and I certainly don't intend to. There are many other ways for you to rebuild your house and take revenge. Maybe you don't need to get Ronan to like you after all?"

"What are you even saying?!"

"Think with your head a little. Your father died a miserable death after Ronan threw him away. Why not kill Ronan to avenge him? Your chance will come in time."

If she couldn't control her anger and tried to have another go at me, then next time I'd kill her for sure. For now, though, she was still useful. I didn't know how just yet, but there had to be something.

"How about, instead of going after me, you take your revenge on the direct cause of your misfortune?"

Yes, this was a spark. A spark for her to go after Ronan. Anyway, I had said everything I had to say to her, so I gave Jint the signal and she was set free. She didn't move, though—just stared at me vacantly. Leaving her to struggle with her thoughts, I slipped out of the residence.

Then, immediately meeting up with Euracia, she asked me, "By the way, what exactly are your intentions? If another Naruyan invasion isn't far off, then...in the end, the people of Runan will be..."

It seemed she'd heard everything.

“The king is an imbecile, and the duke is greedy. I don’t care what happens to them, but I don’t plan on letting the people die in the war.”

“...” Euracia said nothing in response to my answer.

In fact, when I looked at her, she turned her face away from me.

*

“*Where* do you think you’re going?” Jint said as he caught Gensema trying to escape.

“Spare me! You’re going to spare me, right? I’ve done everything just as you’ve told me to! Please, spare me!”

Sorry, but I never said I’d spare you. I only said that I could*.*

“What goes around comes around in this world, right? When you do something bad, then that much retribution is headed your way,” I said, handing Gensema over to Jint. “Do with him as you will.”

“You mean it?”

“Of course I do.”

At my nod, Jint bit his lip and grabbed Gensema by the hair. Then, just like that, he dragged the man up the hill.

“Ngh! Spare me! Please...! I get it, I’ll give you everything. If it’s gold bars you want, just say so. I have mountains of them!”

Perhaps sensing an alarming amount of blood lust, Gensema cried and begged for mercy. Jint gave him no answer, though. He simply looked at Gensema, then swung his blade down.

“Spare—Gwagh...!”

In an instant, Gensema’s head flew through the air, his lips still moving. It took seconds for him to lose consciousness, and the severed head kept making noise the whole time. In those brief moments, his flying head likely had time to see the body it had been parted from. Like it was staring down at a decapitated torso.

Seconds of despair.

It might not have been nearly enough for the end of a scoundrel who'd plunged so many into the depths of misery, but I'd say that it was still a reasonably fitting end. Once he'd snuffed Gensema, Jint walked over and suddenly knelt before me.

"I don't know how I can ever repay you... What could I possibly do...?"

It was a truly foolish question.

What's that question for?

"You want to repay me that badly?"

"Of course! You've done nothing but help me, yet I haven't been able to do anything for you in return!"

"Then get stronger. That's how you'll repay me. Get stronger, and be more useful. That's enough."

Yeah. Hurry up and become S-class. A loyal S-class subordinate. I'm going to need that kind of power. The stronger he gets, the less risk there was of him dying, so it's a good thing for Mirinae too.

"You want me to get stronger? And if I do...I can be more use to you?"

"That's what I was saying, yes."

"I'll get stronger, then."

Jint was a man of few words, as always. Judging by his enthusiasm, he seemed to get it.

There's something more important right now, though. That's that even with Gensema dead, the Droy Company still hasn't been destroyed.

Destroying their fortress in Runan and killing the master only meant their boss was dead. The branches in the rest of Runan and Naruya were still unharmed. The Droy Company was structured a lot like the drug cartels and other criminal syndicates in the modern world. Because they held their secrets tight, it wasn't easy to get a precise handle on what the situation truly was.

There was the top of the cartel, the people who procured the drugs, split them up, stored them, shipped them, managed the black market, pushed the

drugs, watched for trouble, and managed the books. Everyone had a role assigned to them. It was normal for the commanders of the organization not to show themselves in public. This assignment of roles meant that while there were vertical connections between the members, they weren't connected horizontally, so each member only knew their direct superiors.

Most of the time, when it came to people doing the same job, they only knew one another's faces, not the names that went with them. So even when a person managing sales was caught, it was difficult to hunt down the leadership and catch them all at once.

On interrogating the captives from the fortress, we learned that Gensema of the Droy Company only managed the fortress and the main branch in Runan, while he gave orders to the other branches in secret without showing his face at any of them.

In conclusion, that meant the Droy Company was still largely intact at this moment, and I could take it for myself.

*

Euracia took Frill on ahead to the fortress.

Once we'd disposed of Gensema, Jint and I met up with her there. When I arrived at the fortress, I began interrogating our captives again.

"So they report in regularly. Each branch has a person who comes here, and then returns to their branch with orders?"

"Y-Yes!" the prisoner shouted emphatically.

"Your information has been accurate. Thanks to that, I was able to kill Gensema and Lutri. As long as you give me that kind of precise information, it makes it worth my while to keep you alive. You catch my drift, right?"

"Yes, of course! I... I'll never lie to you!" the prisoner shouted, trembling with fear.

There's no need to show mercy to men like these. But if there's something to be gained from it, then that's another matter entirely.

"Did Gensema ever show himself to the people from the branches?"

“No. He was deeply suspicious of others. Things are much stricter in the Naruya Kingdom, so he hasn’t shown his face to any of the people from the branch there. By keeping the branches ignorant of each other, even if one is put down the rest are able to survive.”

“That branch in the Naruya Kingdom is the one I need.”

More precisely, I need the accurate intel they could provide.

As a criminal syndicate that dealt with the nobility, it was easy for them to get their hands on important information, and they would uncover more than if I sent my scouts.

In war, intel is worth more than gold. It’s what leads the way to victory.

I was all too happy to become the master of the Droy Company in order to get that information. Of course, I didn’t intend to tolerate human trafficking. I planned to gain information while capturing the other Droy Company branches in one fell swoop.

If I’m going to round them up anyway, pretending to be the master of the organization to get intel out of them has got to be fair game, right? It’s two birds with one stone. Getting information about what’s happening in Naruya is more important than anything right now. More than the gold beneath Eintorian. No, more than the iron in Bertaquin, even.

“You were saying the messengers from the other branches gather again half a month from now, right?”

“Y-Yes!”

“Then start preparing immediately. I’ll be meeting with the other branches’ intermediaries personally,” I declared to my captive.

*

“Frill!”

“Sis!”

Frill hugged Lilian. Frill had been dragged around here and there without any idea what was happening, but it was different for Lilian. The girl shed tears as she hugged Frill tight.

The girl had come to me, crying, and begged me to save her little sister. It was immediately obvious that I should grant her wish. Her earnestness was palpable to anyone listening, and it was the little things like that which came together to form the public's opinion.

The fact of the matter is Opinion scores are the most important element to take into consideration in the game. No matter how much I raise my level, without popular support I don't have a proper country and world domination is impossible.

Everything I did was to become the true winner of this game.

"Don't worry. My domain is building villages, so everyone can live there. No one is going to make the two of you suffer anymore," I told them.

"Frill, hold on a moment."

"Sis?"

Leaving behind Frill, who was perplexed by her big sister's sudden tears, Lilian wailed over and prostrated herself before me.

"My lord!"

"Huh?"

"I... I'll do anything! No matter what you ask of me! So, please, let me stay by your side to serve you!"

What she was saying was outrageous.

"Stay by my side and serve me? There's no need for that. You should go to the village and live however you please."

When I gave that kind of realistic response to her sudden request, she grabbed my leg while remaining prostrate in front of me.

"My sister and I were sold by our village! There's no freedom for us if we go back there... Instead, I want to live for you, the one who saved my sister's life, my lord! Please, let me repay this debt. I beg of you!"

"Uh, it's nice of you to say that and all, but..."

Unable to brush her off, I was at a loss for what to do.

In a way, it's easier dealing with scum like Gensema.

I suddenly broke into a cold sweat. She locked her little arms around my leg, unwilling to let go of me even if that meant being dragged around.

The longer this went on, the more people who would see. This situation actually risked creating misunderstandings. Misunderstandings that were bound to lower people's opinion of me. I needed to handle the matter delicately. If she started crying now, there'd be no saving me.

I did have one idea that was kind of like serving at my side.

With my brain racing for solutions, I proposed, "Then will you serve as a maid in my castle? There's a lot that you'll have to learn, but that would be serving me, in a way."

"I'll do it! Please, let me! I'll make your castle the cleanest on the continent!" Lilian declared, announcing a rather strange ambition.

If that's what she wants, then so be it. I can leave the rest to the head chamberlain.

"Okay, okay. I'll handle the formalities once we return, now stop clinging to me and stand on your own two feet."

"I'll do my very best! I mean it! I'll give it everything I have!" Lilian put her hands together in front of her as she tried to show how passionate she was.

Having seen this, of all things, Euracia suddenly appeared and shook her head with dismay. Then, she uttered two words.

"You pervert."

Whoa, hold up. What about any of this makes me a pervert?!

"Hey, Euracia!" I shouted after her desperately as she went, but she didn't seem to have any intention of stopping.

Chapter 2: Secrets of the Mountainfolk

Having ordered my soldiers to disguise themselves as the Droy Company, I returned to my domain for a time. I couldn't stay away too long, or it might come out that I'd been moving my troops around on unofficial tasks. When I got there, Gibun had just returned from Bertaquin, and after hearing his report I ended up setting out for Bertaquin next.

I was feeling a little fatigued, and I didn't want to be away from Runan too long with the matter of the Droy Company still remaining, but Gibun's report was also not something I could ignore.

He said they'd found a mana circle.

For some reason, in the game, this mountain region didn't get activated until it was occupied by the player. Maybe this mana circle was part of that secret.

"You sure you're all right, Gibun? You can rest, if you'd like."

"Not an option. Someone's got to show you where the mountainfolk are. And prevent you and the captain from missing each other too!"

"Well, you've got a point there. I'll have you keep on working just a little longer, then."

"I can take it."

Euracia, Gibun, and I headed out on horseback. I'd assigned Jint another task, so he was busy elsewhere this time.

"That's the castle!"

This was my first time visiting Bertaquin. True to expectations, it was an underdeveloped domain. We entered the castle as soon as we arrived. Yusen might be there, after all.

But there was no sign of Yusen.

"He said he would be surveying the area, so I guess he's still not back yet..." Gibun said, scratching the back of his head with a look of concern on his face.

That leaves us with nothing else to do at the castle.

“Let’s head into the mountains.”

“Yes, sir!”

With Gibun leading the way, we headed to the area where the mountainfolk were.

“I think it was this way...”

However, Gibun got us lost on the way there.

“Well, you see... It was a *very* tense situation at the time!”

Forest here. Forest there. With all this green everywhere, it was understandable that he couldn’t tell one place from another.

“Let’s just move forward for now. Those weirdos with the green face paint will show up eventually!”

Just as Gibun said that, something fell down from up in the trees. A person, incredibly enough.

“It’s one of them! They look just like that! Eeeeek!”

Gibun tripped and fell over as he backed away when he saw. Euracia quickly drew her sword. But on closer inspection it was a familiar face.

“Hey, it’s Yusen!”

“Your Excellency, you came!”

At this point, Gibun rose to his feet with indignation.

“Captain! What was that for?! Why are you dressed like one of them?! Did you become one of the mountainfolk while I was away?”

“Shut up. The bigger problem here is the way you failed to recognize me and started wailing like you’d seen a ghost.” Yusen gave Gibun a swift kick in the butt before turning to me. “They paint their faces green in this fashion. I stood out too much on my own as I was, so I decided to do the same.”

“Well, that’s certainly true, Captain. Just looking at your face, there’s no way to tell you apart from—”

Gibun, who'd said a little too much, was cut off as Yusen gave him another punishment that left him lying on the ground.

Nice to see they get along so well.

"So, have you figured anything out?" I asked.

"I investigated their territory. Here's a map!" Yusen said, handing me a hand-drawn map.

"For now, is there any way of reaching the place where the mana circle is without them finding us?"

"They won't leave their territory. It's an unbreakable taboo for them. So, if we take the side route over here, we can get there easily, but..."

"Is there something there?"

"It seems to be a holy site for them, so they're guaranteed to notice if we trespass there. That's the problem."

There's no avoiding a clash, huh? I may not like it, but I came all the way for that mana circle, so I'm gonna do what I have to do.

"Until I see that mana circle, I can't decide how I'm going to deal with the mountainfolk. Lead me there."

"Yes, sir."

Following Yusen, we took a big detour off the path. Unlike Gibun, however, Yusen knew the area like the back of his hand.

"There it is, Your Excellency!"

Let's see if it's what I think it is.

A massive cliff. And at the bottom of it, a mana circle. It looked very familiar.

"I knew it. It looks like the one we saw that time, doesn't it?"

"I was thinking the same thing. Look at this!"

It was the same as the one in the underground space Euracia and I found during the war with Brijit. Remembering what happened that time, Euracia held out her hand. Blue light shone from her ring. This was also the same as back

then.

In short, this circle of mana was a device created by the Ancient Kingdom.

If there's iron somewhere in this area, could it be that it's not from an iron mine, but iron ore that was being used by the Ancient Kingdom? Was it lost with the fall of the kingdom?

"Ukakakakakauka!"

At some point while I was thinking about all this, a green-faced gang had surrounded us. It was immediately obvious they were the mountainfolk because they were dressed the same way as Yusen. Hundreds of them appeared from on top of the cliff and from the rear, encircling us with faces that showed unmasked hostility.

"Who is your chief?! I am Erhin, the new Lord of Bertaquin!"

In response, one of them opened his mouth. The man with the broadest shoulders in the mob.

"It matters not to us who you are. Begone at once. Or your life will be forfeit."

They seemed uninterested in my status as their lord. Well, that had been obvious at first glance. They were all short, but with comparatively broad shoulders and muscular frames.

"I suspect that one is the chief," Yusen explained. "He was rather strong. I was only barely able to beat him."

"Oh, yeah?" I replied.

Bertalman

Age: 28

Martial: 80

Intelligence: 50

Command: 78

I immediately checked the man's ability scores. He wasn't A-class, but the numbers were certainly still appealing.

“If you won’t leave, then you must die! Kill them!”

The mountainfolk attacked because we ignored their warning.

We could fight back, but that risks casualties. That being the case, we’ll break through instead.

“Euracia, it’s probably fastest to dispel the mana circle and go inside. We’ll cover you, so get that door open!”

“Got it.”

Euracia nodded and raced toward the mana circle. As she did, I arranged for her protection.

“We’ll hold them off until Euracia opens the door!”

“Leave it to us!”

Then, just as we were about to make contact with the onrushing mountainfolk. It only took a brief moment.

The mana circle flashed with the same blue light as Euracia’s ring, and the ground began to shake like an earthquake.

“Ukakakakaka?”

The mountainfolk, shocked by the tremors, ceased their attack. At the same time, the wall on which the mana circle had been drawn opened up as if it had been vertically bisected and then the shaking subsided. Euracia’s ring and the mana circle were still emitting a powerful blue light as they resonated with each other.

She went inside, and I followed behind her.

The mountainfolk looked on in a daze, as if they didn’t understand what was happening.

“Look at this. What do you think it’s doing here?” Euracia said, pointing in front of the door. There was a brown sword thrust into the ground there. Cocking her head to the side questioningly, she drew the blade. It was brown, like the sword that had been in Rozern.

Nameless Sword

Martial +2

The item's effect was identical.

Don't tell me the Ancient Kingdom's treasures are all the same. No, even if they're harboring some secret, surely there can't be twelve of these brown swords, right?

"Your Excellency! Look! Look at them!"

Gibun's shouts caused me to turn and look at the mountainfolk.

"Ukakakakaka!"

The mountainfolk who had been attacking us had all prostrated themselves before us at some point. And as they lowered themselves, their apparent chief addressed Euracia.

"Master!"

He spoke as if he were speaking to a goddess.

Euracia pointed at herself with a blank look on her face that seemed to say, *"Master? Me?"*

Speaking on her behalf, I asked, "What do you mean, 'Master'?"

The chief raised his voice and answered, "It is as our ancestors foretold. You are the one who opens the holy place with blue light—the master who is to liberate and lead us. We have protected this place, waiting eagerly for the one who will lead us with the blue light!"

On hearing this, Euracia cast a troubled look in my direction. She was even more divine when her poker face slipped, making the mountainfolk prostrating themselves before her look like worshipers. Their presence complimented Euracia's beauty.

"What do you suppose they're doing?"

"They appear to be worshiping you."

"Huh?"

Euracia hid herself behind me, tugging on the hem of my shirt. It was unusual for her, who always stood in front of me, fighting, when a battle broke out, to do this. And she was even grasping the hem of my shirt. I'd have loved to look at this fresh side of her a little longer, but I turned to face the mountainfolk again.

I had mountains of questions for them.

"You're saying that you were waiting for someone to open the door sealed by the mana circle?"

"Who are you?! I have nothing to say to anyone but our master!"

Chief Bertalman of the mountainfolk's response angered Euracia who shouted, "I don't know if I'm your master or not, but he and I are one and the same!" from behind me.

"What? Oh, I see. He is your spouse, then?" Bertalman said, jumping to an unbelievable conclusion.

"E-Erm, no he's—mmph?!"

Euracia was quick with the denial, but I covered her mouth with my hand.

"If she's my spouse, then will you listen to me?"

"If you have sworn vows with our master, then we will swear our loyalty to you as our master as well."

I see. So that's how it is.

I put my hand around Euracia's shoulder, pulling her close.

"I see. Your master is my wife!" I declared boldly, but Euracia objected of course.

"Wait, who're you calling your wife?!

"Just play along for now. We need to get the mountainfolk on board," I muttered, putting my hands together in a conciliatory gesture. Euracia pursed her lips slightly.

"Even though I'm not your type! Yeesh!" she complained in a whisper, then raised her voice so everyone could hear her and said, "It's true. He is my

partner.”

“What?” She accepted it so plainly that I couldn’t help but ask.

“Is that not what you meant?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“If it helps you, then I’m fine with it. And besides...”

“Besides?”

At a loss for words, Euracia smiled, and she shook her head.

“Even if you are a pervert, maybe I can accept that...?”

With that, she turned her back to me and headed inside.



No, hold on. Do you really still think I'm some kind of deviant?

"Woah, hey, Euracia! I told you that was a misunderstanding!"

Euracia pretended not to hear me as she looked around, vanishing inside. I watched as she left me behind out here, then turned my gaze back toward the mountainfolk. I'd considered going after her, but this had to come first.

"Anyway, you heard her, right? My questions are her questions. So answer me. Were you waiting for someone to break the seal of this mana circle?"

Bertalman, who had been watching us, seemed to draw some conclusions, and opened his mouth to say, "When you get in a fight with your wife, the winning strategy is to let her win, Master!"

What kind of conclusion had he come to? Why was he looking at me like I was pathetic? With a look that told him to shut up, I asked, "Listen, just answer the question, would you?"

"O foolish master. I will answer your question. Yes, we have waited many long years."

"Was there some reason for that?"

"We mountainfolk were brought to ruin by Brijit a thousand years ago. But we had a benefactor who saved us then. Our ancestors did as he told them, and have protected this land with the mana circle ever since. He told us the one who appeared together with the blue light was our master, and that master would spread the name of the mountainfolk across the entire continent."

"Whoa, hold up. I get that this guy saved you, but you're telling me you've really been waiting for an entire millennium?"

"We are not like those of Brijit. No matter how many millennia pass, we never forget our gratitude! It is said that he foretold many things, and our ancestors bound us to do as he said. And so, we obey!"

Hmm. That was a pretty cool line. Their high degree of loyalty's no lie.

I wanted these mountainfolk as my subordinates badly. Their mobility and ability to conceal themselves while in the mountains was a big part of that.

I'd be a real lucky guy to have them as loyal subordinates.

But even more important was the fact that their story had hints to the treasures of the Ancient Kingdom in it.

The man who the mountainfolk said saved them was likely the original bearer of Euracia's ring. He must have taken the treasures from the Ancient Kingdom that were stored in Brijit, then brought them to be stored at this mountain with the mountainfolk protecting them. In that case, was their savior involved with the Ancient Kingdom? In other words, one of the ancestors of the Eintorians? I could theorize that their savior left this place and then went to Rozern to give them the ring. Not that I have any idea why he'd have done that. Still, having any clue at all makes a world of difference.

"Hrm..."

Well, if I keep pursuing the mystery, the pieces of the puzzle are bound to fall into place at some point.

"Your Excellency! You married Her Royal Highness?!" Gibun approached and asked as I was deep in thought.

"What?" I responded, with a look as if it was the most ridiculous thing I'd ever heard. Yusen let out a sigh and shook his head before dragging Gibun off. Gibun hadn't been able to say a word to Euracia the whole way here. He'd been overwhelmed by her beauty, or her position. Probably both.

Anyway, I turned to the mountainfolk and said, "Basically, you were looking for a master who would bring honor to the mountainfolk, then? It sounds like his prophecy was correct. Because I am the man who destroyed the same Brijit that drove your people out. If you serve under me and Euracia, I promise you the whole world will know the name of the mountainfolk!"

"Brijit was destroyed? O Master, is that true?" Bertalman asked with a look of stunned disbelief.

Considering his people couldn't leave the mountains, it was no surprise that he didn't know.

"The reason Bertaquin has a new lord is because Brijit was destroyed."

"You truly destroyed them, Master?"

"The master you've been waiting so long for has appeared before you. If you cannot even believe what he tells you, then what have you been waiting these many long years for?"

“We believe you! You are our saviors!” Bertalman turned and spoke to the tribesmen in their own language.

“Woaaaahhh!”

The mountainfolk immediately let out a great cheer. Then they repeatedly bowed their heads toward me.

“Are you still doing this?” asked Euracia, who had returned at some point. She was always making sudden appearances, so it didn’t even surprise me at this point.

“How far in did you go?” I asked.

“This place is really deep,” she replied. “It seems there’s an iron ore mine, but there was also one of those things at the entrance.”

“What things?”

“That mana circle that increased our mana before.”

“No way!”

It looks like the mana circles associated with the Ancient Kingdom really do have that function, like I suspected.

This was really good news. I could raise two people’s ability scores this time.

“Euracia, do you know the origin of that ring? Like, who it came from?”

“No. Father never told me. Or rather, he likely didn’t know himself.”

The answer’s not going to come easy, I guess. Why purpose did these facilities from the Ancient Kingdom and their treasures have?

“Well, it’s fine. We have unsealed the mana circle that you people were protecting. You are to follow me and my wife Euracia from now on!”

“Woaaaaaaahhh!”

Their cheer echoed through the mountains.

Why were they driven out of Brijit, and for what reason did my Eintorian ancestor save them? Whatever the answer, the important thing now is that I’ve found myself some powerful pawns in the mountainfolk. There are mountains

everywhere, but with this world's level of technology none of them are highly developed. That means that the mountains aren't yet part of humanity's domain. It's just a fact that having the aid of the mountainfolk, with their incredible mobility inside the mountains, will be useful.

On top of that, it looks like the huge volume of iron ore that I was expecting is in here too.

I planned to use that iron to build myself an elite unit of iron cavalry as soon as possible.

The iron cavalry boast both offensive and defensive power. They'll be invaluable in the age of chaos that comes with the destruction of Runan.

And I already had a man in mind to be captain of my iron cavalry.

Martial 96. Intelligence 70. Command 92.

He was one who possessed superior abilities for a commander.

Yes, it has to be Erheet Demacine.

*

The iron problem was resolved.

Gibun and Yusen were to bring in engineers from Eintorian, then secure the transportation routes. Management of the domain and development of our manpower were proceeding apace too.

Which means what I need to do now is gather information—information on the Naruya Kingdom. So far, I've been able to keep winning thanks to my experience with the game. But there was no second Naruyan invasion in the game. It'd be dangerous to go up against the powerful forces of Naruya without any intel whatsoever. They have characters—their king foremost among them—who I can't overcome even with Daitoren equipped, after all.

If I fight blindly without accurate intel, I really will be risking my life in this war.

There's that saying that if you know the other guy, and you know yourself, you won't have to worry about the result of a hundred battles. Some famous Chinese strategist guy said it. If I know the enemy, I can win. Of course, that's easier said than done.

"I'm gonna head to Naruya," I said, thinking aloud.

"Wha—? What's this, coming out of nowhere?" Euracia asked, her expression dubious.

"It's to gather information. There's something I want to use the Droy Company to find out."

Euracia stared at me. "Is that right? Well, let's make sure we're adequately prepared," she said as if that were the natural conclusion. Which meant she planned to come with me.

"Uh, listen... I think I'd better go it alone this time. You kinda stand out... You're not a good pick for a covert mission."

"Just what about me do you think stands out?" Euracia asked, pouting. She was upset I'd told her not to come.

"Everything about you. Your very existence. That soft, blonde hair and your creamy white skin. Your breathtaking beauty. You stick out like a sore thumb."

"..." Euracia stared at me in dumb amazement when I said that.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you saying?! This is way too embarrassing! You can't just say that...!"

She turned away, her face reddening.

Hey, wasn't her reaction too slow there?

"That's just how much of a sore thumb you are. So, much as I might like it to be otherwise, I'm going alone. The domain's set up to run when I'm not around, at least. I've got a favor to ask of you instead."

"A favor?" Euracia asked, bashfully hiding her face behind her hands.

"Can you move Rozern to act on my behalf? I want you to head there for that purpose."

Yeah. Infiltrating Naruya to gather intel was great and all, but I needed to be able to move Rozern if I was going to put it to use.

"Move Rozern...you say?"

"Yeah. In the coming war, I'm going to want Rozern to choose me over Runan, and to help me out."

"Of course we'll choose you. If the choice is you or Runan, the answer is obvious."

"Is that right?"

"Yes," she answered instantly, an expression on her face that showed she felt no need for hesitation. "Because you said Runan was a sinking ship. But no, there's more to it than that..."

"More to it?"

"I've actually chosen you over Rozern too."

"Huh? You have?"

There was a silence, followed by, "You dummy! I don't even know you anymore!" as Euracia stormed off looking genuinely angry.

*

Near the Runanese capital, the soldiers guarding the Droy Company fortress had been replaced by Eintorian troops. And inside the fortress, there was a prisoner I'd spared because he knew the chief of the Naruyan branch of the company.

The branch chiefs just pass orders along and rarely visit the fortress, so nothing should look like it's changed as far as they're concerned.

I had traded my usual noble garb for Gensema's clothes.

"They'll be coming from Cassis, the Naruyan capital, today, right?"

"Yes. That's what was scheduled."

The chief of the branch in Cassis. In other words, the key individual in this situation.

"You're certain Gensema's never met his branch chiefs directly?"

"Yes. He only sent out messengers with orders for the branches."

The prisoner nodded, wincing a little.

After seeing how mercilessly we'd killed his comrades, he probably had no intention of trying to trick me.

Naruya's not corrupt like Runan. In fact, in order to preserve the absolute authority of the king, they systematically eliminate any unpredictable elements like criminal organizations. Because of that, unlike in Runan, the Naruyan branch of this company is at a high risk of being wiped out. That's why Gensema chose not to show his face—to prevent it from ending up on a wanted poster if the branch did get swept up.

He could only do that because he was running a crime syndicate, not an ordinary organization. It's going to make mopping the rest of them up all at once tough.

"In that case, think of me as Gensema from now on. Got it?"

"Understood!"

Once I'd driven that point home, the person we were waiting for arrived. His name was Martin, and his ability scores were nothing impressive.

“I am Martin, chief of the Cassis branch! You’re the master? I never expected you to be so young...”

“I inherited the position from my father. If you’ve heard anything about the master that is contradictory to my appearance, then that was likely him.”

“I see. So that’s how it was... Anyway, why is it you’ve called me to the main fortress? Isn’t this in violation of company rules?”

Martin eyed me suspiciously. He was as cautious as I’d expect from the branch chief of a criminal organization.

“That’s just how important this is!” the prisoner standing beside me interjected.

“Oh, who are you? You’ve come to Cassis a number of times to deliver messages, haven’t you?|

“I see you’ve been good enough to remember me.”

Perhaps thanks to that acquaintance, Martin put his suspicions to the side for the time being and nodded.

“I have an important task for you, and that is why I’ve made an exception to the rule,” I explained before clapping my hands together.

When I did, the soldiers brought in the gold bars. Four boxes worth. Even one box was equivalent to five years of the Droy Company’s revenue. They opened the boxes to reveal the gleaming gold. Martin’s eyes lit up as he approached. He’d joined this organization for the money, so that was to be expected.

“What is this...?”

“The advance payment for the important job I’m assigning you.”

“All of this...is the advance payment?”

“Correct. And you’ll receive twice this much if you’re successful.”

“Double! You’re serious?”

Martin looked at me with disbelief. Because there was enough money in the advance payment alone to walk away from this lifestyle and live like a king.

“Where in the world...did so much money come from? No, just how

dangerous *is* this job?”

The higher the price, the greater the risk. That was a given.

“There is something that I am hoping to investigate by ingratiating myself to the Naruyan nobility. This gold is the price of the information.”

“No way!”

“You just need to accept the payment and help me infiltrate Cassis. I’ll handle the rest. Our client is a great man. If the job is a success, the Droy Company will be able to make inroads in the Jenas Kingdom. I think you can see why it was worth breaking the rules now. However, because we’ve head to go against protocol, I expect you’ll be transferred to another branch once the job is done. That, or you could quit entirely. You can consider this to also be a retirement bonus.”

“I can’t believe we’re moving into Jenas!”

That meant moving into an incomparably larger market than Naruya. Unlike the insular Naruya, Jenas was a country whose profile had been rising due to their trade with other nations. Obviously, they were even more watchful of what business was going on in their country than other nations.

That was why the Droy Company hadn’t been able to extend their tendrils into that region yet.

Martin looked at the boxes again. Then he gulped.

“By the way...would I, personally, be in any danger?”

“Not at all. I’ll do all the risky stuff myself. I only need you to set things up so I can infiltrate the country.”

“I’ll do it, then! You’re really giving me all this gold...!”

“Good. The gold is yours. Once you’ve gotten me into the country, you may return to the fortress to claim it. But only after you’ve gotten me in. Understood?”

Martin’s eyes bulged as he thought about this.

From the perspective of a villain like him, it must have been concerning that

he wasn't being handed the gold here and now. In a shadowy organization like this, it was only natural that he would fear he might be repaid not with gold but death once he'd served his purpose. After all, this was an organization where people didn't meet face to face. They were bound by gold, not loyalty.

"I just have to get you in, that's all? And then I really get the gold?"

"That is correct. Obviously, if you were to talk, I would die when I infiltrated the country. If that happens, you won't be getting the gold. What, do you think I'd do you harm when I'll need to Cassis branch to help me make my escape too?"

"You have a point... Okay then. I'll take my payment when the job is done. Heh heh heh!" Martin said with a chuckle.

He seemed ready to stab me in the back once he had the gold bars.

With that much money on the line, that's a natural outcome. But there's no way he should be able to betray me before he has the gold. I'm sure Martin must smell the danger, but the allure of the gold in front of his eyes is much greater.

"Now, let's take the company's route to Cassis."

"You're not going to bring Lutri with us?"

"It's a top secret operation, after all. The fewer people involved, the better."

"I see. Then you'll be acting on your own in Cassis?"

"That is what it means, yes."

Those words lent Martin a sense of certainty, his lips curling ever so slightly up into a smile.

The Gensema he knows is weak, and Lutri is the strong one. And *we'll be going to Cassis, his sphere of influence. That means if I kill him instead of paying him, his men can turn me in to the authorities. It's a profitable deal made all the more tempting by the security measures he has in place. He must have sensed that, as long as Lutri isn't with us, it should be possible.*

*

The Droy Company branch near Cassis was also a fortress with an underground prison. It was a facility for holding slaves who were being trafficked. The children who didn't sell would be taken in by the assassin group and subjected to advanced training from a young age. Those who survived would become hired killers, while those who couldn't handle it would simply perish.

Of course, they just killed any adult they couldn't sell. That's the kind of place the Droy Company was.

"So, how are you planning to get me in? You've brought me here with some plan in mind, right?"

Martin nodded in response to my question.

"Of course. There's a group in Naruya called the Ten Commanders."

"Surely you aren't suggesting I wasn't aware of them?"

"The truth is, we have a customer in the Ten Commanders. Heh heh heh!"

Really?

"Only Naruya has an organization like the Ten Commanders."

The Ten Commanders of Naruya were literally the ten strongest guys in Naruya. Whenever a stronger guy appeared, the lineup changed. Whether they were a noble or a peasant didn't matter.

Basically, they're a total meritocracy.

When a commoner was chosen as one of the Ten Commanders, they stood above the ordinary nobility. They might not have a title, but for as long as they were one of the Commanders, the nobles couldn't lay a hand on them. That included every noble outside of the royal family and the House of Valdesca who came from one of the Twelve Continental Families.

Naturally, it was incredibly prestigious for a noble house to have produced a member of the Ten Commanders. The Ten Commanders system had existed since the founding of Naruya, and the post was seen as sacred. But at the same time, it was also a license to do anything without facing the censure of anyone outside the royal family.

*

Three months later, in the royal palace in Runan, the king was shouting at his retainers, his face turning red as he was unable to control his fury. When Duke Ronan answered his sudden summons, he looked at the king dubiously.

“What is the matter, Your Majesty?”

The king immediately pounded the armrest of his throne in response.

“Those Rozernans have gotten full of themselves! All of a sudden, they’re refusing to pay the promised annual tribute? What ingrates! I’ll make those underhanded curs pay for this!”

Not just Ronan, but all of the nobles present furrowed their brows when they heard the king say that.

Yes, this is outrageous. Curse those measly Rozernans, they all thought.

Even though *they* weren’t the ones who’d saved Rozern.

“We’ll destroy them at once. Prepare for war!” the king roared.

While the king and Ronan thought alike much of the time, the duke was still the more logical of the two.

“Sire! We can’t go to war.”

Consequently, he opposed starting a war on impulse.

“We’ve already sent many of our troops to Brijit, where there are still elements resisting our rule, and they are busy suppressing the domain.”

They had only given Erhin a small number of troops when he said he would take Brijit, but once the capital fell, the lords replenished their troops and headed there one after another. Thanks to that, the Royal Army and the nobles’ personal forces were largely away at the moment. If they recalled them to start another war, they would quickly face pushback from the nobles and an insurrection in Brijit, among other problems.

“Still, we cannot suffer this in silence. Damn that petty country!”

The king’s words worried Ronan. Once the man got angry, there was no changing his mind. He was strong when facing the weak. At this point, the

nobles came together to make a suggestion.

“Why not send Count Eintorian, sire? Then there won’t be any need to fight a war. Sending him should be enough to intimidate them!”

“Oh, I see. That *is* a move we can make. To think things would go so badly after we withdrew him. Fine, send an envoy to Erhin. We’ll demand that Rozern pay ten times the annual tribute for going back on their word. If they don’t, then it will be war. Also, they must send us hostages. Yes, I think that the princess who came here last time will do nicely.”

He wasn’t thinking about the big picture. He’d completely forgotten about Naruya. The possibilities of money and a beautiful woman dangling before him were all that went through the foolish king of Runan’s mind.

“But sire, that will make it hard to use Count Eintorian...”

“I don’t want to hear it. Are you suggesting that Runan ignore a slight from measly Rozern, then, Duke? We either send Erhin, or we send in the troops to destroy them utterly!” the king of Runan declared firmly.

Chapter 3: The Road to Being King

In the Naruya Kingdom, the young king, Cassia de Naruya sat upon his throne. Despite his youth, the king already possessed both dignity and a regal aura that befitted a hegemon. Before him stood Count Roland with his head bowed. He was an emissary of the Herald Kingdom and was also said to be the strongest fighter in that country.

The Herald Kingdom bordered Naruya to the east. In terms of power, they were roughly on the same level as Brijit, meaning that they were weaker than Runan. But in part due to his fame within his own country, Roland remained confident even when standing before the King of Naruya.

“So, in summary, you are asking if we would like to form an alliance?”

“Indeed I am. And it is not such a bad deal, if I do say so myself!”

There had been a similar proposal from the Brijit Kingdom the other day. Not that Brijit existed as a nation any longer. Of course, Cassia had no intention of accepting.

“You people are also targeting Runan, then? You wish to join hands with us in order to occupy that country, is that it?”

“I won’t deny it. However, Your Majesty, if you were to form an alliance with Herald, I can assure you we would be able to conquer Runan with even greater certainty!”

Count Roland declared, releasing mana as he spoke. It was a way of boasting about his own power. Perhaps an ordinary ruler might have been intimidated, at least somewhat, by such a display.

However, Cassia merely dug the wax out of his ear as if bored.

“It seems that the Herald Kingdom’s information is out of date. It’s absurd that someone like you is a famous commander there. A man with your level of martial ability would be no use anywhere else. You fail to even arouse our curiosity, emissary of Herald. Begone.”

At that moment, red light overflowed from around Cassia. The power of his red mana made the entire throne room shake. Count Roland's mana was swallowed up in an instant, and the overpowered count was forced to sit on the floor, his trembling legs unable to support him. The king's power was so great he was speechless.

With quivering lips, the count said, "I'm sure you'll regret this... We're after Runan too, so next time we meet...it'll likely be on the battlefield...!"

He was likely attempting to save his pride by saying that, but all he was doing was wagging his insipid tongue.



Two of the royal guards flanked Count Roland, picking him up and removing him from the audience chamber in shame. He was so overwhelmed he couldn’t

even stand up on his own.

"What a pitiful wretch," the king remarked with a look of boredom before rising from the throne.

Once he was gone, Frann Valdesca, who had simply been watching as the situation unfolded, asked the Ten Commanders, "Have you finished searching for Runanese scouts?"

"Yes, Your Highness. The intelligence service has captured them all. Many of them were given rather sloppy missions, so it wasn't difficult. It seems Duke Ronan isn't very good at this."

"I see. Please catch them and take as much advantage of them as you can."

The king of Runan and his right hand man Ronan were fools. Ronan didn't even merit being seen as a threat. There was only one among the enemy who did. And if Valdesca's reading of the situation was correct, that person would actually be pleased by the destruction of Runan. That being the case, the advisor to the Naruya Kingdom felt he should take as much advantage of the man as he could.

*

Soon, Naruya would invade Runan.

The time was at hand.

If so, this playthrough is coming to the main event.

No, rather than the main event, it was actually the beginning.

Normally, this game starts with the destruction of Runan. With the fall of Runan, the surrounding nations intervene in order to occupy some of their vast territory. That's the fuse that sets off the era of war in earnest. I managed to dodge that opening, but the fall of Runan is inevitable.

In the three months since I'd infiltrated Naruya, I had been steadily preparing countermeasures against the Naruyan invasion.

Clearing the game is only going to get more difficult from here. It's an era where the things that I know are intermingled with a newly rewritten history. Once Runan falls, each country should ultimately react in the same way that

they do in the game. But this is also the point where there's bound to be inconsistencies with the game's original history.

Because "I" exist, and the Brijit Kingdom no longer does, there'll be things that go like in the game, and then all sorts of unpredictable butterfly effects, both of them winding together as we enter a time of turbulence. That'll make things more interesting, and more dangerous.

As part of my first strategy for that time to come, there was a need for me to not be in Eintorian, on paper at least. I'd turned to Euracia and got her to move Rozern. She had them declare they wouldn't pay the tribute from the prior war. As anticipated, the King of Runan flew into a rage, and he gave me secret orders to go to Rozern.

I had used the Droy Company to notify me of the Naruya Kingdom's invasion so that I could prepare myself a justification. If I was in the Eintorian Domain when it happened, then I'd be obligated to defend Runan.

Who wants to be known as the incompetent who let Runan be destroyed? It needs to be strictly the fault of the short-sighted king who sent me to Rozern.

Yeah, I was only in Rozern on paper, while I was actually in my own domain, shoring up the defenses, of course. And Naruya would soon cross the border.

*

"Whoa! What's that?!"

At a sentry post on the Runanese border, a Runanese sentry collapsed in shock at what he was seeing. The forces arrayed before him make him doubt his eyes. Soldiers here, there, and everywhere, roughly one hundred and fifty thousand men.

He could see the banner of the Ducal House of Valdesca at the center of the massive army, flapping in the wind alongside the flag of the Naruya Kingdom. On top of that, the banners of the Ten Commanders were everywhere. This time, they'd come with a massive expeditionary force on an entirely different scale from the last.

"Yahhhhhh!"

Just like that, the Royal Naruyan Army advanced on the border. Their war cries the only notice of the start of war. They were divided into three formations, each attacking Runan's border from a different spot. This also marked the coming of a time of turbulence.

It was a sign that the entire continent would be pulled into a maelstrom of war.

*

"Your Majesty! The Naruya Kingdom's invading us!"

There was chaos in the Runanese palace when reports reached them. The nobles looked around in a state of confusion.

"They've finally gone and done it...!"

The nobles murmured among themselves. They had been pouring resources into taking Brijit in a time when the threat of Naruya hadn't completely vanished. The vast lands of Brijit had proven a sweet temptation. The cost of succumbing to it was that they now lacked the manpower to defend their own nation.

But Ronan had an idea.

If they occupied Brijit, they could raise their manpower. He planned to use that to counter Naruya. A major factor in all this had been the way Valdesca used the scouts Ronan sent into Naruya to deliver false information. They'd believed the fake reports that a new invasion from Naruya was still a long way off.

As a result, the enemy broke through the border forts before they could muster an adequate response, and the Royal Naruyan Army was bearing down on the capital at a breakneck speed. The King of Runan and Ronan had already been thoroughly defeated in the preliminary battles. In this situation, there was obviously only one person the king could think of, and even Ronan and the other nobles were on the same page.

The king was the first to say it out loud.

"Call Erhin to the capital at once! Assign him to protect me!"

His words brought a sudden look of bewilderment to the nobles' faces.

Ronan was so exasperated that he just shook his head.

"Your Majesty, we sent Erhin to Rozern!"

"What are you saying?! What does Rozern matter at a time like this?!"

That the king carried on as if he knew nothing of this, despite it having been his own decision, made the nobles mentally curse at him.

"We sent him there to punish Rozern for not paying the tribute they promised, remember!"

"Who allowed that? Send a messenger after him at once! At once, I say! He can't have arrived in Rozern yet!" the king shouted angrily.

"Your Majesty!"

It was at that moment when a soldier slipped into the room and prostrated himself before the sovereign.

"They've broken through Bern Castle. They say the enemy have over a hundred thousand men... No, it may even be two hundred thousand!"

"Spare me this nonsense! Two hundred thousand? They can't...! Hey, lop that man's head off! No, first, Erhin! Bring me Erhin! I want Erhin!"

Instead of coming up with any other countermeasures, the king simply kept on shouting Erhin's name.

*

The First Army of the Royal Naruyan Army was a combined force assembled from their northern domains.

The Second Army was a combined force from the southern domains.

They were each commanded by one of the Ten Commanders who had the domain lords serving under them each managing ten thousand troops. The commander-in-chief of the Naruyan Army, Frann Valdesca, had occupied the nearby domains in no time after they crossed the border. He had decided that they would take the capital as soon as possible in this invasion. Haste was a virtue for soldiers.

That's why on this occasion, he chose to avoid the Eintorian Domain, where he expected to meet fierce resistance, and invaded exclusively from the north. There was no chance of Runan defeating him, but if there was then the threat lay in Erhin Eintorian alone. It was why he had to take the Runanese capital while Erhin was away.

He'd long since received reports that Erhin was sent to Rozern as an envoy.

However, Valdesca believed that was a trap.

What he saw in the Eintorian Domain and a comprehensive analysis of everything his agents had told him could only lead to one conclusion:

Erhin's after Runan just like we are. The man must have been making preparations to seize the Runanese throne for himself.

Once Valdesca had that hypothesis, he started to see a strategy.

He must be trying to gain a justification for ruling Runan. The defeat of Runan and the death of the king. The cause of avenging his fallen liege. He no doubt plans to absorb Runan's remaining manpower.

"I'm sure the Eintorian Domain Army will come to retake the Runanese capital no matter what happens. And they'll do it once the king is dead. The key is that they'll definitely appear *after* he dies."

"Bwah hah hah! I should have expected no less from you, Your Highness!"

Commander Kediman of the Third Army let out an obsequious laugh.

The famously taciturn Commander Istin of the Second Army lived up to his reputation by remaining silent, but he said the same thing with a glance.

Still, the reason Valdesca was occupying the capital first was so that he could use Erhin's own strategy against him.

Runan Castle boasted the highest and firmest walls on the continent.

He couldn't afford to pass up being given it for free.

If rather than his current strategy, Erhin had instead used the castle against Valdesca, protecting the king inside while forcing him to fight a siege battle, that would have been more troublesome.

But because Erhin had motives other than loyalty to the king, it actually turned into an opportunity.

He would take Runan Castle effortlessly and kill the king.

That was just what Erhin was hoping for, but he didn't care about that.

If I take Runan Castle and kill the king, then that will massively boost our troops' morale.

It's what Erhin wants, but I don't mind.

Valdesca didn't have any intention of giving Erhin the time to trumpet his righteous cause and start absorbing soldiers into his army.

Indicating points on the map with his pointer, Valdesca gave orders.

"The Second Army will head for Lynon Castle. Once you take Lynon Castle, head through the checkpoint in front of the capital and advance on Runan Castle."

At this, Commander Istin of the Second Army bowed his head deeply and thumped his chest with his right hand formed into a fist.

"The Third Army will take the other castles, including Bern Castle, and then join up with the Second Army to advance on the capital."

"Yes, sir, Commander!"

"Also, the First Army will move with you. While the Second and Third Armies are taking their respective castles, we will take a detour and head to the capital!"

This was how Valdesca divided his forces.

"Once we've killed the enemy king, the Fourth Army will immediately go along the west border to advance on Eintorian."

"If we do that, then the Eintorian forces that set out to save Runan will be forced to..."

Valdesca nodded at what Kediman was saying.

"Yes, they will be forced to return and defend Eintorian. We will pursue and deal the enemy a blow from behind. If we join up with the Second Army to

encircle and eliminate Eintorian, then Runan will be finished for good.”

This was Valdesca’s plan which turned Erhin’s hoped for a just cause and popular support against him. What would happen if Eintorian didn’t send troops to support Runan? If that was what happened, then he just had to occupy the country and isolate Eintorian. Valdesca was ninety percent sure that Erhin would make the worst choice for the sake of his just cause and public opinion.

“Of course... We can’t afford to let our guard down.”

Despite his confidence, Valdesca shook his head. If the man was this easily conquered, he wouldn’t be treating him like a serious opponent like this.

*

Word of Lynon Castle’s fall reached the palace in Runan. In the recent war, Erhin retook Lynon Castle, but this time it didn’t even hold out for a day. As soon as he heard about the fall, the king was so shaken that he made up his mind to flee.

“We’ll go south! Are we so short of people?! How could you let them break through so easily?! When will the troops we sent to Brijit return?! How could you invade Brijit when Naruya’s so close and bearing down on us?! No, wait, Brijit has a lot of mountains, doesn’t it? Let’s go to Brijit! We’ll move the capital there!”

He had zero intention of fighting. Even if Erhin had been here, the king would have hidden himself while he made Erhin defend Runan Castle.

“We’ll head for Brijit. Have Erhin come there too. Defend me, my royal guards!”

With that, the king slipped out of the castle. With nothing but a desperate plea for Erhin, who seemed like he might be able to save his life. When the king abandoned the castle without any forewarning and went outside, the people approached and began pleading with him.

He should have left quietly, but insisted on taking a gaudy carriage, essentially advertising his intent to flee, so it was little wonder that chaos ensued. The people pushed aside the waves of people rushing towards them. But at some point, they turned into a mob, and the royal guard began cutting their way

through the rioters which fueled even more terror.

“Kill everyone who comes out of Runan Castle!”

It would probably have been faster if he had been riding a horse himself, but the old king insisted on a carriage even in this situation and he urged his royal guards to make haste.

This was how the King of Runan slipped out of Runan Castle, and successfully escaped toward Brijit.

“We must flee quickly! Hurry!”

The carriage sped along, encouraged by the king shouting until his throat was raw. People called Runan Castle the most impregnable castle on the continent, and yet it had just seen its master evicted with relative ease.

*

A few hours after the king’s carriage took off for Brijit, Ronan also slipped out of Runan Castle. He had considered settling in for a siege, but he thought what the king was saying did have some merit. He decided fleeing to Brijit was the wisest thing to do.

Obviously, he was a little different from the incompetent king who had fled with nothing but his royal guard. He was already having the forces of the Ducal House of Ronan assemble in Runan. They’d be here any time now. Although roughly a third of the army had been sent to Brijit, there were still enough troops remaining.

That’s why he meant to join up with his forces along the way. After leaving Runan Castle, Ronan began fleeing in a different direction from the king.

“Your Highness, what about His Excellency Erheet?”

“Forget about him. We have no time to wait. I’m sure he’ll be able to escape and survive on his own.”

His priority was to assemble the troops somewhere far away from the enemy forces which had the momentum right now. The worst thing would be for them to scatter and be defeated in detail. If he considered how long it would take fighting the enemy while he waited for Erheet to join up with him, he was

better off withdrawing to Brijit immediately and reorganizing there.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!”

As he was thinking this, a large number of soldiers rushed to his side. Ronan was frightened and on edge, but soon let out a sigh of relief. The three thousand men who’d rushed to his side were the army of Heina’s domain.

“Why, if it isn’t Heina!”

“Your Highness! I’ve come for you!”

“I see... Well done! I always knew you were sharp, unlike the rest of those incompetents. Really, well done!”

Ronan joined Heina with a smile so broad you never would have known he was the one who’d buried her father.

*

About half a day before Ronan left the castle, Valdesca, having left the capture of Lynon Castle to the Second and Third Armies, had advanced at a breakneck pace to reach the front of Runan Castle. Without Erhin around to interfere, he meant to seize the castle, bringing the heart of Runan under his control.

“We will spend a day here, laying out a great camp to demonstrate the splendor of our forces, but I forbid any further pillaging of the Runanese people.” These were Valdesca’s orders to the First Army, which he commanded, with Runan Castle in sight.

This was one of the frightening things about Valdesca: he, too, saw the importance of public opinion. There was no country without its people, after all. Tyrannizing those who would soon become citizens of his nation would only serve to weaken it.

On top of his superior intellect, he also had advanced techniques that made use of mana circles, the fame of heading one of the Twelve Continental Houses, and a power of command that was born of his good character. The man seemed perfect, but he was also humble, not known to boast of his own prowess.

“Your Highness!”

He had his shortcomings, of course. He’d nearly fallen from his horse as he attempted to dismount just now. He’d been getting on and off of horses since he was just a young child and he didn’t have especially slow reflexes, so it shouldn’t have been difficult for him. Yet he could be awfully clumsy when it came to actually doing things. Perhaps people found that side of him relatable, though, because it only served to make him more popular.

“Sorry. I’m all right,” he told Patrick, his lieutenant, as the man rushed to his side, then adjusted his posture and gazed in the direction of Runan Castle.

This was the castle he’d failed to take in the last war. It gave him such a rush to have it in his sight now. However, he was still rather concerned about Erhin’s movements. Despite how quickly they’d taken Runan Castle, he wasn’t doing all that much about it. That was actually more troublesome.

What in the world are you thinking? What's your aim? Isn't it to usurp the throne by retaking Runan? Is it because we let the King of Runan escape?

"Wham!"

Ultimately, Valdesca did the same thing he always did when he was agonizing over something. He slammed his forehead into a nearby tree.

"Your Highness! Stop that! You'll cut your forehead again!"

Patrick and the soldiers hurriedly rushed toward him, but Valdesca raised a hand gesturing for them to stay back.

"Don't mind me. Has Eintorian made any move?"

"None yet, as far as our information shows, Your Highness."

It irritated Valdesca that, although the war was going smoothly, there was still someone out there who could make him uneasy. "Well, it's fine," he said. "For now...we'll set it aside and deal with Runan Castle. If things go as I predict, it will have emptied out by nightfall."

The reason Valdesca had made camp in sight of the castle instead of just attacking was to give them time to flee. There was no need to go out of his way to shed blood. If the king fled, Runan Castle would be practically undefended. That meant the castle ought to fall into his hands come morning.

*

He was sick of living as a landed count. No, the life of a warrior was what had his interest. Feats of courage were displayed on the battlefield. He stood there, sword in hand, for the first time at the age of fifteen. He'd defended the country for twenty-seven years since.

Erheet Demacine was approaching the final checkpoint on his road to the Runanese capital.

He'd have liked to die holding off the enemy at the border, but the Naruyans were pushing south along many different roads. Because fixating on the border would do nothing, he waited for further orders from the central government, but as none were forthcoming, he ultimately chose to act on his own initiative.

He stopped at the checkpoint between Lynon Castle and the capital.

Valdesca hadn't participated in the attack on Lynon Castle, instead taking a long detour around the side where Bern Castle was. But for the Second Army, which was tasked with taking Lynon Castle, and for the Third Army, which would join up with them later, this checkpoint lay on their quickest route to the capital. This basically meant that the Second Army would have to break through this checkpoint in order to establish a supply line.

Furthermore, in order to keep up a smooth flow of supplies, the Naruyan Army needed to hold the checkpoint. Speedy resupply was key on the battlefield. That's why Erheet had stopped just as the enemy were attacking Lynon Castle.

"Wouldn't it be better for us to fight them at Runan Castle instead, Your Excellency?" one of his retainers asked, but Erheet shook his head.

"I will break their supply lines here even if that costs me my life. That should help His Highness and His Majesty, who are fighting at Runan Castle. If we can halt the remaining Naruyan forces here, that should delay the castle's fall. And then...there's *Erhin*! That's why I'll die here!"

Erheet was relying on Erhin too, but in a different way from the king. He planned to put his life on the line holding his ground here for that reason. However, his intentions were based on the naive idea that the king and Ronan would actually fight for Runan Castle.

Erheet never would have imagined his own king would flee immediately without so much as lifting a blade. The five retainers who always joined Erheet on the battlefield knelt before him when they heard his words.

"What are you saying, Your Excellency?! If anything should happen to you, then Runan will truly be finished!"

They tried to dissuade him, but Erheet only shook his head more forcefully.

"Listen, just shut up and stand strong. What would it do to the men's morale if they saw you like this? The only thing we must think about is stopping the enemy that is rushing toward this checkpoint!"

His firm resolve ultimately persuaded his retainers. And so, they all drew their swords. There was nothing left for them but to die defending the master they'd

served all their lives.

*

It was the Second Army that came after Erheet's checkpoint.

Commander Istin of the Second Army was a powerful warrior, ranked third among the Ten Commanders. He also had a female commander, Lucana, ranked seventh among the Ten, as his second-in-command. Unlike with Naruya's previous invasion force, all of the Ten Commanders had joined forces to participate in the subjugation of Runan.

This was an obvious move to prevent a repeat of their earlier failure.

The Second Army boasted a massive force of fifty thousand men.

"That's the checkpoint on the way to Runan Castle," Lucana said, laughing with glee at the easy battlefield. "Commander! Let's hurry and take it, then join up with His Highness, no, I mean the Commander-in-Chief and the main force."

Istin gave her no response. The man was famous for actions over words, and what words he did say were few and far between. When the orders came down, he just focused on carrying them out. In fact, it was fair to say that none of the soldiers who had fought alongside him had ever heard the man talk at *all*.

Lucana, however, had been at his side since they were both young and had fought many battles with him, and so was used to carrying on by herself.

"By the way, did you hear that the guy who beat back our Commander-in-Chief during the last war's not around? I kinda wanted to see what he was like... We all respect Lord Valdesca, so... Huh? What happened? Did he just get lucky? Well, yeah, that's probably all it was..."

Istin just stared at Lucana, but she went on answering her own questions and asking more as if she could read his mind.

"Okay, men! That's the checkpoint there! Let's break through it!"

At Lucana's command, twenty thousand elite Naruyan soldiers with a Training level of around 90 or so charged toward the checkpoint. The remaining thirty thousand would trade places with them once they got exhausted. It was this tactic that Istin used when taking small fortification walls. If the walls weren't

that large to begin with, then trying to attack with everyone all at once was pointless. They only had so many ladders.

In fact, by dividing their troops, they could keep the wave attacks going around the clock.

The battle began using Istin's strategy, but as time went by Lucana shook her head. The dubious look on her face lasted until the next day.

"It's never taken us more than half a day before... What's with this checkpoint?"

Istin, who was just standing there as silent as ever, obviously did not respond to her question.

"Hmm... I guess it's my turn, then?"

Istin just looked at Lucana, still giving no response, but she took that as a sign he approved.

Lucana drew her favorite sword and mounted her horse.

"All right, time for a switch-up! This time, I'll join the team that goes in!"

When Lucana shouted this, the thirty thousand troops who were currently unable to get over the wall turned their backs to the enemy.

It was time for the other twenty thousand to go back in.

But that's when it happened.

A man with a massive spear leapt down from the checkpoint's walls as if he'd been waiting for them to change shifts—Erheet. He swung his spear at the troops that had turned their backs to switch out with the other team.

It was like the grim reaper swinging his scythe.

A dark shadow assaulted the soldiers of the Second Army, and in the next instant, hundreds of heads flew through the air. It was Erheet Demacine's mana skill Fiendish Spear, an insta-death attack with a massive area of effect.

Standing in a sea of flowing blood, Erheet thrust his spear into the ground as he stood in front of the checkpoint.

"What was that?!" Lucana furrowed her brow at this development.

At that same time, arrows rained down on the soldiers who were racing toward the checkpoint. Erheet's troops had been conserving their arrows. As the retreating force were caught off guard by Erheet's skill and starting to lose their nerve, the hail of arrows sent them into total disarray.

Erheet stood in front of them, spear firmly in hand.

"Your Excellency, that's the famed Erheet Demacine of Runan!" shouted once of Lucana's retainers.

The name brought a smile to Lucana's lips. If there was anyone in Runan worth fighting, it was Erheet.

"Erheet? *The* Erheet? I've heard he can be almost as taciturn as our Commander Istin, you know that? This'll be interesting. I doubt anyone's quieter than our commander, though."

With that, Lucana rushed forward to turn the situation around, when...

"Hear me, enemy commander," Erheet shouted. "I am Erheet Demacine. How long do you intend to watch from the rear? If you call yourself a warrior, then step forward and fight me. One-on-one duels are the only fun to be had on this bloody battlefield, wouldn't you agree?"

"Huh?"

It was clear to anyone listening that Erheet was calling out Istin and not Lucana.

Lucana looked at Istin in exasperation. "Now hold on, Commander!" she cried. "Are you really going to fight him just because he's caught your interest? What are you saying?! You've been wanting to fight a Runanese commander, and he'll do perfectly?! That's not funny! Now that he's come out all on his own, it'd be fastest to just gang up on him and kill him...!"

It didn't look like Istin was saying anything as far as the soldiers around them could tell, but Lucana went on as if only she could hear him. As she did, Istin slowly approached Erheet.

"Hold on! Wait! Let's go together!"

Lucana hurriedly tried to stop Istin. There was no need for him to fight the

enemy commander. She didn't *think* Istin would lose, but it was absurd to agree to fight a one-on-one duel with the commander of a force so much smaller than theirs that it stood no chance against them. If he did somehow lose the fight, morale would plummet. They might be reprimanded by Valdesca for accepting at all.

But Istin was rather prideful.

Lucana was well aware that once he'd made up his mind to do something there was no convincing him otherwise, so she just shook her head as she watched him go. The newly deployed Naruyan troops parted to make way for their commander.

Istin's horse trotted between them until he reached the front. The two commanders faced off with about fifty meters in between them. Of course, there were fifty thousand men at Istin's back, while Erheet just had the checkpoint and three thousand men behind him.

"Who are you?"

Istin didn't answer Erheet's question. Lucana rode up, as if she were there to interpret for him.

"You face His Excellency, Count Istin, ranked third among the Ten Commanders of the Naruya Kingdom!"

Erheet smiled when he heard her. He recognized the name.

To think I'd be able to face such a strong opponent. Could I ask for a finer end to my life?

Of course, regardless of who his enemy was, he didn't plan on going down easy.

Still, the soldiers at the checkpoint were reaching their limit. Unlike the Naruyans, whose fifty thousand men were able to fight in shifts and take time to rest, the three thousand suicide soldiers from the Runanese Army hadn't been able to rest at all.

Erheet wanted to fight the Naruyan commander in order to buy time for his men to recover.

“Thank you for accepting my challenge. I never would have thought I’d face a warrior as strong as you in what will no doubt be my last war. Hah hah hah hah hah! I don’t know whether to consider it good fortune or bad. Regardless, I’m pleased to meet you. Let us fight, Istin. If you are a true warrior, then will you face my spear one-on-one?”

In response, Istin put his hand on a greatsword that was every bit as heavy as his silence, then nodded.

“Wait, Commander! We don’t have time! We have to break through the checkpoint and join up with the commander-in-chief quickly! What? A duel between men needs no justification? Are you kidding me...? No, that’s not what I mean! Augh, fine!”

Lucana ultimately backed down with a look of exasperation on her face, unable to dissuade Istin. Of course, she still didn’t think he’d lose. The fight was just incredibly pointless.

Thus the duel between two commanders began.

*

“What is that monster?!”

The Royal Naruyan Army were astonished. They thought Istin would win handily, but the enemy commander held his ground.

“Lord Erheet...!”

Meanwhile, Erheet’s retainers, who knew exactly what he was thinking as he went into this battle, gulped at the tense showdown.

The greatsword tore into the ground.

The spear caught nothing but air.

They took turns unleashing attacks, parrying, and attacking again.

Any one of the blows could be fatal.

One mistake would mean certain death.

That was the kind of duel Erheet was fighting.

His opponent ranked third among the famed Ten Commanders of Naruya,

whose infamy spread the length and breadth of the entire continet, and Istin's martial prowess was indeed slightly greater than Erheet's. But while Istin had an estimated Martial score of 97, Erheet's Martial was 96.

With such a small margin of difference, there was no telling who would win. They'd have to fight like their lives depended on it, and that would be what decided the outcome.

Another factor was that Erheet had no way out. He couldn't afford to think about conserving his stamina. He'd gone into this fight just trying to buy time. That's why they were at a standstill.

The longer the battle dragged on, the more time his men had to rest.

That was the only thing that mattered to Erheet.

Of course, he'd been polishing his skills for decades. He never considered he might lose. He would buy time, then win the fight. He could only think that, once he won the showdown and the enemy fell into disarray, that would buy him even more time. He knew better than anyone that, even if he bested this enemy commander, overall victory in this battle would not be his. Nevertheless, he fought on for his people and country.

But obviously, he was really doing it all for himself.

Bwoooosh!

Erheet blasted Istin with his skill, Fiendish Spear, engulfing the area around them in a massive explosion. Istin generated mana with his greatsword to form a barrier and stop it, but that didn't stop Erheet himself. He leaped high into the air, holding his spear ready to strike.

This was the ultimate technique of the spear-fighting style that Erheet, the mightiest warrior in the Runan Kingdom, had spent all his life polishing.

"Aurora Spear!"

When Erheet threw his spear in midair it shone brilliantly as it shot toward Istin like a laser beam. The light of the powerful mana surrounding the spear was blindingly bright to anyone who looked at it.

Erheet had used Fiendish Spear to mess with the area around Istin, forcing

him to stop it with his greatsword. Then, before the smoke cleared, he'd immediately used Aurora Spear.

Even as Istin was blocking the explosion, he'd sensed the power of Erheet's longspear right in front of him! Instantly realizing the spear was moving faster than he could dodge, he poured mana into his greatsword. Bright light shone from Istin's greatsword as he swung it, and the blade grew to twice its already great size, and he used it to block Erheet's spear.

Shiiiiiing!

Their powers collided, shaking the earth and filling the area with light. The famously quiet Istin let out a battle cry, swinging his greatsword around as it grew even more massive.

That one swing blew away Erheet's Aurora Spear.

Roarrrrrr!

Erheet's spear, which had been flying with a thunderous roar, stabbed into the fortress wall of the checkpoint. Landing on the ground, Erheet jumped into the air once more in order to pull his spear from the wall.

Obviously, Istin wasted no time in springing at him.

Erheet was in front of the wall, while Istin had been pushed back as he tried to block the skill earlier, so Erheet managed to snatch his spear in the brief opening he had before colliding with Istin in midair.

The two both landed heavily on the ground, skipping not a beat as they launched back into the fight. Having both used up their most powerful skills, they moved on to a never ending contest of physical stamina. Istin had been trying to save his strength at first, but it wasn't viable for him to do so, and so they both went all-out.

"Gah! I got totally absorbed in the battle..." Lucana cried, slapping her own forehead.

If she stepped in here, she could feasibly end this meaningless battle in an instant. In fact, she had been planning to do just that if it ever looked like Istin was about to go down.

But only as a last resort.

Istin hated it more than anything when people interfered in his battles, and thought it was a shameful injury to his pride. And so Lucana couldn't intervene.

This battle between monsters went on for six whole hours.

Eventually, the sun set, and darkness swallowed the battlefield. The two men suspended their duel and looked at one another.

"Why don't we settle this tomorrow?" Erheet suggested and Istin nodded. He immediately looked at Lucana.

"You want to pull back?" Lucana shook her head at this order. It was unthinkable.

But Istin's eyes were filled with a strong will to defeat this man and seize the checkpoint from him.

"You just had to try and beat Runan's strongest man..."

Lucana wanted to give him a piece of her mind, but she held back. She'd stayed with Istin all this time precisely because he was like this. And so, with his grand army behind him, Istin withdrew to camp, and once Erheet watched him go, he headed back within the checkpoint where he collapsed.

Erheet's retainers all rushed to his side to support him.

"I'm fine. I managed to buy time for our men to rest, didn't I?"

His retainers clenched their fists, seeing him like this. They shook with rage at their own inability.

*

"Commander!"

"What is it?"

"Our scouts have found the Runanese king!"

Hearing this report from one of his subordinates, Valdesca awkwardly scratched his cheek inside the commander's tent.

The King of Runan, huh? If I killed the king, then I'd be doing just what Erhin

wants me to, wouldn't I?

Valdesca was confident Erhin was gunning for the throne. So if he killed the king, he'd be giving him a justification. Still, now that he'd found the king, he couldn't just *not* kill him.

The King of Naruya had ordered his death.

Wham!

Valdesca slammed his forehead into the table.

So what if he's after the throne? Justifications and righteousness had nothing to do with this.

His goal in this war was to beat Erhin. So long as he won, there wouldn't be a problem. He couldn't fight properly if he stayed scared like this.

You should be ashamed of yourself, Valdesca Frann!

Valdesca smiled bitterly. They had mobilized a full three hundred thousand troops for the Grand Subjugation.

Two hundred thousand of them had been deployed to Runan—enough to occupy the country and then immediately continue onward into the minor nations of the south. Runan's manpower was insignificant. Erhin could move around fifty thousand troops at most. The gap in their forces was overwhelming. *And* Valdesca also had the powerful Ten Commanders on his side. If he couldn't win like this, then he'd never be able to win. So what was he so afraid of?

Wham!

Valdesca slammed his forehead into the table again.

I don't care what his intentions are. I'll kill the king, then destroy Runan my way.

He had already formulated a perfect plan for taking Erhin's main stronghold in Eintorian. The Subjugation Army for Runan wasn't limited to just the First, Second, and Third Armies which he was leading personally. There was also a trump card, the Fourth Army, still standing by in Naruya.

“Encircle him. I want to capture Runan’s king.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Once that was decided, it didn’t take long. Valdesca soon arrived at the place where the search team had the king surrounded. The royal guards were no longer among the living by this point. They had been no match for Valdesca’s elite soldiers.

The king was soon dragged from his carriage and forced to kneel down on the dirty ground, a far cry from the throne he was accustomed to.

“King of Runan,” Valdesca said, looking down at the king with cold eyes.

“S-Spare me!”

The king quickly began pleading for his life. He’d never had so much as one iota of pride to begin with.

“I’ll go into exile in the Naruya Kingdom. You can have Runan. I surrender! Surrender, I say!”

“That won’t do. It would be one thing before hostilities began, but now that we’re at war, I cannot accept your surrender without my king’s permission. If you intended to concede, then you should have offered up your country *before* our troops crossed the border.”

“I’ll give you all of Runan! So, please, just spare my life...”

Valdesca shook his head in dismay at this pathetic display. The king was an even greater fool than he’d heard. The wretch truly believed that if he cried and begged, thinking only of his own self-preservation, there would be some way out for him.

Valdesca despised men like him more than anything.

“I regret to inform you that I cannot allow you to live. You made a mistake in fleeing along the main road.”

“D-D-Don’t be absurd! I am Tutankha, King of Runan! A member of the most renowned family on this continent! You, a mere commander of an invading force, kill me? The idea is risible! Take me to the King of Naruya! I will speak to him personally!”

The King of Runan volunteered to become a prisoner in the hopes of extending his life even a little longer.

“Gah hah hah hah hah!” Valdesca laughed in his face.

“I am Valdesca Frann! Inheritor of the House of Frann! Not once have I ever thought my house inferior to the House of Runan.”

“F-Frann...? You’re a Frann?! Th-That’s absurd...!”

The King of Runan shook his head in disbelief. The House of Frann was one of the Twelve Continental Houses. It was of the same rank as the Royal House of Runan.

“Would you stop this unsightly behavior? Runan is already finished. Now, Your Majesty, I believe it’s only natural you meet your end too.”

Valdesca nodded to his subordinate Rump who responded by pointing a sword at the king’s throat.

“N-No... Spare me! Stop! Gwarrrgh!”

The king resisted to the last, but his head soon sailed through the air.

Such was the end of the King of Runan.

“Yeahhhhhhhh!”

The soldiers cheered wildly at the sight. The demise of the last king of the once great Runan Kingdom could not have been more worthless.

“We’ll send the king’s severed head to His Majesty. Prepare it so it can be sent to the front line in Herald.”

“Yes, sir!”

At that time, King Cassia of Naruya was personally leading another army into the Herald Kingdom. He had been more interested in their eastern border with Herald than he was in Runan. There were rumors of a worthy opponent, another S-class warrior like King Cassia himself, in Herald. That’s why Runan never interested him to begin with.

“All forces advance on the vacant Runan Castle.”

Those were Valdesca’s orders. This was the moment when that castle, with all

of its long history, fell into his hands.

*

Istin and Erheet's battle resumed in the morning. The fight looked the same as it had the day before, each man doing all he could to kill the other. However, a little past noon, the situation suddenly changed when another force appeared, approaching the checkpoint.

Lucana let out a big sigh when she saw what unit it was.

"Damn! Why's he gotta be here...!"

It was the Third Army, roughly the same size as Istin's Second Army. Their arrival changed Istin and Erheet's battle as the man at the front of their vanguard rushed into the fray, his horse galloping at top speed.

"What are you doing? Is this really the time to be indulging in a duel, Istin?"

It was Kediman, commander of the Third Army and fourth in rank among the Ten Commanders. As he shouted that, he attacked Erheet, who was still fighting Istin, from behind. Istin didn't have a chance to stop him.

In that moment, the perfect balance of their duel was broken.

Blood spurted from the wound in Erheet's back and his knees gave out. Istin's greatsword, already mid-swing, tore through the air towards Erheet's now defenseless head.

"You're so pathetic. If you just did it like this, you'd have finished him in one blow. Now finish him off and let's go!"

Even as he bled, Erheet shouted, "Is this what warriors are like in Naruya? Have you no shame, sullying a duel where two men's pride is at stake!" He thrusted his spear forward, fully prepared to offer up his head in exchange.

Even if my head flies, I'll take down the enemy. That was the thought that led him to swing his spear without evading.

In that instant, the greatsword came to a stop.

Seeing this, Erheet also halted his spear and asked, "What's wrong?"

Looking at the way that Erheet managed to stay firmly on his feet, despite the

deep wound in his back, Istin shook his head in dismay. Then, with a murderous glare at Kediman, he pulled back.

“Heh! Pathetic to the end. Fine, I’ll take him on myself!”

Now it was Kediman’s turn to take a swing at Erheet with his sword. Erheet was already sorely wounded, but he fended off the blow with sheer force of will. However, the Third Army came charging in behind Kediman. Unlike the Second Army, they had no intention of waiting to see how the battle played out.

“We’re pulling back? You plan to leave this to Kediman? Hold on, Commander!”

Istin’s unit began to pull back. Obviously, they weren’t withdrawing completely. Istin’s army still had to make it through this checkpoint in order to join up with Valdesca. But Istin had no desire to work with Kediman.

He would have liked to kill the man for interrupting his duel, but he liked to think he wasn’t so selfish that he could turn a blade against his ally when they were at war.

If Kediman were one of his subordinates, he could have executed him for disobeying orders, but they were of equal rank. Istin quivered as he tried to suppress his rage. Erheet was a lot like him. Both had many techniques born of a lifetime devoted to the martial arts.

That’s why he’d at least wanted to kill him with his own hands. But that barbarian Kediman stole that from him.

Lucana saw all this, but she couldn’t say anything, she could only be relieved that she wasn’t the one who’d intervened. She’d planned to if the situation turned against Istin. If she’d had to do it, his anger would have been directed at her. When she thought about it like that, she was actually grateful to Kediman. She didn’t like him much, of course. The brute was a barbarian, after all.

And so, once Istin and Lucana were gone, Erheet was forced into a battle that was clearly not in his favor. Kediman’s Martial score was roughly the same as Erheet’s. On top of that, the wound in Erheet’s back slowed his movement, while his opponent was in top condition.

Erheet found himself gradually being pushed back.

“Defend His Excellency!” Erheet’s retainers shouted as they tried to push back the enemy soldiers rushing onto the walls of the checkpoint. On his arms, and on his chest, the wounds grew with each stroke of the enemy’s blade, and soon Erheet thrust his spear into the ground without meaning to.

“You giving up? Heh heh! And to think they called you the strongest in Runan. You put up so little of a fight I can’t even be properly disappointed. All right, time for you to die now!”

Despite having snatched away Istin’s prey like a hyena, Kediman still had the gall to mock Erheet. That’s when Erheet’s retainers broke through the surrounding enemy forces and jumped in front of him.

“Your Excellency! Leave the rest to us! You get up back on top of the checkpoint and heal your wounds. We’ll buy time for you!”

“Stop... I can’t sacrifice you people to save myself! You all head back up on top of the checkpoint before me. I’ve long since thrown away my life!”

Bleeding all over, Erheet mustered the last of his strength in order to activate the skill Fiendish Spear, decapitating hundreds of troops behind Kediman who had been preparing to charge in. Kediman, who’d noticed the activation of a skill and been able to dodge the Fiendish Spear, laughed.

“Oh, you’re fun. Real fun. I never knew Runan had a guy like Istin too.”

“Your Excellency!”

At that moment, a pair of Erheet’s retainers rushed in front of Kediman. They were no match for him, of course, but they still managed to slow the enemy’s advance a little.

“Are you going to let my death be in vain?! You people have to hurry back up on top of the walls! Just hold out a little longer. Runan needs your strength now!”

Erheet rose to his feet once more. Adjusting his grip on his spear, he glared at Kediman with the determination not to let him pass so long as he still drew breath. Erheet’s remaining retainers looked at one another. If they kept what

they knew a secret any longer, their master would die. They nodded in unison, then shouted to tell Erheet.

“Forgive us, Your Excellency! The truth is...we received a message earlier. His Majesty has already abandoned Runan Castle. He fled at the first opportunity, without defending the people he was supposed to protect. And so did Duke Ronan... He abandoned the castle without waiting for you. There are no soldiers fighting for Runan Castle. It was left empty, and fell into the enemy’s hands! So, please...retreat, Your Excellency! There’s no need for you to die here too!”

The retainers told Erheet because they wanted him to live, but their words instantly extinguished the flame of life that burned within him.

“I-Is that true?! Why would...His Highness do that...?”

Spitting blood as he trembled with rage, Erheet sat down.

How could he have run away so easily?

He’d served Ronan because the duke was the only one in the kingdom who was putting in the effort to protect Runan. He’d been disappointed to learn about the slave traders, but still didn’t consider it a betrayal.

This, however, was different.

“Gah hah hah! That’s just how your leaders are! Did you only just realize? Looks like your loyalty never meant anything. Well, I suppose it’s a fitting end for disgusting bugs like you. Runan Castle is already in our commander’s hands! I won’t spare you even if you surrender, though, so shut up and die. I hate boring people.”

Finally, Kediman’s sword pierced Erheet’s chest. Even as he sank into despair, Erheet clutched the blade with his bare hands, seeking to put off his death as he glared at Kediman. But at that very moment, arrows suddenly began to rain down on Kediman’s army.

“What?”

Kediman’s unit, made up largely of infantry, turned to focus on this surprise attack.

Atop the checkpoint, Erheet’s men rubbed their eyes in disbelief.

“I-Is that...!”

Erheet’s soldiers pointed in shock—at blue uniforms emblazoned with the Eintorian crest!

The iron cavalry clad in brilliant blue were charging in with enough like they meant to trample Kediman’s men under their hooves.

“Y-You’re...!”

A man rushed ahead of the iron cavalry, forcing his way between Kediman’s men. With red hair and a brown sword, it was Erhin Eintorian’s trusty blade.

“My lord gave me an order. Rescue Erheet Demacine!”

The moment he saw Jint, Erheet’s hands clenched the sword that was stabbed into his chest even more tightly, as if saying he’d never relinquish his life. Kediman pushed with all his might, trying to snuff out Erheet, but he spent far too much time on it. With one great leap, Jint cleared Kediman’s soldiers and landed next to the two of them. At the same time, he struck Kediman with his sword, lopping the commander’s hand off at the wrist.

“Gahhhhh!” Kediman screamed as he clutched his arm, having been so preoccupied with Erheet that the attack caught him off guard.

Jint’s actions also constituted interference in a one-on-one battle, but Jint hardly cared. Staying out of it because they were fighting one-on-one? The thought had never even occurred to Jint. Erhin told him to save the guy, and so that’s what he did, regardless of the methods involved. The key thing to Jint was that he’d followed orders.

The iron cavalry, who arrived a little behind Jint, began crushing Kediman’s unit. Intimidated by the terrifying speed and momentum of these armored cavalrymen, Kediman’s forces were forced to pull back.

Kediman’s unit had a Morale of 80 and 95 Training, while Jint’s iron cavalry had a Morale of 90 and 97 Training. This was the unit Erhin trained to be the main force of the Eintorian Army!

He meant for them to be second to none when it came to their Morale and Training. But more than just that, Kediman’s unit was made up of infantry, so it

was only natural for them to be pushed back by iron cavalry. Especially with their commander Kediman on the ground, screaming!

Erheet pulled the sword out of his chest with Kediman's hand still hanging from it. The wound bled, but it wasn't deep because he'd mustered all his strength and used up his mana to stop it. Then, taking his spear in his hands, he stood.

"Yarrgh! Damn you... Damn youuuuu!" Kediman sprang at Jint in a berserk rage.

He refused to accept that Jint had been able to cut off his hand because of any degree of skill. He was just some kid who got lucky with a surprise attack. He'd be no match for him in a fair fight. Or so Kediman believed.

"Give me a sword!"

Taking a sword from one of his soldiers, he immediately pounced at Jint. However, the moment his hand was cut off, Kediman's Martial score had fallen precipitously. Jint's sword struck like lightning, slashing open Kediman's chest.

"Argh...!"

And just like that, Kediman died with his eyes still open.

Jint kept up his usual poker face as he moved on to cutting down the other nearby soldiers.

*

Sometime after they moved away from the checkpoint, Lucana and Istin thought there was something strange about the sounds of combat they were hearing behind them and turned back around. There they saw the blue iron cavalry and the young man with red hair leading them.

At first, Lucana also took Jint for just a kid, and she didn't pay much attention to him. The problem was the massive damage the iron cavalry were doing. But when she saw the intense speed with which Jint drew and handled his sword, she reconsidered that evaluation.

Neither Istin nor Lucana had thought Kediman would go down in a single blow like that, even if he had lost his hand.

Istin immediately looked at Lucana's face. She knew what he meant and nodded.

"We're moving to assist the Third Army at once! Charge!"

Lucana had never liked Kediman, so she didn't feel even a twinge of sympathy over his demise, but his soldiers were still her countrymen. They couldn't just abandon them. But more than that, they couldn't let the enemy soldiers who'd just joined the fray run free when they didn't know what their objective was.

Istin's unit rejoined the battle in front of the checkpoint. That changed the balance of forces in this fight once again. Kediman's unit was fifty thousand men, and Istin's was another fifty thousand. That gave them a hundred thousand in total.

Meanwhile, the iron cavalry were just ten thousand men.

They'd still been able to hold the advantage when it was five to one because of the difference in what category of troops they were, but that inherent advantage against infantry couldn't outweigh them now being outnumbered ten to one. Also, since this was an open field, there were no tactics they could use to take advantage of the terrain. The numerical advantage was overwhelming.

Jint was commanding the iron cavalry now. He'd just been at the front in order to save Erheet.

The iron cavalry had scattered all around, striking down Naruyan soldiers at random. Because of that, Istin chose to form a semi-circle around them with his unit to cut off their escape route. Basically, that meant they had the checkpoint in front of them, and Istin's unit at their backs.

"Lord Istin is in command here. Kediman's troops will follow his orders! Form into battle ranks at once!"

With the famed Commander Istin of Naruya now taking the field, Kediman's soldiers, who had fallen into disarray, let out a war cry and began regaining their vigor.

*

Jint's abilities were specialized toward defeating the enemies he saw in front of his eyes. That's why he was unusually powerful in one-on-one fights and situations where he could get the drop on his enemies, but he had practically no potential as a commanding officer.

"Hey, Erheet Demacine! Can you hear me?!"

However, he was second to none when it came to following Erhin's orders.

"He told me once Runan Castle falls to take this unit of iron cavalry and go to Voltaire Castle!" Jint shouted after cutting his way over to Erheet.

On hearing this, Erheet looked at the iron cavalry again.

They're a well-trained unit.

That much was clear at a glance.

"Gah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah!"

Despite their current predicament, he roared with laughter. Erhin was just as unpredictable as he'd thought.

"I see. So Count Erhin was training a unit like this."

Runan Castle had already fallen. He'd given up when he heard that, but the sight of the Eintorian crest had made him muster then last of his strength to grip the sword.

If Erhin is around, that changes things!

He thought it was wrong for him to assume command of one of Erhin's units, but there was no time to let that bother him. There was clearly no other competent commander here. These iron cavalrymen were sent to save him. If he treated their lives as carelessly as he had his own, then that would be far more wrong.

Ultimately, Erheet forced his battered and exhausted body into a saddle. In addition to the wound on his back, it was hard to fight with his mana so spent, but he wasn't so weak he couldn't give orders. In fact, if he didn't rally the troops here, then he'd be too ashamed to face Erhin even if he did survive.

"Hear me, iron cavalrymen of Eintorian!"

As soon as he was mounted up, he shouted to the iron cavalrymen scattered around the battlefield.

“I am the Runanese commander Erheet Demacine. I will be taking command of you for the time being. Will you follow me?!”

There wasn’t a soldier in Runan who didn’t know his name.

“Yeahhhhhh!”

The iron cavalry let out a cheer when they heard his voice.

96 Martial. 70 Intelligence. And 92 Command!

He had built up his intensely commanding presence over the course of a lifetime spent on the battlefield. It was something completely different from Euracia’s charm, or the Brijitian king’s overwhelming charisma—a power that was purely for dominating the battlefield.

“Listen to me, soldiers of the checkpoint! You will abandon your posts and join up with the iron cavalry! Then, working together, we will find a single point to break through the enemy, so gather in the center! Do you understand me? Jint, you stay at the front and buy us time!”

In no time, he was giving orders to the soldiers of the checkpoint, the iron cavalrymen, and even to Jint. Having been ordered to follow Erheet’s orders once he left the iron cavalry in his command, Jint obediently nodded.

Istin and Lucana were members of the Ten Commanders. Of course their Command scores were reasonably high, but they had been hired primarily for their martial prowess. When it came to commanding men on the battlefield, Erheet was far better than they were.

Now that he had assumed command, Eintorian’s iron cavalry began moving around like they were an entirely different army.

“If I can’t get you out of here safely, I won’t be able to face Count Erhin!” Erheet shouted. “Slowly assemble, and then break through at a single point! Those of you who are inside the checkpoint, follow the iron cavalry!”

Following his orders, the iron cavalry clumped together for a while, then broke through Kediman’s unit and charged at Istin’s encircling forces. Istin’s

plan had been to encircle the scattered iron cavalry and pick exterminate them one by one, so he couldn't handle the rapid change in the way they were moving. Erheet's commands raised the iron cavalry's morale even further, and neither Kediman nor Istin's men could stop their momentum.

The encirclement was broken in no time. What was more, the battle fiend Jint stood at the vanguard!

The Naruyan soldiers who were standing in the iron cavalry's path were sent flying by the momentum of the horses. The incredible vigor of the iron cavalry unit broke through them, and there was nothing they could do about it.

The Naruyans were left grinding their teeth in anger as they watched them go.

*

"You knew he was an incredible commander? But you didn't expect him to break through us so quickly?"

Frustrated, Lucana grabbed Istin by the front of his shirt.

"You're not going to pursue them?!"

But Istin simply shook his head.

"They already killed our momentum, and how are we supposed to chase them when they're fleeing on horseback? Okay, you have a point, but...!"

Lucana groaned as she mussed her own hair. Her long hair, which was tied back, came undone and fell to shoulder length.

"You're telling me our original mission was to take the checkpoint, and then join up with the commander-in-chief at Runan Castle, and we've accomplished that?!"

That was one way of looking at it, sure, but Lucana couldn't help but feel they had lost, and badly.

Lucana was frustrated over the idea that Valdesca might ask them about what happened, but Istin was unconcerned.

"You're going to settle things with that man on the battlefield, so you can't

wait for that day to come? Next time, you'll fight fair and square? Augh, this is the problem with you..."

Lucana shook her head in dismay.

Istin remained impassive, and once he had finished communicating with Lucana in a way that only someone who had known him since childhood could understand, he advanced his forces into the checkpoint.

Chapter 4: Eintorian's War

Voltaire Castle.

Eintorian was situated in the west of Runan, and the domain that lay along the road between Runan Castle and Eintorian was none other than the Voltaire Domain. The fires of war had not spread to Voltaire Castle yet.

Though the northern territories had already fallen into Naruya's hands, and many of the nearby castles had seen their lords flee, the Lord of Voltaire, Lican Voltaire, had shut his gates tight for one simple reason: Lican had gotten drunk with all of his retainers and, in the elevated spirits brought on by drink, had declared, "I'll defend this domain, come whatever may!" Lican was brazen enough that he could have pretended to never have said it, but stubborn enough to follow through on his declaration.

Seeing how moved his retainers were by his will to do what was right for the country, he could no longer suggest they run away, and so found himself in this predicament.

"Like His Excellency said if we die, we'll do it here, in this land. It would be far too pathetic to die with our backs turned!"

Those words oozed with contempt for the king who'd died just such a pitiful death on the run. Of course, every time one of his men said something like that without knowing how Lican really felt, he thought he would go crazy.

"Yes, I suppose you're right..." Lican agreed. He was a timid man when sober. "Word has spread that His Majesty was captured while fleeing, and that they lopped his head off. Countless refugees have attested to it, so there can be no doubt."

Many of the people escaping Runan Castle had passed by Voltaire Castle by necessity. That, of course, led to the natural spread of such rumors. Valdesca was not the kind of commander given to massacre, especially civilians. Him laying hands on the commonfolk was rare. Not that this had any effect on the people of Runan's decision to evacuate.

Many of them feared that they might become slaves under Naruyan occupation, and naturally, people wanted to live in their own country.

“I don’t care if the commonfolk flee. Don’t stop them. We don’t have the resources to detain every person who flees in fear of Naruya, or to save everyone who stays.”

Lican gave these orders in the hopes of leaving himself some opportunity for escape.

“Yes, sir!”

The decision only served to further ignite the passions of his retainers who were spoiling for a fight.

That’s when it happened.

A cloud of dust rose in the distance, and not long after, a unit of cavalry were spotted making their way toward Voltaire Castle.

“Your Excellency! It’s the enemy!” one of his retainers shouted in surprise.

Lican internally let out a shocked sigh. To think the enemy would be upon them so quickly! He had been seriously contemplating whether or not to flee, but now he thought he was just going to die without being able to put up a fight.

What were his retainers thinking, getting all fired up like this instead of proposing that they retreat? *Useless fools!* he mentally cursed them.

“Close all the gates at once! Hurry!”

“We’ll defend them to the death! Close the gates, quickly! We’re going to keep this place safe with our own hands!”

What are they saying? Maybe it’s too late, but come on and suggest we flee.

Indecisive though Lican was, his own life still took priority. There was no need to defend his pride now, in his final moments.

Yeah. What good’s pride going to do me?

Lican made a firm resolution.

“This is it.”

“Your Excellency...!”

“They’re charging towards us at a terrifying speed... We should flee...”

“They’re a cavalry unit! If we close the gates, we have an absolute advantage over them! Wouldn’t going outside actually be *more* dangerous?”

“Oh, right... You have a point! Darn it, I never said we should run away. If that’s what I wanted to do, I’d have done it long ago. We’ll stop them. All right, bring it on!”

“Oh, look...! Your Excellency!”

“What is it now?”

His retainer had his head cocked to one side. That’s because, as the cavalry approached, the man was finally able to distinguish the color of their uniforms.

“Blue! They’re blue!”

“What’s blue?”

“Their uniforms, sir. They’re on our side!”

“How can you be so sure? What are they riding towards us for?”

Lican shook his head. It was true that their uniforms were blue, but still, reports from the front lines told of one defeat after another. There was no way any cavalry unit could be coming to support them.

“I see how it is!”

“What do you mean, Your Excellency?”

“It’s a disguise. The Naruyan Army are wearing Runanese uniforms to trick us. We mustn’t open the gates. We mustn’t!”

“I-I see. It does seem entirely possible.”

Lican’s retainer nodded in agreement. They reclosed the gates and prepared for combat.

“Have the archers ready to go at once. We’ll make pincushions out of those Naruyan scum who dare try to trick us!”

With that command, his retainers prepared to make it rain arrows.

“But...what if they really are our allies?” Lican wondered aloud.

“Huh?”

Lican’s indecision had reared its head again.

“Well...” his retainer didn’t know what to tell him.

“I might become an incompetent lord who slew his own comrades!”

Lican’s retainers looked at one another when he said this.

“Th-Then, what do we do...?” they asked.

“For now, we stand by. A cavalry unit won’t be battering down our castle gates in a hurry. We’ll wait and see what’s happening. Stand by! Archers, hold your fire!”

The castle fell silent at Lican’s words. Finally, the cavalry arrived in front of the castle gates. It was an iron cavalry unit whose uniforms bore the crest of Eintorian.

Jint and Erheet stood at the front of the group.

“Who goes there? State your affiliation!” one of Lican’s retainers shouted from atop the gates.

“Is that you, Count Voltaire? It’s been a while. My name is Erheet. Could I trouble you to open your gates?”

“Why, Lord Erheet! It’s you!” Lican shouted as he recognized Erheet. “Open the gates at once! We’re saved! Saved, I say!”

With that, Lican let out a sigh of relief. He didn’t know what brought Erheet to his domain, but all he had to do now was follow him. Lican jumped down from the gates to greet Erheet, thinking he had found a good excuse to escape.

“Jint, you’re certain that Count Erhin said to meet him here?”

Jint nodded at Erheet’s question. His attitude was rather rude, but Jint acted the same way toward Erhin. It was just who Jint was. Erhin didn’t mind, obviously. If the man was loyal to him, then who cared about his attitude. Erheet wasn’t the type to be bothered by it either.

“He said to wait here. That’s all. I was told to wait, so I’ll wait here even if it

kills me!”

Erheet actually laughed at this. He’d taken something of a shine to Jint.

“Your Excellency! Your Excellency!”

It goes without saying that, once Lican finished racing over to them, effective control of Voltaire Castle passed over to Erheet.

*

With the king dead, Runan was headed towards certain doom. Perhaps if he had chosen to meet his end in a decisive battle at Runan Castle things might have been different. If he’d put up a hard fight until I came back from Rozern, it would have raised his chances of survival.

Of course, I knew that wasn’t the kind of king he was, so I’d predicted him dying as he fled, and the man never once defied my expectations.

Thanks to that, Valdesca had Runan Castle, and I now had justification to avenge my king.

I sent out scouts, confirmed the status of the king, and then immediately rushed to the checkpoint. Following that, once I received a report that Jint and Erheet had met up, I waited for about two days and then headed for Voltaire Castle.

The story was that I’d been in Rozern, after all. The king had ordered me to go there.

While I set out on the trip a little early, the key thing is that I went to Rozern and came back. My image as a loyal commander who wanted to save Runan but couldn’t is going to be vital in future. If they think I refused to save Runan, I’d be criticized even more harshly than the king who fled. That’s why I had to go to Rozern and return. I’ll use everything at my disposal to unify the continent!

That’s the goal of this game, after all. I’m just doing what it takes to beat it.

The people’s opinion of me was going to be important for unification, so it only made sense that I would try to win them over. Even if that meant resorting to underhanded methods.

And so, two days later, I arrived at the Voltaire Domain.

Voltaire Castle

Domain Opinion: 60

Voltaire Domain Army: 3000

Troop Types: 2500 Infantry, 500 Archers

Training: 30

Morale: 30

Reinforcements

Eintorian Iron Cavalry: 9330, Demacine Infantry: 2800

Troop Types: Cavalry, Infantry

The domain's army is three thousand men. That's pretty low, but also to be expected. This isn't a border territory. It would be weird for them to have a lot of troops.

The information I was able to confirm with the system wasn't that far from my expectations. The walls of Castle Voltaire were low. It wasn't built with a focus on making it defensible. Since it wasn't on the border, wasn't the capital, and wasn't a checkpoint, that was to be expected.

This place wasn't a place of any particular strategic importance.

I had chosen to send Jint and Erheet here entirely to influence the people's opinion of me. The Voltaire Domain was on the road to Eintorian whether you were coming from Northern Runan or from the capital. That meant a lot of refugees would pass through here. In order to sway their opinions, I needed to do something here that would result in favorable rumors about me.

"Who goes there?!" shouted a man, presumably one of Lican's retainers, when I appeared alone in front of the gates.

The gates were shut tight, and I could see lines of refugees all over. The walls only protected the center of the city, so the closed gates wouldn't stop the refugees from fleeing to the southwest. Since they weren't attacking me, they must have seen my Runanese armor. I was about to identify myself when,

suddenly, the gates opened. As they did, a single man rushed out. It was the commander who'd shouted down at me a moment ago.

"Why, you're Count Erhin Eintorian!" he declared, looking pretty tense. He must have heard of me.

"That's right. Where have Count Voltaire and Count Erheet gone?"

Even though we were all counts, there was still a hierarchy. As things stood, Erheet was unquestionably higher than me. Since I still needed to rely on the name Runan, I couldn't defy that hierarchy just yet.

Lican, on the other hand, was beneath me.

Bearing the name of the Old Kingdom, Eintorian, was seen as an honor, and so most counts who hadn't been elevated, like Erheet, were lower than me in the hierarchy. Of course, this was all separate from ranks in the military.

"Lord Erheet is recovering, but Lord Voltaire will arrive shortly!"

"Oh, yeah? Anyway, there's one thing that's bothering me. How did you know it was me?"

"Well, there's a man with us who claims to be an Eintorian retainer..."

I figured out who before the man could even finish speaking.

Jint's been waiting for me on top of the wall the whole time, huh?

At just that moment, the ground-shaking sound of hoofbeats echoed through Voltaire Castle. The iron cavalry appeared in front of me—roughly ten thousand of them, all rushing in my general direction. They formed up into orderly ranks as I watched, then all dismounted to bow before me.

"We've been waiting for you, Your Lordship!"

These were my soldiers, so it was only natural they would greet me. It was such an obvious thing for them to do, but the sight of ten thousand cavalry forming into ranks must have intimidated the Voltaire retainer, as his expression grew even more tense. I didn't need to look to know the man who led the iron cavalry to me was Jint.

No sooner had he dismounted than he ran over to me, shouting, "I completed

the mission!”

That’s the first thing out of his mouth? How cute.

“Well done. Now take the iron cavalry back. Why did you bring all of them here? The men need rest.”

I said, slapping Jint on the back, then turned to look at Lican’s retainer.

“Can you take me to Lord Erheet?”

“Yes, sir!” he responded in a loud voice, then led the way. As I was following behind him, Lican hurried over to us.

He was a little pudgy, and looked like he had trouble running. There was certainly something to be said for the man as a lord, given that he hadn’t run away yet, but... His ability scores were absolutely nothing to write home about.

“Would you happen to be His Excellency, the famed Count Eintorian?” Lican asked between wheezing breaths.

He wasn’t being so obsequious just because I outranked him. Considering that the majority of the soldiers in his domain answered to me, he didn’t have any other choice.

“That’s right. For now, I’d like to meet with Lord Erheet.”

“Oh, certainly!”

Erheet was lying in bed. He’d suffered a fairly deep wound in the battle at the checkpoint. But even injured as he was, he’d made it here with the unfaltering belief that I would follow suit. If I entrusted him with troops, he was the kind of man who’d risk his own life to see that they all made it to me.

It was why I respected him, and so badly wanted to recruit him. He had the soul of a true warrior, something that I, who would stop at nothing to clear this game, did not possess myself.

Of course, I wasn’t going to try to hire him right this moment. If I rushed things, I would make a mess of it. I needed to be cautious when trying to gain a man of his caliber. Either way, we shared the common goal of fighting Naruya, so I could take my time winning him over.

“Your Excellency, are you all right?”

“You came!”

Erheet shot up in bed, like an exuberant child. If that caused his wounds to reopen, we’d lose a valuable asset.

“You’re here, at last! I’ve been waiting for you!’

“I came from Rozern as quickly as I could, but, well...the capital has already fallen...”

“What happened to His Majesty?”

“He was caught by the Naruyans while he was making his escape... It’s too late for him...”

I shook my head, laying the act on thick, and Erheet clenched his fists.

“He fled without trying to defend the country and paid the price for it, then... And what happened to His Highness, Duke Ronan?”

“I don’t know.”

He was silent a moment before saying, “I see.”

“Your Excellency, the duke’s a heartless bastard who abandoned us!” said one of Erheet’s retainers who had withdrawn from the checkpoint along with him. The man’s face was full of anger.

Honestly, thanks for the assist.

Erheet’s retainers were probably highly dissatisfied with the duke over the slight they must have felt when he sent them to the border. Since they wouldn’t have known anything about the discord between Ronan and Erheet. Given Erheet’s personality, he’d never have told them the secret details involving the slave traders.

“Enough of that,” Erheet said, shaking his head at his retainer. Then he looked at me. “What do you plan to do from here on?”

His eyes were unswerving as he asked the question. There could only be one answer to it, of course.

“I will fight Naruya,” I replied instantly, earning me a big laugh from Erheet.

“Gah hah hah hah hah! Really now... The enemy has an army of a hundred and fifty thousand men. Just how do you plan to face such a... No, wait. If you’re the one to take the lead, it just might be possible. Because you’re you!”

Erheet got up out of the bed, his body wrapped in bandages.

“Then use me as you see fit in that war. I’ve already died once, as far as I’m concerned. No matter how reckless your plan, so long as it has some chance of success, I will risk my life to carry it out!”

That’s just what I wanted to hear. It didn’t mean I’d recruited him, but it did mean we had a common cause in the war against Naruya.

“First, the people are shaken up, and we need to settle them down. I mean to hold out for a while using Voltaire Castle as our base of operations. We’ll make it so that the people of Runan can evacuate to the southwest, avoiding the battlefields.”

My true goal was to lead the people of Runan to the southwest of the country, and then later make them my subjects.

For that, word needed to spread that, after both Ronan and the king fled, I became the shield of the people, buying time for them to escape. Such rumors would secure the people’s opinion of me. This operation would be vital to swaying public sentiment in my favor. Honestly, it was a sort of show I was putting on for them.

“What do you mean? I-It’s impossible to hold out here. My domain only has three thousand troops, and cavalry are not well-suited to fighting a defensive siege battle!” Lican, who had been listening to us quietly, interjected, his face ashen. “Why don’t we pull back to Eintorian and fight another day? I’ll lead my domain’s forces and go with you!”

So, basically, he wanted to run away.

“We can do that later. The priority right now is winning back the people’s trust before they completely give up on Runan. Doing that will help us later when we need their support to draft men as we regroup. There’s a world of difference between forced conscription and conscription done with the support of the populace.”

“But...!”

“If you’re that frightened, you’re free to part ways with us here. I have no intention of stopping you,” I responded instantly, since I didn’t need him either way. Lican immediately backed down.

“No! The safest place is with you, Your Excellency! But why... Ah! Could it be that the Naruyan scum have started heading south, without coming this way first?”

“As if they’d ever do that!”

Lican looked like he wanted to cry.

Valdesca’s not the type to ignore me and head south. I’m sure he’ll have read my mind, though I can’t say to what degree, and he’ll constantly be on guard. I’m the only irregular variable in this war. So he’s guaranteed to come try to kill me. Lican seems torn over whether he’s better off running for it, or staying here with me.

Agonize over it all you like. I don’t care what you do, as long as you don’t get in my way. There’s a whole lot that’s about to start.

I have detailed information on Naruya that I got from the Droy Company. It’s time to use it, along with the Eintorian forces that I’ve trained in order to gain as much as possible.

*

After their bloodless takeover of Runan Castle, Valdesca met Istin in front of the throne. The throne once belonged to the king, but now Valdesca stood at the foot of it, his brow furrowed.

“You’re telling me a unit of iron cavalry intervened?”

“Precisely!”

“They took away Erheet, the battle god of Runan. This has gotten troublesome.”

“We’re terribly sorry, Commander!”

Lucana stood by Istin’s side, bowing her head repeatedly.

“They were able to kill Kediman too. These enemies aren’t to be taken lightly. And it was an iron cavalry unit... When could they have trained soldiers like that?”

Runan is not a country that can mine iron, and these troops weren’t in the intelligence reports, so they must have been trained by Eintorian. To think he’d be able to produce iron cavalry in a nation without iron.

It was far too unexpected.

“He says, ‘I’m sorry. This was a failure, on my part,’ Commander!” Lucana said on Istin’s behalf.

“Well, it’s fine. We’ll leave Kediman’s Third Army to Rump. Fortunately, our side suffered no major losses. I will hold you responsible for this later. For now, think of how to redeem yourself.”

Still, this is frustrating. I really didn’t want to lose.

Even though he’d gained Runan Castle, Valdesca couldn’t help but feel defeated in some way. Valdesca immediately slammed his head into a pillar. There was a loud thud, leaving a red indentation in his forehead.

“I won’t let him have his way this time. I’ll tolerate no indolence. Deploy all our forces in front of Runan Castle. We’re heading for Voltaire Castle, where the iron cavalry withdrew to!”

“He says, ‘Let me go!’ Commander.” Lucana relayed Istin’s intentions, but Valdesca shook his head.

“With such an overwhelming numerical advantage, it would be a poor idea to divide our forces. I won’t give them any chance to fight back. We’ll leave only enough forces to guard Runan Castle, and all the rest will advance on Voltaire Castle.”

This wasn’t a foe he could beat with his forces divided. It would be the worst possible plan to divide his men and risk them being defeated in detail, so Valdesca had no intention of doing that. It would only be giving the enemy a chance of victory, no matter how remote.

I swear I’ll win, and I’ll beat him with strategy, Valdesca resolved as he gave

his commanders their orders.

*

Are we going to face Valdesca's main force on these low walls?

It would be madness, pure self-destructive madness, not even fit to be called a strategy. Once a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers surrounded the walls, we would no longer hold any kind of advantage. The elite iron cavalry I had raised would be fenced in, without any chance to distinguish themselves, and then we'd all starve after the attack began.

That sounds like a good way for me to end up getting hit with the same tactic I used in Brijit. And to have it happen here, at Voltaire Castle, where I haven't been able to prepare for it? That won't do.

"Your Excellency. Lord Erhin. Your Excellency!"

As I was coming up with another way to make Naruya suffer, one of Lican's retainers ran over to me.

"What is it?"

"It's Naruya! A massive Naruyan force is pressing toward us! See the dust cloud rising in the distance?" he shouted, terrified and out of breath. Was he going to be able to fight properly in this state?

"A massive Naruyan army? Well, I'll go take a look, at least," I answered calmly.

"R-Right!"

It was impossible for the Naruyan Army to have arrived so quickly. They had a hundred and fifty thousand men, after all. There was a great difference in the marching speed of an army of ten thousand versus an army of a hundred and fifty thousand. Although, if Valdesca had divided his forces, perhaps sending in an advance party like the King of Brijit, that would be another matter.

I'd appreciate it if he did, but there was no way the Valdesca that I knew would ever do such a thing. He was a strategist on a whole different level from the Brijitian Army. Regardless, I followed Lican's retainer to see for myself.

*

“Not this way. They’re over that way!”

As I hastened to the east side, the direction of Runan castle, Lican’s retainer pointed to the west.

“Naruyans coming from the west? You’re sure you saw their uniforms?”

“N-No, they were too far away for me to tell what color they were.”

Yeah, go figure.

I’d come to see if Valdesca had done something that diverged from my expectations, but no, he hadn’t. The Naruyan Army weren’t the only unit I was expecting. Still, just to be certain, I scanned the unit off in the distance.

Eintorian Domain Army

Manpower: 20,000 men

Troop Types: 15,000 Infantry, 5000 Archers

Morale: 90 (+5)

Training: 95

It was safe to say these were friendlies. They were my own troops—the Eintorian Domain Army which I had gone to great trouble to train! These twenty thousand men, together with the iron cavalry, were part of the thirty thousand elite troops I had managed to raise.

The +5 Morale bonus proved that Euracia was with them too. That Morale buff was a halo effect from having a commander with a Command score of 95 or higher.

“Were your eyes even open when you were scouting? They’re on our side.”

“Huh? Hold on... Where do we have allies coming from?!”

“It’s the Eintorian Domain Army.”

“You mean it?! I never expected reinforcements!”

Lican’s retainer jumped up and down with glee. We couldn’t expect any other allies to show up yet. But if I showed off that I was still here, and that I had

Erheet with me, it was true that there were domains between Voltaire Castle and Eintorian that would join the battle. Even so, considering the efficiency of leaving Eintorian empty to send all my forces here, that was all a part of the strategy.

This battle was all part of my plan to win the hearts of the people.

“Open the gates and welcome my forces in at once.”

“Understood. I’ll go do that!” Lican’s retainer shouted, jumping for joy.

*

Because our numbers had increased with the arrival of the unit from Eintorian. We immediately set about providing food to the refugees.

If we do this, word will spread that, “If you can make it to Eintorian, you won’t starve,” and people with nowhere else to go will gather.

“Eat well.”

I took a bit of time to join in, handing out food personally.

“Thank you! Thank you!”

There probably weren’t many noblemen who cared this much for the people, especially in Runan. Thanks to that, most of the people offered me their heartfelt gratitude. Still, there were all sorts of refugees.

“Is this all?”

Some of them were audacious enough to say that kind of thing during a war, and to a nobleman, no less. Maybe they were simply taking their usual frustration with the nobility out on me.

“That’s all you get. Try and have a thought for the people behind you. We’re awash with refugees, but we’re still doing all we can.”

At those times, Euracia stood by my side and spoke powerfully on my behalf. I’d sent her to the Rozern Kingdom, just in case the invasion pushed all the way to Rozern, but as I predicted, the Naruyan Army settled for just occupying Runan. That being the case, Euracia had come back to my side.

Being a princess who put the people first, she volunteered to help out with

distributing food on her own. When she spoke, the people who had been making snide remarks fell silent, unable to say anything in response.

Erheet, who had recovered somewhat, joined the effort too. He decided he would donate all of the assets from his domain, but that didn't really mean anything now. His domain was in the south of Runan, and it was impossible for him to bring supplies from there immediately.

"Don't push yourself. You should rest... You're not fully healed yet."

"I'm fine. I can't rest when no one else is. I wouldn't have expected us to be distributing food to the people at a time like this."

"If it's provisions you're worried about, then don't be," I responded, thinking he might be concerned that we wouldn't have enough left for the troops, but Erheet shook his head.

"I didn't mean it that way. You've thoroughly impressed me."

"Oh, what are you saying? Anyway, just rest. I'm going to put you to work out on the battlefield, so I can't have you exhausting yourself here."

"Hah hah hah! Fair enough. I get it. I'll rest, then!"

The refugees who passed through here were just a small portion of the population flowing out of northern Runan and the capital. The refugee flows would be going to the south and the southwest. The people of the southwest were the ones who would've heard all the old rumors that went around Runan about me, so I needed to take extra care with them.

Turning that around, however, this influx of people couldn't go on forever. No, there would certainly be an end to it. That was why the best move was to buy time here for as long as was appropriate and then pull out.

"Yusen."

"Yes, Your Excellency!"

"I plan to head out of Voltaire Castle leading a unit for a little while."

"You're leaving Voltaire Castle?"

I explained my first strategy of the war to Yusen.

*

Naruya's massive army of a hundred and fifty thousand men marched on Voltaire Castle. Valdesca had them all advance at the same pace without dividing the infantry and cavalry units. As they were on the move, his scouts came back to the main unit.

"You're telling me Erhin headed out?"

"Yes. Once the unit from Eintorian joined up with the forces at Voltaire Castle, he took his iron cavalry and headed out."

Valdesca furrowed his brow at this.

Why did Erhin leave so suddenly?

It was strange that he'd brought such a large-scale force from Eintorian too. It would leave his domain lightly guarded.

What is he plotting?

Valdesca spread out a map. He expected that Erhin had left the bare minimum needed to defend Eintorian, but this would still make attacking Eintorian incredibly easy.

Does he mean to fight at Voltaire Castle? What in the world is he aiming for?

It would be easy to isolate Voltaire Castle.

With a hundred and fifty thousand men surrounding them, a castle like that wouldn't be able to hold out for even two days. Members of the Ten Commanders like Istin, Lucana, and Rump, Valdesca's own retainers, and the Naruyan nobles who had come along on this campaign all looked at one another. That was because of the serious look that came over Valdesca's face as he agonized over what to do.

"Commander, will you organize a party to pursue him?" Rump asked but Valdesca shook his head.

"No. We continue advancing as planned. The sooner we reach Voltaire Castle the better."

He could only imagine it was for an ambush to lower their morale. That, or

perhaps to cut off their supply lines. However, now that they'd taken Runan Castle, it wouldn't be so easy to break their supply lines. If Erhin meant to try and retake Runan Castle with so few troops, it was an incredibly poor idea. He'd only be gifting Voltaire Castle and his main force to Naruya.

Surely he wouldn't do that. So that only leaves an ambush.

What still remained completely unintelligible was why he had dug in at Voltaire Castle.

Whether the fight took place at Eintorian Castle or Voltaire Castle, it was still just a matter of isolating them there and then winning, so it made no difference to Valdesca which Erhin chose. If anything, the low walls of Voltaire Castle raised serious concerns about the defensibility of the place. It frustrated Valdesca being unable to figure out why Erhin went out of his way to choose to fight there.

"I have no intention of giving the Runanese forces in the direction of Brijit time to join the battle. Even if those reinforcements did come, we would still outnumber them... but I'd prefer to remove as many uncertain factors as possible."

His intel told him that there were fifty thousand troops in Brijit. But if they all came, Runan would instantly lose control of Brijit. The men would scatter, and the domains of Runan and Brijit would all lose their owners. Either way, Naruya held an overwhelming advantage. Valdesca also had no intention of letting Erhin join up with the reinforcements in Brijit. He'd already come up with a strategy to win the battle at Eintorian quickly!

"Well, anyway, our best move is to surround and exterminate them."

"Do you still plan to keep the Fourth Army a secret, Your Excellency?"

"The moment they retreat to Eintorian, the Fourth Army will move into action. I can't imagine they plan to stay at Voltaire Castle for long."

Valdesca couldn't figure out what kind of strategy this was. Whether Erhin chose to fight at Voltaire Castle or in Eintorian, neither was advantageous to him. The terrain wasn't favorable. If Erhin had wanted to take advantage of terrain, he should have fought near the checkpoint or at Runan Castle.

“There’s no need to get confused. Let’s proceed as we have been.”

“Yes, Your Excellency!”

“I expect he’ll ambush us with five thousand cavalry. Be sure we’re thoroughly prepared for them!”

The massive Naruyan army of a hundred and fifty thousand men continued advancing under Valdesca’s orders.

*

Eintorian’s army composition diverged a fair bit from established theory. Because we had more cavalry than usual, we were specialized more toward offense than defense. We were also ill-suited to fighting siege battles. Cavalry units were only able to show their full power on the flatlands.

The reason I had gone to such great lengths to raise ten thousand of them before developing my infantry was that I expected to need their mobility. That was factoring in the fact that Naruya had more soldiers than us to begin with, and only my unit and Erheet’s were really going to function.

Basically, the premise was that we would be facing an overwhelming disadvantage in troop numbers, which meant that fighting a siege battle was a no-go from the get-go.

Even if we went back to Eintorian, we’d be isolated. Sure, we could hold out for a while. With enough food held in reserve, I was confident that Eintorian Castle could hold out for a fairly long time, even if it couldn’t last for as long as Runan Castle. But that was still a battle of attrition. I’d have allowed Runan to be destroyed only to gain nothing from it as I watched my dream of uniting the continent fade off into the distance.

So the key point in this war was going to be how much I could whittle down Naruya’s forces as they advanced. My plan was to make things as painful for my enemies as I could while slowing the rate of their advance. The better a job I did at that, the more refugees would pass by Voltaire Castle and hear the rumors.

It wasn’t as if Naruya’s massive hundred and fifty thousand man army didn’t have cavalry units of its own. But Valdesca was forcing them to advance at the same pace as the rest of the army to avoid his units being picked off.

That means they're no faster than common infantry.

I had the iron cavalry stand by in the area while Jint and I climbed a nearby mountain to scout out the enemy forces. When an army is as massive as a hundred and fifty thousand men, its movements are obviously going to be noticeable. That isn't a scale where they can advance covertly. The enemy had assumed a complex formation. They had cavalry in the front, infantry in the rear, and a supply unit in the middle with another unit of cavalry to protect them.

It was clear at a glance that they were all moving as one clump just from this positioning.

As was to be expected from a military embarking on a war of conquest, their composition was centered around infantry—a hundred thousand of them—in order to fight siege battles. The remaining fifty thousand were archers and cavalry.

Traveling as a pack is effective against ambushes. The man's clearly an excellent student of military strategy.

But even if the enemy units didn't move around on their own, there were still other opportunities to pick them off individually. In fact, them moving around all bunched up together like this could prove to be a weakness.

In order to make that possible, what I need is mobility, and a weakness in the enemy's ability to command their troops. He'll have heard about the tactics I used in Brijit. If that makes him timid, it'll give me even more of an opportunity.

The key was the Third Army.

With the death of Kediman leading to a sudden change of commander, their internal cohesion wasn't all that great, and their morale had fallen. That meant the Third Army wasn't as well-commanded as was standard for the Naruyan Army, and if we could throw them into disarray with a surprise attack the effect of it would spread. The Third Army was at the rear of the advancing enemy column.

The most important thing to do now was to make the optimal use of our mobility to execute a hit and run attack.

“Jint, I want you to take two thousand cavalrymen and charge the front of the Third Army. All you have to do is charge them. Once the momentum from the initial charge attack takes down the enemies in front of you, charge through and then pull away!”

“Got it!”

“Euracia, I want you to take two thousand cavalrymen and charge the center of the Third Army. Do like Jint, and charge until you come out the other side of the enemy.”

“Understood!”

If we temporarily separated the front and middle of the Third Army with charge attacks, then the forces in between them would be isolated. While those four thousand cavalrymen were charging the enemy, I would take the other six thousand and cause chaos among the enemy’s isolated forces.

Basically, this was a plan to defeat them in detail.

“Okay, time to charge!”

This plan would work best not when the enemy was camping, but while they were advancing at a steady pace. Since we were attacking an infantry unit with a cavalry unit, we would have an overwhelming advantage in mobility.

If the enemy’s cavalry breaks off to pursue us, all the better. We just have to pull them in and destroy them in that case.

At my command, Jint and Euracia charged into the rear of the enemy’s massive army in the area where the Third Army was located. Because this was the plains, the enemy’s rear units could easily see them coming and prepared for battle. However, due to how absolutely massive the enemy force was, the units in the front didn’t notice. Either that, or they couldn’t stop marching.

Thanks to that, a gap formed between the front units and the rest, temporarily splitting up the enemy!

“Follow them without delay!”

And with a part of the enemy temporarily split off, I charged in with the six thousand cavalry under my command.

“Yahhhhhh!”

Six thousand powerful and motivated cavalrymen trampled over the infantry of the Third Army.

Separated Naruyan Third Army

Troop Types: 20,000 Infantry

Morale: 60

Training: 92

The middle portion of the army that had been split off by Jint and Euracia’s individual charge attacks was the Separated Naruyan Third Army.

“Charge! Kill every enemy you see, then pull back to here!’

Eintorian Iron Cavalry

Troop Types: 6,000 Iron Cavalry

Morale: 93

Training: 97

Naruyan Third Army Infantry: 20,000

Eintorian Iron Cavalry: 6,000

Battlefield: Plains

Type Advantage: Iron Cavalry, 50% Attack Bonus

Morale Bonus: Additional 50% Attack Bonus

This was a battle on the plains.

In a battle between common infantry and iron cavalry on the flatlands, we received a massive troop type advantage. Naruya’s Third Army did hold a numerical advantage, but my vastly superior iron cavalry let us cut them down one after another. The center of the Third Army was currently cut off by Euracia’s charge attack. They’d probably also broken ranks to attack Euracia’s unit.

I assaulted the portion of the army cut off by Jint and Euracia.

Also, because their current commander, Rump of the Ten Commanders, was at the very rear of the Third Army, cut off from this segment of his forces, we'd be long gone by the time he arrived to help them.

Naruyan Third Army: 15,000

Eintorian Iron Cavalry: 5,700

Once the battle began, Naruya's Third Army quickly panicked and took more than five thousand casualties. While this was a surprise attack, this result was born of the attack power advantage generated by the difference in troop types! However, Naruya's Third Army were obviously well trained, and they began organizing into ranks and fighting back.

"Withdraw!"

I didn't plan to keep up the attack. Surprise attacks like this are only meaningful during the first exchange, while there is the element of surprise.

If we stay too long, we'll face a pincer attack. Jint and Euracia's units will be pulling out by now, so I'll get out of here too! The fundamental rule here is to hit and run.

This strategy wasn't a one and done kind of thing. We'd be ambushing them as many times as we could between here and Voltaire Castle. The enemy knew this too, but they had no means to prevent it. The moment they organized a force to pursue us, they would have defeated the purpose of advancing all in one bunch like this.

It's a long column of a hundred and fifty thousand men. We get to decide where and when we'll cut off parts of it. All they can do is remain alert night and day. Not that we'll be able to do anywhere near enough damage to truly influence a force so massive... This first raid is probably the one that will hurt them the most. They'll be alert against future ones, and we can expect a more vigorous response.

But I'll bet this has massively lowered the enemy's morale. Just how much we

can sap their will to fight will be the key to this strategy.

*

"Hey, did you see?"

"Yeah, you bet I did. The Eintorian cavalry were racing all over the place, cutting down those Naruyan bastards!"

Eintorian's were seen launching surprise attacks in many places. And as Erhin had predicted, the refugees began to speak about it. As the rumors spread, they grew and were exaggerated.

"I hear the Lord of Eintorian is the only one still fighting after all the others fled."

"Yeah, he must be. I mean, even the king made a run for it!"

The king was the subject of harsh criticism everywhere. Not only had he done nothing for the refugees, his terrible decisions had earned him a miserable death. All of the resentment and blame for the current plight of Runan was pointed squarely at the king. All of which only served to expand on the rumors surrounding the opposite example Erhin was setting.

"Should we evacuate to Eintorian, then?"

"It sounds like the best idea."

Thanks to that, more and more Runanese people came to believe in Erhin.

*

Valdesca was smashing his head against the table. He knew that Erhin's raids with the iron cavalry would be coming, and yet he was powerless to stop them. The areas already weakened by those attacks were only getting hurt more and more. But even so, if he were to reorganize his armies now, he would lose control over all of them.

"If they come again, this time we'll go after them and crush them completely!" Lucana shouted with indignation.

"We have cavalry of our own, do we not? Those bastards strike, and then they hide... We should go after them!" insisted Rump, whose Third Army was taking

the brunt of the losses.

The other commanders were just as frustrated and enraged. Valdesca stopped banging his head and rose to try and calm them.

“No. That is the one thing we absolutely must not do. If we fail to control our anger and divide our forces, we will only be doing exactly what the enemy wants us to. For now, we can only bear the pain...”

Looking at the individual raids, the casualties weren’t that great. However, the fact of the matter was that, as the days went by, they were growing to a number that couldn’t be ignored. The great army of a hundred and fifty thousand men had been reduced to an army of a hundred and forty thousand men.

The measures they had taken meant that there wasn’t much loss in troop numbers, but with the threat of the iron cavalry looming over everyone at all times, all of them, from the highest commander to the lowest common soldier, were at their wits’ end.

Normally, they would have organized a pursuit and gone after the iron cavalry driven by berserk rage. However, if they did, they would only meet with another ambush along the way, and lose the troops of the pursuit team.

This was clearly a strategy that took advantage of people’s anger, but Valdesca could control his.

“We will move cautiously, without being driven to impetuous actions. Let your anger build and build until it comes time to unleash it on Voltaire Castle. We’ll be arriving there tomorrow regardless. Let them feel all of your wrath then. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Commander!”

As a duke, Valdesca’s position demanded absolute respect. Everyone had to nod in agreement.

And so, the following day, having suppressed their anger and moved cautiously, Valdesca’s massive hundred and forty thousand man army finally arrived at Voltaire Castle without breaking ranks.

*

In the war room at Voltaire Castle, with everyone in attendance, I made the obvious announcement.

“We will abandon Voltaire Castle.”

Digging our heels in here would be suicide. There was a big difference between just retreating, and retreating after taking measures to shake up the enemy, though. The enemy losses were good, but the real reason was that showing the will to fight as we withdrew was necessary to keep the people’s opinion of me high. Having done enough to ensure that was the case, now it was just a matter of retreating at once.

“You mean it?!” Count Voltaire cried, sounding almost happy about it. He also understood fighting here would be the death of us.

Of course, he followed this with a cautious, “Where will we go, then?” That was a question that should have been on everyone’s mind. Everyone who wasn’t a retainer of Eintorian, that is.

“The Naruyan army number a hundred and forty thousand. Meanwhile, we have only around thirty thousand. Even if the other lords rally to our banner, they would only add another three to five thousand. We stand at an absolute disadvantage.”

The fact of the matter was that, whatever we did, this entire situation was practically suicide. Unlike the north of Runan, these were flatlands, with hardly any terrain we could use to our advantage. At best, there were some hills here and there, and they weren’t going to be of any use to us.

“We’ll withdraw to Eintorian.”

That had been decided from the beginning. Going anywhere else had never been an option.

My own retainers already knew the plan, so they just looked at one another and nodded, but Erheet and the others who had joined up with us cast doubtful looks in our direction.

“So, it’s finally time to execute the plan?” Yusen asked.

Erheet couldn’t hold his tongue any longer.

“What exactly is this plan you speak of? I think that it’s about time you let me in on it.”

First, I’d need to explain this to Erheet. But anyway, if this plan was a success, I’d finally graduate from being a lord under someone else to creating my own country, and jump into the competition for mastery of this continent. It was all on the line now.

*

A short distance from Voltaire Castle, Valdesca laid his camp and immediately sent out scouts.

“Commander! Something is strange!”

“Strange, you say?”

“The castle is strangely quiet.”

Voltaire Castle was on the plains. It made the place easy to attack, but also difficult to approach in order to conduct intelligence operations. The scouts were repeatedly being found and chased off by archers. Also, with refugees becoming scarcer, the scouts couldn’t blend in with them. Especially with Erhin having returned to eliminate the scouts, they hadn’t been able to gather information, and it was only as they got closer that they realized the castle had been vacated.

Valdesca’s brow furrowed at the report.

“Quiet, you say? What does that mean?! Explain!” Rump shouted in frustration.

“Their banners fly above the walls, but the gates are closed with no soldiers anywhere in sight. It’s as if the castle is empty!”

“An empty castle?” Rump turned to look at Lucana. “I thought this might happen. They never planned to fight at that castle with its low walls. Their real goal was to split us up and ambush us with their iron cavalry. Have the Second Army scale the walls with ladders and scout ahead, exercising the utmost caution. There is a risk they may be planning to burn the castle with us inside.”

“Understood!” Lucana replied. Once Istin nodded as well, they led their unit toward the front gates.

However, the Naruyan camp were only getting angrier now that they heard the castle lay empty.

They had been planning to vent all of their rage on Voltaire Castle, but with no one there, the camp was dominated by despondency and anger that had lost its outlet. Because of that, the retainers prayed for the castle to not actually be empty, but Lucana returned with a look of intense anger on her face as she reported in to Valdesca.

“Commander, the castle is empty! There was nothing there!”

The retainers bit down on their lips hard when they heard this.

“Is that right?” Valdesca, of course, was his usual, calm self.

“The captain said he would check and make sure, but it would seem they aren’t planning to burn the castle. There was no oil spread around, and no piles of kindling.”

“Understood. When you’ve finished scouting, open the castle gates.”

“Yes, Commander!”

The gates of Voltaire Castle were soon opened at Valdesca’s command.

But as they had suspected, there was no one in the castle. The only thing that they’d gained for their efforts was a comfortable place to rest. No supplies had been left in the abandoned castle for them to seize. Worse still, because they had to pursue the Eintorian Army immediately, they couldn’t even avail themselves of the comfortable resting place.

“Well, I had already anticipated this, considering that the castle is of no importance, but to think he’d withdraw without preparing any scheme...”

Valdesca had been sure there would be a trap, but his retainers didn’t feel the same way.

“Commander, he’s only human. Are you sure you’re not overestimating him...?”

The Ten Commanders were just following orders. They didn't get why Valdesca was so nervous about Erhin.

Neither did the King of Naruya.

The king believed that Valdesca had lost last time because he had come without any proper commanders, then let his guard down on top of that, so things would be different now that he had the Ten Commanders accompanying him.

The only one who thought differently was Valdesca, who had been so thoroughly defeated before.

"Anyway, we'll begin the pursuit at once. I know you've all just lost the outlet for your frustrations, but I, on the other hand, have been waiting for this moment. The moment when the Eintorian's forces return to their domain. Now, while they are retreating, is when we have our chance. We'll strike from both sides and drive them into a corner!"

"Then the Fourth Army is finally making its move...?"

Valdesca nodded at Rump and Lucana's question before pointing at the map.

"He will likely continue his retreat all the way to Eintorian. I don't know what strategies he'll use, but I believe in my own strategy. We will attack them from the front and back here. After that, the remaining soldiers will enter Eintorian, and destroy them using the mana circle I've prepared in order to take Eintorian Castle. He'll have nowhere left to run."

*

"Your Majesty, it's about time we prepared ourselves. If the Naruyans push all the way into southern Runan, then our own lands in Rozern will be next!"

The conflict had lit a fire under the butts of everyone in Rozern and the palace was abuzz with activity.

"Has my sister requested reinforcements?"

"There has been no word from Her Highness just yet. But we don't have the spare troops to send to reinforce them."

"But they have Erhin, don't they? I'm sure he'll protect them again," the

young king said, but the nobles were still quite shaken.

“He was right to tell us not to send Runan the promised supplies. Thanks to that, we will be able to tell Naruya that we’ve severed ties with Runan. Perhaps we should take this opportunity to cut our ties to Erhin too, and then build a good relationship with Naruya.”

“How could you say something so shameless, even in light of the current situation!” roared another noble, one who backed the princess, rising to his feet.

The nobles in the king’s faction pushed back against this, and a riotous debate soon broke out.

“Brijit and Naruya are different. Naruya has a whole ten commanders who are just like Brijit’s Ganeif. Besides, the ingenious strategist, Duke Valdesca, who is from one of the Twelve Continental Houses, is with them too. We must prepare for the worst case scenario!”

They could debate this endlessly and never come to a conclusion.

Ultimately, they agreed to be cautious and wait a little longer to see how the war situation developed before making a decision.

*

"The Naruyans are behind us again!" Gibun shouted with a look of exasperation. "Looks like we're definitely being pursued. Those guys don't even *look* at the other castles. They're so persistent. Maybe they don't plan to occupy any of the other domains of Runan?"

"You said it. They won't suffer us let our guard down for even a moment." Yusen agreed with a nod.

"I beat their commander-in-chief really badly during the last war. He must think that if he doesn't get me out of the way, I'll do it again."

I was of the same opinion as Gibun and Yusen. If the guy would just look down on me, let down his guard a little, then it would make it a bit easier to fight. Instead, he fought cautiously, as though he were the one at a disadvantage despite the overwhelming superiority of his forces. Because of that, although I was able to do some damage with the iron cavalry, it wasn't as much as I'd expected.

"Well, whatever. If he's not going to relax his guard, I'll just use that to my advantage instead."

If this were a situation where I was trying to defend the Runan Kingdom from Naruya's invasion and live on as a Runanese noble, then maybe it wouldn't have been that hard to assemble all of Runan's troops and stop the attack at the checkpoint in Northern Runan and at Runan Castle.

But then I'd always be nothing more than another pawn of the king and Duke Ronan.

That's why Runan had to be destroyed, even if that meant letting someone else do it for me. I need to walk this risky path in order to declare independence later. Overcoming these difficulties is what's going to let me create a legitimate nation of my own.

If Runan was destroyed, and I were to try to defend Eintorian as the surrounding countries were looking to get a piece of the fallen nation's lands for themselves, then I'd be surrounded on all sides by enemies and nothing good would come of it.

“We’re going to settle this in Eintorian, just as planned!”

I pointed to the vast plains of Eintorian, where the idea was to lead the enemy in.

We hurried to the stage of the final confrontation.

My total current manpower was thirty three thousand men. In some ways, that might seem like it wasn’t enough. But in war, the important thing is to decide on and prepare the battlefield, and we had a one day lead on the Naruyan forces. Even if we hadn’t been that far ahead, because we were mostly cavalry we had an advantage in marching speed, but I deliberately had us slow down.

“Your Excellency!”

As we were approaching Eintorian at that relaxed pace, Bente, who I’d left behind in Eintorian Castle, raced over to me.

“We’ve got big trouble, Your Excellency!”

The man could give Gibun a run for his money when it came to being thoughtless. When he reached my side, he jumped down from his horse to give me his report.

“Erhin? You’re supposed to be protecting the castle. What are you doing here?”

If the guy who’s supposed to be protecting Eintorian Castle with Hadin is here, then that means...

The people behind me, which included Yusen, Gibun, Euracia, and even Lican and Erheet, all looked rather surprised too. Jint wasn’t particularly interested, but that was par for the course with him.

“It’s the Naruyans. They’ve crossed the border to attack. They’re marching this way right now!”

“The Naruyan Army?”

“Yes, Your Excellency!” Bente gave me a big nod.

Shocked, Yusen asked him, “No, the Naruyan Army should be behind us... No,

don’t tell me they had yet another army?! Is that it, Bente?”

“That’s exactly it!” Bente nodded vigorously. “Judging by their course, they aren’t heading for Eintorian Castle. They’re heading straight for here, where you are, Your Excellency!”

It seemed everyone but me was stunned to silence by what Bente had told us. If what he was saying was true, we were caught in a Naruyan pincer movement. Of course they’d all be stunned.

“Damn it! I knew it... I should have run away from the beginning...” Lican blurted out despite himself, then hastily covered his mouth.

“What does it matter? They’re all enemies we’d have to fight eventually,” Erheet said coolly, adjusting his grip on his spear.

I’d anticipated this from the beginning. It was why I’d deliberately slowed our march.

Because by deliberately walking into this pincer movement, I could get the Naruya Kingdom to display its full might to us. This was what I used the Droy Company for. I’d spent copious amounts of gold coercing Naruyan nobles who’d illegally purchased slaves into giving me accurate information.

What I learned from them was the total manpower that Naruya would be mobilizing for this war of conquest: roughly three hundred thousand troops. However, only a hundred and fifty thousand came across the border. Where did all the rest go?

According to my intel, a hundred thousand of them went off to occupy another country under the direct command of the emperor. Where did that leave the remaining fifty thousand?

They were right where I expected them to be. So I was right to lower our marching speed. I had a simple reason for walking into their pincer attack: it was better to take down Naruya’s entire army all at once. And thus I’d waited for them to all gather in one place like this.

“What basic troop type are the new enemy?”

“They have cavalry and an infantry unit. They’re using an incredibly basic

formation, with the cavalry up front and infantry in the rear!”

It was a formation so rudimentary I’d hardly even call it a strategy.

“Will you go with the iron cavalry, Your Excellency?”

“No, we’ll go with infantry first. I intend to assume the fish scale formation!”

The fish scale formation involved positioning infantry in a solid arrow shape. If the soldiers at the tip are defeated, the row behind them engage the enemy, and if the enemy’s cavalry charge into the center of the formation they’re easily surrounded.

“Understood!”

My well-trained troops changed formation in an instant.

“The archers will stand by in a position in front of the fish scale formation, and release their arrows the moment the enemy appears. They will then quickly pull back to the rear, and the foot soldiers of the fish scale formation will engage the enemy cavalry. Yusen will lead the fish scale formation, and Gibun will handle the archers!”

“Yes, sir, Your Excellency!”

Now that those two had their orders, I looked to Jint. “You’re coming to drop in on the enemy commander with me.”

“Got it!”

With all those orders given, Erheet looked at me vacantly.

“What should I be doing?”

“You’re not at your best, Your Excellency. So, for now...”

“What are you talking about? I’ve almost fully recovered!” Erheet said firmly. In all honesty, I had been waiting for him to say that.

“Then can I ask you to command the iron cavalry? Once the enemy cavalry slam into the fish scale formation, I want you to circle around behind them and hit them in the back.”

“I swear I’ll accomplish that mission. Let’s go!”

“Yes, Your Excellency!” Erheet’s retainers nodded enthusiastically and followed him.

There’s just one problem. Who exactly is controlling the new enemy unit? That’s going to be the most important question.

I had a bad feeling about this.

Valdesca had gone to great lengths not to split his forces, and yet the very same Valdesca had deliberately set this unit aside.

Whoever it is, Frann trusts them more than anyone else. My greatest fear right now is that we’ll take major losses. At the very least, I can’t retreat until Frann’s unit catches up with us. I want to avoid a situation where my forces are damaged. Actually, the best thing would be if we could break this new enemy unit before the main force arrives. If we break Frann’s unit after that, then we’ll be able to take out two hundred thousand Naruyan troops in one stroke, so that’s pretty efficient.

But...there’s no way he doesn’t see that coming.

While I was still lost in thought, Euracia spoke to me.

“Is something wrong, Erhin?”

“I’m getting a bad feeling about this...”

“A bad feeling?”

“Well, it doesn’t change what I can do, so it’s not a problem. If my plan fails, head back to Rozern immediately. You mustn’t die here.”

Of course, I had no intention of failing. But all the same, I didn’t want her to die fighting in what was really *my* battle. As soon as Euracia heard me, she drew Rossade and fell into a fighting stance.

“You’re talking like that again! I really will stab you this time!”

Despite her harsh tone, she looked sad.

“I need you to make it home safe, even if I die on the battlefield.”

“I’ve cast aside Rozern to be with you. It’s not so easy for me to go back now. I’m not a Rozernan anymore. I won’t leave you until you show me the world you

promised. Even if that means I die at your side!”

It was a thrill to hear her say that.

I’m such a lucky guy, having people willing to die with me.

“Okay, okay, I get it. Lower your sword, please. I won’t say it again.”

“As long as I’ve made myself clear.” Euracia bit her lip as she lowered her blade. It looked like she still had more she wanted to say.

Well, I’ll try asking her after the battle’s over. First, I need to make this plan work.

“Jint.”

“I feel the same. My life’s been in your hands for a while now.”

“What are you talking about? You need to survive too, for Mirinae’s sake.”

“Well...” Jint sounded just a little hesitant. “I’ll die in your place. I’m sure you’ll look after Mirinae after I’m gone. That’s good enough!”

Euracia and Jint both know what to say to make a guy happy.

They were the only ones in my entire army who I’d really trust with my life. I’d started out all alone, without a friend in the world, so having two people I could feel this way about was incredibly moving.

Anyway, I have zero intention of dying here, in a place like this. And I’m confident I won’t.

Regardless, as far as I recalled, the events that were about to play out weren’t in the game’s history. I was getting a little sentimental because I had no idea what the future would hold from here on out.

All I can do is believe in myself and fight on.

“Jint, Euracia. Both of you charge at the enemy from your respective positions. I’ll advance along with you.”

Of course, my goal was to identify the enemy commander.

*

“I suspect that the Fourth Army should be encountering the Eintorian Domain

Army around now," said Lucana.

"Yes, you're right," Valdesca agreed. "Knowing them, they'll be throwing the Eintorian Army into disarray."

"Of course."

Lucana shook her head with dismay as she remembered Medelian. The color drained from her face as she recalled the unpleasant memory of the time she'd almost died while training with her. Any unit paired with Medelian's destructive power would be the strongest. She expected the Eintorian Army would struggle against that power.

The Fourth Army were their ace-in-the-hole.

"There isn't a commander in Eintorian who is a match for my little sister. Only His Majesty can control—"

"Oh? I have to disagree." Lucana cut Valdesca off. "She's always running away from His Majesty, so clearly no one can control her."

*

The Fourth Army had been separated into its own unit just before the invasion of Runan. There was a young lady in the House of Valdesca—Frann's little sister, Medelian Valdesca. Bearing the blood of House Valdesca, she was every bit as gifted at controlling mana as her brother.

That's why the Naruyan Army needed her power.

But as far as she was concerned, war was a bore, and she was always running around, avoiding the orders of King Cassia. That didn't stop her from being the highest ranked of the Ten Commanders.

The moment she graced the battlefield, victory was assured. Even the most capable commander was just another grunt before her.

It was why she was allowed a degree of leniency. Medelian had been optimistic that, with this dispatch of troops to Runan, so long as she kept on groaning about it, she might not have had to go to the battlefield. Or she *was*, up until the point Valdesca threatened her with, "If you won't join us, then I'm going to throw you out of the house."

She could be a little rebellious, but now that he was laying down genuine threats, she couldn't disobey his orders.

Valdesca and Medelian had lost their parents at a young age. They were each other's only kin, and Valdesca had practically raised her too. Left with no other choice, she put in an appearance at the front while making it very clear she didn't want to be there.

Once Medelian joined them, Valdesca entrusted her with command of the Fourth Army of Naruya's Runan Subjugation Force. This unit would move completely independently of the First through Third Armies which he would be leading. They were the unit that would be the core of his operation to catch Erhin, and so it was important that they have the person who boasted the greatest martial prowess.

Medelian Valdesca—the strongest of the Ten Commanders, and the most capable in Naruya next to only King Cassia himself.

"Am I *really* going to have anything to do, big bro?! I've got more important things to be doing!"

However, Medelian had visited her brother's camp that morning to complain about it at length.

"Don't ignore me! Your adorable little sister is talking to you!"

Of course, this wasn't a conversation between the commander of the Runan Subjugation Force and his subordinate. The way she was playing up the cute little sister bit, it was a sibling squabble. Medelian had never thought of her brother as a superior officer anyway.

"Save it. I'm busy. Can't you tell?"

"You're the one who called me to join the military! And I'm busy too! I've got stuff I need to be doing!"

Medelian punctuated her complaints by slamming her fist down on the table. After being given the Fourth Army, Medelian had made a habit of visiting Valdesca every day to vigorously object. That said, there was no changing the plan now.

Also, before dispatching troops, he had his hands full with checking over his provisions and other supplies, as well as gathering information on other countries. Sure, his sister was cute, but he didn't have time for her. Finally at his wit's end with her, he slammed his forehead into the table.

"Medelian! What do you even have to do?!"

He knew that his sister was somewhat self-centered. Perhaps he'd coddled her too much as she was growing up. Because of that, she was temperamental, and all too happy to act in ways that he couldn't predict. She just wasn't suited to an organization like the military. But he needed her to get out there and work for him.

"Hmm, all sorts of stuff? Well, things that are more fun than this war, I guess!"

War was tiresome for her. She enjoyed fighting, but not when it was totally one-sided. And yet, no matter where she went, there were never any commanders who could put up a decent fight against her. Too strong to find a rival, she always left the battlefield feeling unfulfilled. It was starting to really get to her.



Obviously, Valdesca understood his sister’s frustration with not being able to put her skills to their full use.

“Medelian, this war won’t go like the others before now. I expect things will happen to make it interesting for you too.”

“Impossible. You’re trying to tell me there’s someone strong enough to take me on in *Runan*, of all places?”

“Yes. Not only will it be an even match, he might even beat you.”

Of course, Valdesca himself didn’t believe that. He knew the strength of Erhin and his cadre, but even in light of that he was certain that Medelian’s victory was unshakable. That was why he needed to provoke her curiosity, even if he had to deceive her a little to do so, in order to get her to head out.

“Hmm...” Medelian crossed her arms and regarded him suspiciously.

She was pretty sure he was leading her on. But if Valdesca was willing to say this much about them, then maybe she was just a teensy bit curious.

“So, who exactly are we talking about?”

“Erhin Eintorian.”

“Oh! That guy you fought? He’s tough in battle too?!”

“He is. And his retainers have considerable talent of their own.”

“They’re that good...?”

She’d taken the bait. Valdesca decided to give her one last push, just to be sure. “How’s this sound, Medelian? If you distinguish yourself in this war, I’ll grant you one wish. So just stay on task, and lead the Fourth Army as you’re instructed.”

Medelian’s eyes sparkled at this.

“You mean it?”

“Yeah... I know you’ve been avoiding His Majesty. If you’re so sick of him, I’ve been thinking it might be good to dismiss you from military duty so you can wander the world for a while...”

Medelian instantly turned to leave.

“I’ll be right back. I’m gonna go beat them all!”

Medelian ran off with fierce speed before she'd even finished listening.

*

The battle began.

Naruyan Fourth Army

Manpower: 50,000

Troop Types: Cavalry, Infantry

Morale: 92

Training: 95

The enemy was a unit called the Fourth Army. Frustratingly, they were made up of elite soldiers. On top of that, I hadn't been ambushing them, so their morale hadn't fallen like the rest of the armies' had. It was going to be hard to gain an advantage on that front. Though I *was* able to use our respective troop type and combat formations to put myself in a better position. They didn't have a strategist like Valdesca with them now, so I was confident in my ability to win at mind games.

Assuming the enemy commander moved as I hoped, that was.

"Yahhhhhh!"

"Kill them!"

"Dieeeeee!"

The battle began, and the enemy cavalry charged toward our prepared formation, just as we'd planned. The front line of cavalry went down in a hail of arrows from my archers.

Naruyan Fourth Army: 48,000 men

Eintorian Domain Army: 33,000 men

With five thousand archers firing, those numbers kept dropping. When the enemy approached, the archers pulled back to the rear and the infantry moved

up front. The cavalry finally charged into the fish scale formation. The enemy had the troop type advantage here, but all I could do was hope that the fish scale formation would minimize it.

“We’re heading to the enemy commander!”

Euracia, Jint, and I all jumped into the onrushing mass of the enemy together. As the cavalry in the front row of the enemy army pushed on with incredible momentum, the infantry were behind them, preparing to jump into the action. Erheet’s iron cavalry unit would get around the very back of the infantry and then break them from there.

Even before troop types were considered, Erheet’s ability to command meant his troops had a higher morale.

When we were about to charge the enemy commander, a blindingly bright flash of light demolished the fish scale formation. Light rushed forth from the same place several times, and with each blast of light, my army’s numbers dwindled. The momentum let their cavalry break my fish scale formation, and with my troop a disorderly mess their numbers fell in no time.

Mana exploded off in the distance. I started to feel more and more panicked. I spurred my horse onward, racing toward the scene.

When I arrived, there was an incredible woman up ahead. She was using the countless swords that had fallen on the battlefield to tear my slash apart my soldiers. Any weapon they dropped became hers, floating into the air and then raining back down on my forces, always exploding with a burst of light.

I couldn’t help but furrow my brow.

Medelian Valdesca

That name...

Her family name was the first thing to make a real impact on me. She was a Valdesca. House Valdesca was one of the Twelve Continental Houses, and also the one that Frann Valdesca was head of.

Age: 21

Martial: 99 (+1)

Intelligence: 34

Command: 72

As should be readily apparent from her Martial score, Medelian Valdesca was the strongest of the Ten Commanders of Naruya, a great nation that was seen as the biggest threat on the continent.

She was their number one.

Now that I saw her for myself, she lived up to the rumors.

She had more than enough martial prowess to hold the first rank among the Ten Commanders, which also meant that she was the mightiest commander in Naruya. She even had a bonus applied to it. That meant her actual Martial was 100 right now. She must have had a treasure like Euracia's Rossade.

Two more swords hung at her waist too. I couldn't view detailed information on them, but it was safe to assume that since she was keeping them in reserve, they were treasures in their own right. I didn't know if she'd been given such destructive weapons at such a young age because of the special nature of House Valdesca, or if it was purely a recognition of her talent, but that wasn't important right now.

She's too strong. That's the problem here.

That said, I couldn't exactly ignore her or retreat.

Running into Valdesca as we withdraw would be the worst.

Still, there were too many issues with leaving her alone. She'd already completely shattered my fish scale formation. For every dead soldier, another sword floated up into the air to assault my forces once again.

It was maddening.

My men were dying, beheaded one after another. Realizing that, if this kept up, I was going to lose them all, I summoned Daitoren. I got in range of the flying swords, but Medelian wasn't paying attention to me. She just slashed at

me like any other soldier.

The style was unorthodox, but Daitoren was more than capable of stopping attacks like these. It was a wide area skill, but not one that particularly increased her attack power.

Her Martial score of 100 was reflected in the attack, which was common for many area-of-effect attack skills. It meant that each of these attacks were at Martial 100, so the ordinary soldiers couldn't possibly handle them.

I completely avoided Medelian's attacks as I approached her. The closer I got, the fiercer the attacks grew, but I could still stop them.

Once I closed in, Medelian drew her sword and came at me. It must have been a Valdesca family treasure.

The blade crossed with Daitoren, their powers colliding.

Daitoren was a mass of mana too. I didn't understand mana, but the basic way it functioned was that Daitoren was a mass of mana that released white light.

There were bright flashes each time Daitoren and the sword filled with Medelian's powerful mana clashed.

"Hey, there *is* someone pretty good here," she said as if she were enjoying the situation. "Hee hee! I was getting bored, so you'll do just fine. Let's play!"

The problem was that she kept using her mana skill while crossing blades with me. Even as we fought, every sword that fell on the battlefield became her weapon, flying up to rain back down on my troops. There was a bright flash each time.

She's tough. Even as she's fighting me, she's still able to keep doing massive damage to my troops. I never knew monsters like this existed. No wonder she's S-class.

If this keeps up, we're going to lose. Even if I can hold out against her, eventually Valdesca's reinforcements are going to arrive. In short, I'll have to accept the punishment of death on top of my failure to beat the game. That's the one thing I don't want.

The only reason I was able to fight her when she had a Martial score of 99 was that she wasn't taking it seriously. This was all just fun and games for her still.

Now was my chance. I'd take her out with True Crush before she got serious.

Even if Medelian had skills for single combat, True Crush had the awesome effect of nullifying enemy skills. I could only do this now, before I'd tipped my hand.

But there was a reason that I couldn't act right away. Her floating swords were fighting me ceaselessly, as though she had an inexhaustible supply of mana.

What is she hiding?

I turned my horse around. If this fight dragged on, that would mean my forces took that much more damage, and the risk of the main force joining up with them increased. I needed to settle this as soon as possible.

"Where are you going? It's a pain, but my brother told me I couldn't let so much as one mouse slip away from this battlefield. So you aren't going anywhere. And you're such a good way to kill time too!"

Even with Daitoren, I'm just an idle plaything to you, huh? I've got a half hour time limit, so I need to hurry. Now's the only time for it!

I used True Crush on her. Daitoren emitted a flash of white light and shot toward Medelian. There was a twinge in her expression for the first time. The swords flying toward my men all switched to defending her, but the moment True Crush touched them, her skill was nullified, and they fell to the ground.

She began to assume a defensive stance with the treasure sword in her hands, but it was already too late for that.

"Swegg! Rollins!"

Or so I thought, but then she threw the sword at me. Another shot off of her hip as if following the first. Perhaps because she'd revealed the names of her treasures, their effects displayed for me now.

Swegg gave her Martial a +1, while Rollins was a Martial +2.

The two blades collided with Daitoren! As they did, True Crush nullified the

mana skill, and with the loss of momentum, Swegg and Rollins fell to the ground.

Normally, equipping two or more swords wouldn't have given her any further boosts to her Martial score. However, because her personal skills allowed her to control the blades simultaneously, the system considered them both to be equipped. That meant that with the combined effect of Rollings her Martial rose to 102. If I were still using Crush, it would have been deflected, and I'd have died for sure.

Fortunately, True Crush could negate it. That meant her Martial was now 99.

I can win with True Crush!



But it looked like Swegg and Rollins' resistance also affected True Crush. They delayed it hitting Medelian, if only by an instant. That was long enough for her

to call the name of her final sword.

"Valdesca!"

Perhaps sensing the power of True Crush, she gripped her last sword and attempted to deflect Daitoren. Valdesca gave an incredible +5 to Martial. I'd used True Crush anticipating she would use her last sword.

Her base Martial was 99. Another +5 brought that up to 104. As for me, with Daitoren my Martial was 99. True Crush raised it to the same 104.

Our numbers are even. But there's still hope!

Under the game's system, when two powers of S-class or greater collided, they would counter each other, creating a blast wave that dealt damage and caused a knockback effect. Many players criticized it for being too cartoonish, but right now, I could only be grateful that the system existed.

If I miss with this, I'm a dead man. Now! Please*!*

At that very moment, we were both blown away. I'd been getting ready to use my 30 Second Invincibility, and activated it at the perfect moment to completely avoid the blast wave. I was blown backwards, and then sent rolling across the ground, but since I was invincible it didn't hurt.

The pain wasn't why I'd used my 30 Second Invincibility, though. The blast wave itself had a Martial of 104.

"Whew..."

The powerful mana explosion blew all of the soldiers around us to smithereens, and Medelian collapsed off in the distance. I was fine because of my 30 Second Invincibility, but she'd taken the force of that blast wave to her entire body. Her legs were still twitching a little, though, she apparently wasn't dead.

That was the top ranked member of Naruya's Ten Commanders. Who knew she'd be so formidable? If she had gone exclusively for me from the beginning, without bothering with the soldiers around us... No, if she'd used that Valdesca sword from the start... This ended the way it did thanks to her arrogance.

But before I could go and deal the finishing blow, she was suddenly wreathed

in light and disappeared.

Looks like it's that tool activating again. It was the same with Valdesca. He collapsed right next to me, but used that tool to escape. I think I remember hearing that, in the time of the Ancient Kingdom, the House of Valdesca were the ones who designed those tools, the ruins, and that kind of stuff. Mana circles, ruins, tools, and treasures. Their family's deeply involved with all of them.

If I hadn't been sent flying, that might have been a chance to finish her, but because I was so far away, I couldn't do anything. Daitoren had vanished too. Because my battle with her had already dragged on for so long, my time had already run out once I used True Crush. Fortunately, I was still able to do a good amount of damage.

That blast wave was really something. Who knew that it would be so dangerous when two special attacks from evenly matched commanders collided? Anyway, judging from the way she was looking, she isn't going to be able to rejoin this war in any hurry, at least. We'll call it a victory by decision, I guess.

This wasn't how I'd wanted it to be, but at least I was over the hurdle.

"Whew...!" I let out an involuntary sigh of relief.

The moment I did, arrows rained down on my forces.

These weren't fired by Medelian's Fourth Army. No, the Fourth Army didn't even have archers to begin with.

Valdesca's massive army had finally arrived.

*

“The enemy is estimated to have roughly twenty thousand men. Lady Medelian most definitely ground their numbers down.”

“I see. Still, it’s hard to imagine that proud girl retreating.”

Valdesca cocked his head to the side in confusion at Rump’s report.

“Regardless,” he continued, “They had no supply unit. They pulled back from Voltaire Castle to here without resupply. You understand what that means, right?”

Lucana clapped her hands and answered, “They have supplies in Eintorian?”

“Correct. Ultimately, the heart of our enemy lies in Eintorian. If the Fourth Army had held out a little longer, then we could have kept the number of enemies who were able to flee back to Eintorian to a minimum... It’s unfortunate that things worked out this way.”

“Incidentally, we don’t have a full grasp of the situation,” Rump explained. “The soldiers near Lady Medelian all died, without exception... No one knows what happened.”

Valdesca scratched his cheek. Right now, winning was more important than his sister.

“Let’s take an orthodox approach. We’ll surround Eintorian Castle. There is a limit to the amount of supplies they can have in there, and the enemy only numbers twenty thousand.”

If the Fourth Army hadn’t been beaten out on the open plains, the battle could have ended there. That it hadn’t was disappointing, but the Naruyan Army’s overwhelming advantage remained unshaken.

They outnumbered the enemy eight to one. Even if the battle happened at a castle with fortifications instead of out in the open, it was still indisputable who would win. On top of that, most of the Ten Commanders were still alive and well. Valdesca’s massive army of a hundred and sixty thousand men began marching on Eintorian Castle. As they were chasing a fleeing enemy, he positioned his cavalry at the front, and had the infantry follow behind.

But then something changed about the enemy they were pursuing.

When the report came in, Valdesca didn't even know what to make of it.

"You're telling me a small number of the enemy's troops entered Eintorian Castle, while the remainder headed south?"

"Yes, indeed! Will we pursue both groups, Commander? We await your command!"

What in the world does this mean? There isn't a single benefit in splitting their forces like this. If this is some sort of an attempt to confuse their enemies, then it's not a method any strategist ought to use. They're already down to just twenty thousand men. It takes a whole lot of guts to divide that number further and still expect to win somehow.

He said that a small force entered Eintorian Castle, but what am I supposed to conclude from that...?

"I don't think there's any need to dwell on it, Commander," said Rump. "Perhaps there was a rift between their commanders due to the crisis they're in?"

"I feel the same," Lucana agreed. Istin maintained his silence, but appeared to concur with the other two.

It was the same with all of Valdesca's other officers and retainers. They had pursued the forces of Eintorian and pushed them into a corner. There was nowhere for them to go now. Victory was all but in their hands.

"In the end, strategy relies on manpower. That's something that I can say with confidence after the long time I've served under you, Commander."

Valdesca nodded. No matter how he looked at it, there was no way the enemy could turn things around on them now. No matter how highly he overrated Erhin's abilities, it just wasn't going to happen.

"Where did the gray-haired man go? Erhin Eintorian?"

"He entered Eintorian Castle!"

"Then we go to Eintorian Castle. Ignore the rest of them!"

“Understood, Commander!”

As the officers ran off to carry out his orders, Naruya’s forces rushed toward Eintorian Castle.

“Create a multi-layered encirclement of Eintorian Castle. We mustn’t leave so much as a single gap.”

I’ll handle this with the orthodox strategy.

Valdesca decided not to think about anything else.

*

This was to be Eintorian’s final battle. That’s what the current situation led the refugees to believe.

“We all came here to rely on Eintorian, but they’re getting beaten. What’s happening?!”

“The people who’ve seen it in person are saying that they’re hopelessly outnumbered, so you can’t really blame them.”

“They don’t have the numbers to win, then?”

The refugees who had gathered nearby whispered among themselves as they wandered in place of somewhere to go.

“Eintorian’s over there, right?”

“Yeah. A big battle’s going to start there soon.”

“Everyone’s saying this will be the final battle.”

“Yeah, after the king died on the run, the Lord of Eintorian showed up too late, the only one willing to keep fighting on... What are the other lords even doing?”

“It sounds like he was the only one who had his troops ready too.”

“He was able to stop the Naruyans last time. Do you think it’s just too much for him to do it again?”

“I hear by the time he got back from Rozern, the north had already fallen, or something like that?”

“Yeah. That’s where I fled from. The enemy tore through the area so fast we barely knew what had hit us.”

The refugees bemoaned their current situation.

At this point, it was probably best for them to accept that they were going to be Naruyans, but they had vague misgivings about becoming the people of another country.

“Oh, who cares. I’m gonna go see this final battle.”

“You’ll die!”

“You think I’ll be able to see it if I climb that mountain over there?”

“Seriously, stop! It’s dangerous!”

For many of them, curiosity won out over fear. Many of the people began climbing the mountain to watch the battle. Word of the situation had spread, so no one expected Runan to win. But there were also rumors that Erhin was the last lord in Runan to still put up a fight, so onlookers flocked to see it—even knowing it was dangerous.

“By the way, the people in Eintorian are being awfully quiet, don’t you think?”

“They are, now that you mention it.”

Throughout it all, the refugees had one doubt lingering in their minds: there was no sign of the people of Eintorian trying to evacuate. Not only that, there was nothing inside the domain.

“It’s like there’s no one but soldiers in this vast domain.”

They weren’t just talking about inside the castle, of course. They meant the entirety of the Eintorian Domain.

*

Finally, the time had come. The armies of Naruya had assembled. Honestly, Eintorian was not a good territory in which to found a country. Especially not when there were so few people that I could trust, few soldiers, and we were also surrounded by Naruya. Not only that, the vast majority of the Runan Kingdom’s manpower was in Brijit.

Of course, the king sending his troops there, blinded by a juicy prize, had all been part of my plan, because I'd wanted Runan ruined more than anyone. Even if all of that manpower joined up with me, I couldn't amass power here. This land was ideal for starving people to death—an exposed territory, under pressure from more than just Naruya.

It just wasn't suitable as a place for me to declare the founding of my country and then keep growing stronger. But even if I was going to lay the foundation for my country somewhere else, I still had to break the Royal Naruyan Army first. It would be impossible to regroup while on the run.

First, I need to defeat Naruya, then gather the people, organize my armies, and build the strength to invade other countries. This is the first step toward that.

I'd sent the main body of my forces elsewhere while I led a smaller force into Eintorian Castle in order to lure in Valdesca. I surveyed his army from on top of the castle walls.

They surrounded Eintorian on all sides, with an encirclement that was several layers deep. What genuinely disciplined troops.

I couldn't be happier to see so many of them here.

To be honest, it was the secret hidden in Eintorian Castle that was making this entire plan possible.

Those secret passages that were created in the time of the Ancient Kingdom existed in Eintorian too. The room with the gold and the room where I'd found the bonus both had nothing to do with the Ancient Kingdom. The former was created by the descendants of Eintorian, and the latter was made by the game's management team. However, Eintorian, which had shared the same fate as the Ancient Kingdom, also had another secret room—a secret passage which I couldn't have entered without Euracia's ring.

I'd searched the entire castle. *There's no way that Brijit would have one and Eintorian wouldn't,* I'd thought, and was proven right.

The plan now was to use myself as bait to lure Valdesca's massive army into attacking an empty Eintorian Castle. The sun was setting, but he'd probably

attack anyway. All without realizing that Eintorian was now empty.

Valdesca's not going to give me time. He'll want to use his current momentum to take Eintorian Castle in one push.

This was my chance. Valdesca must have assumed it would be easier to attack under cover of night, because his forces stayed quiet until the sun went down, and then as soon as it had he ordered the assault.

*

"All forces, charge!"

Valdesca had no intention of dragging out the conquest of Eintorian Castle. He had all of his forces charge toward the castle. The first to go in were the Third Army, using ladders. Due to the death of Kediman, Rump had asked Valdesca to let the Third Army take point in order to redeem themselves. With no defenders protecting the castle, the massive army quickly got in and opened the gates, allowing Rump's forty thousand men to rush inside.

The burning gates lit the way, allowing a fairly rapid advance. The troops who were inside also opened the other gates, allowing even more soldiers to rush in.

But no matter where they pushed toward, they found no one to fight.

Rump thought the enemy were lying in wait for one last ambush, so he ordered all of the rest of the gates be opened, but search as they might, his men couldn't find a single Eintorian soldier.

"Report to the commander-in-chief at once!"

Finding this suspicious, Rump sent a messenger to Valdesca. After that, a small unit came rushing out of the castle gates.

"Captain, the enemy is ahead of us!"

"Were they hiding, then, like I thought?"

Rump nodded and then went to stop that unit, but Erhin was at the front of the group, and Rump's head quickly flew. Enough time had passed that Ehrin could use Daitoren again, and Rump paid the price. Meanwhile, at the same time, Rump's messenger arrived at Valdesca's camp, which was positioned at the very rear so that he could command all of his forces.

“Commander! Commander!”

“What is it?”

“We have trouble. There’s no one in Eintorian, just like at Voltaire Castle. The place is completely empty. There isn’t a soul to be found!”

“What do you mean? You’re telling me he abandoned his own home base?”

Valdesca felt like he’d been bashed in the head with a hammer. He thought that Eintorian already had other units deployed, and they were using them to disperse his attention. It was unthinkable that Erhin would truly abandon his main stronghold.

“Have everyone pull out of Eintorian Castle at once. At once, I say!” Valdesca shouted.

Faced with the incomprehensible, he had a bad feeling about all of this.

*

The massive Naruyan force entered Eintorian, more than sixty thousand of their troops all pushing forward at once.

The Naruyan Army had gathered nearly all of their forces—an army of a hundred and sixty thousand men—in the area around Eintorian Castle. The secret space was full of insults directed at the Twelve Houses by the ancient king who had been forced by their betrayal to retreat from the original capital of the Ancient Kingdom to Eintorian. This ancestor had developed the mana circles, and built secret passages all over the continent. After retreating all the way to the area currently called Eintorian, his heart broken, he began work on completing the last mana circle of his life. It was a self-destructing mana circle—his most horrible technique, one he meant to use to take the world down with him.

However, in the end, the Eintorian ancestor never actually used it. It was still unclear why.

After Jint had helped me to evacuate all of my remaining subordinates and subjects through the underground passage, Euracia and I stayed behind in the castle, just the two of us, waiting for the enemy.

“They’re here... Euracia, we’re going underground!”

“Got it!”

There was a vast, open space that led into the underground passage. When Euracia stood there, a mana circle appeared. Holding up her ring, she was able to activate it, and the mana circle flashed a blinding white light.

At the same time, there was a great rumbling from underground. The self-destruction circle was working.

“Okay, let’s run!”

We had to get to our horses quickly. I’d explained that it would take a fair amount of time for the mana circle to get going, but we couldn’t know exactly how long that would be, and that gave us reason to hurry. I was willing to take this risky gamble because I could still use 30 Second Invincibility two or three more times.

It’s a race against time, but as long as we can escape it’s all good!

Euracia nodded. And so, the two of us tried to slip out of the mana circle.

However, just as we did, the light of mana vanished!

“...”

Euracia and I stared at one another.

“It would appear...it doesn’t work once the user leaves the mana circle,” she said.

It had that kind of secret? Don’t tell me that the reason the Eintorian ancestor couldn’t use it was because he was afraid to die and just ran away.

As I was struck by a wave of despair, Euracia bit her lip.

“You go on by yourself,” she said to me. “I’ll stay here.”

That was out of the question.

“Not a chance! If it means sacrificing you, I’d rather just run away! Even if Naruya defeat us, so long as we survive, we’ll have a chance to recover. Let’s give up and get out of here.”

The ring, once worn, couldn't be removed until death.

Yeah, that's perfect for something you're going to commit suicide with! Even though he made the tool himself, once he put it on, there wasn't any way for him to take it off again!

"If this ring is the key...then perhaps we could just leave it here?" Euracia suggested, and then...

"Wait, Euracia!"

Without a moment's hesitation, she sliced off her own finger with Rossade.

Blood splattered the ground, and Euracia winced with pain as her finger fell into the circle, causing it to activate once more.

At this point, we left.

With the ring touching the mana circle, this time it kept on working.

"Damn it...! We've got to get out of here!"

There was no more time to think, so I grabbed Euracia by the arm.

We raced through the underground passage on horseback. The light of the mana circle was growing stronger, already setting off sparks outside Eintorian Castle. The Eintorian ancestor had apparently built this thing without the determination to blow himself up or even to sever his own finger.

Once we got outside, the design of the mana circle underground was being projected up into the sky.

This was after I had mercilessly cut down Rump, and we slipped out the gates!

Soon a massive flash of light spread out and engulfed the entirety of Eintorian Castle.

I spurred my horse onward, using 30 Second Invincibility as I did.

*

"What in the... This is impossible!"

A massive mana circle was projected in the sky. As the circle began to shine white, the ground shook. The land where the mana circle had been carved

began breaking apart.

It was an earthquake with an intense magnitude with Eintorian Castle as its epicenter, the disaster rippling and tearing through the land to affect the surrounding areas. The ground crumbled away like melting chocolate, and the earth swallowed up soldiers as the powerful quake kept spreading out.



Fissures continued to form in the splitting earth, closing in to right before Valdesca’s eyes. Magma spewed forth from the ground, engulfing his soldiers.

Eintorian Castle collapsed completely.

“Commander! You have to flee!”

The retainers of the House of Valdesca immediately took Valdesca by the arms.

“Run away! You have to run! Now!”

The soldiers who hadn’t been part of the encirclement went pale, running like madmen in the opposite direction of Eintorian Castle.

It was the same for the Ten Commanders.

Unable to defend themselves, they could only survive by fleeing.

The Naruyan Army, which had been focused on bunching together for the sake of unity, were separated as they ran off in all directions.

“What is this...? This mana circle is impossible! What kind of power could...”

As Valdesca stared at the mana circle with hollow eyes, he began trembling as it occurred to him what this was.

“No, it can’t be a mana circle from the Ancient Kingdom... They used that relic of old?!”

The mana circle spreading out from the castle closely resembled the designs of the Ancient Kingdom. Having studied them all his life, Valdesca was certain this had to be a remnant from that period.

I was up against a descendant of the Ancient Kingdom. I shouldn’t be surprised that he has the same kind of thing. Considering how suspicious his movements were, I should have been on guard against something.

No, I’ve already lost. What good does realizing it do me now?!

Valdesca had a hollow epiphany as he watched the earthquake strike.

“Your Excellency, you must flee this place at once!”

Valdesca’s retainers forced a tool into his hand, then triggered it.

Final Chapter: Victory and Its Price

Thirty thousand men were all that remained of Naruya's once massive army. It may have cost me my domain, but I was ready to call this a big win. Repeated notifications that I'd leveled up appeared before my eyes.

My level rose all the way from 25 to 35, and I'd gained 4,000 points!

However, my bigger concern was Euracia's finger. We couldn't get that back.

"Euracia, are you okay?"

"I'm all right. Were we able to drive off Naruya?"

"Yeah. I think so, but... You idiot! There had to be another way..."

I had no words. Euracia was just seemed indifferent. Something she'd said once before came back to me.

That time I said I'd like her to lend me the ring, she was about to cut her finger off, wasn't she?

"I swear I'll repay you for this. Even if it costs me my life."

"Don't be silly. You've already saved Rozern, and you saved me. There's no need to feel so bad over one little finger."

"Euracia..."

All I could do was clutch the hand that was now missing a finger.

*

With the enemy scattered, the iron cavalry which had pulled back earlier returned to attack them. The Naruyans still had a total of thirty thousand troops, but they had just suffered a massive blow to the psyche.

Royal Naruyan Army

Third Army

Manpower: 9,200 men

Morale: 20

Training: 92

The Third Army had fallen to ninety-two hundred men, and their morale had dropped precipitously. Meanwhile, the iron cavalry were my best troops. My infantry and archers had taken heavy losses in the battle against the Fourth Army, but the iron cavalry which had gone on a detour with Erheet to ambush the enemy still had eighty-four hundred men.

The Third Army, composed primarily of infantry, was no match for them.

Eintorian Iron Cavalry

8,400 men

Morale: 100

Training: 97

The unit had a hundred points of Morale, and an overwhelming troop type advantage on top of that.

Royal Naruyan Army, Third Army: 9,200 men

Eintorian Iron Cavalry: 8,400 men

Troop Type Advantage: +50% Attack

Morale Advantage: +100% Attack

The oversized gap in morale gave us a massive attack bonus, and the Third Army, which had begun retreating before fully entering the castle, was soon being pushed back.

Royal Naruyan Army, Third Army: 2,300 men

Eintorian Iron Cavalry: 7,900 men

It was a one-sided rout.

The death of Rump, one of the Ten Commanders, and the commanding

officer of the Third Army, was probably responsible for their morale falling that far.

The Third Army was broken.

That only left the retreating Naruyan Army with less than twenty thousand men.

*

"This is a mana circle of the Ancient Kingdom. It's hard to believe, even after seeing it with me own eyes."

Erheet had a look of disbelief on his face even now that the battle was over. The tremors had already subsided, but there were places where the ground had swelled or subsided, and magma had flowed forth, leaving clear traces of what had happened here. Normally, this kind of disaster would have killed tens of thousands.

Naturally, my allies began talking about the power of the mana circle amongst themselves, and also how the modern Eintorian, which was built by those ancestors from the Ancient Kingdom, had such a facility, and we had been able to use it.

Erheet had trouble believing it at first, but he had to accept what he'd seen with his own eyes.

"I'm glad it worked properly. The Naruyan Army won't be able to move for some time now. Not until they join up with their king on the Herald front, at least."

That's right. Impressive as Naruya is, they won't be able to exert their power much after losing an army of a hundred and sixty thousand men. Well, with the exception of the hundred thousand men who the Naruyan king took with him, that is. Now that they've taken such massive losses, I'll definitely have time and opportunities. But not here in Eintorian. It's a stone's throw from Naruya, and exposed on all sides.

There's no telling where an enemy might attack from in this situation.

For that reason, I had moved everything to Bertaquin. I'd already relocated

the people of the domain and the riches beneath the castle there over the past three months. The only reason no one found out about it was because of the secret passage. I couldn't have executed this sort of plan without it. The secret passage in that ruin that the mountainfolk of Bertaquin were protecting was connected to Runan.

Bertaquin doesn't just have iron, it's also a land of natural bounty, what with being surrounded by mountains on one side and the sea on the other!

Bertaquin was small by itself, but I was in a position to claim the neighboring domains too. My first goal was to expand my country into a state that was about the size of three domains of the former Brijit Kingdom. It was made possible by the fact that the land I wanted was surrounded by the mountains, making it a natural fortress.

In a way, my position was similar to that of Liu Bei of Shu. Shu was also in a mountainous region, so he'd declared the foundation of his country in a natural fortress that was hard to approach.

Of course, Shu failed in the end. If I'm going to beat this game, I'll have to make sure that I don't follow the same path as they did.

I had twenty thousand troops left.

Erheet was with me, of course, and so was Lican. I hadn't particularly wanted the latter of the two, but he'd ended up sticking with me through everything that happened. It wasn't just Lican who stuck with me. There were also hundreds of thousands of refugees behind me who saw me as their shield against Naruya.

I opened up the secret passage for them.

It would take too long to make them cross the mountains, so there wasn't really any other option. Besides, my own people had already all learned about the secret passage when they'd agreed to the relocation. I planned to move the refugees through it, then destroy the entrance so that no one else could use it.

It'd be a problem if Naruya came through to attack us.

It's a shame to give it up, but I'd better hurry up and let it go.

*

“We’ve already come a long way, and the Naruya Kingdom’s taken our homes, so we’ve gotta go check it out. If we stick with the Lord of Eintorian, he’ll give us farmland, and he won’t even charge us taxes for a while!”

“Is there really a land like that?”

“They were saying it’s on the coast, you know?”

“The seaside, huh... I’ve never seen the sea.”

The refugees were receptive to Erhin’s suggestion that, rather than stay in Runan which was going to be right in the middle of a war zone, they should come with him to another region where they safety would be assured. He told them that soon Naruya would be fighting against many other nations for control of Runan’s territory.

Just the thought of it was hell.

No one wanted to find themselves caught on the battlefield. Giving up their homeland was better than losing their lives. If there was someone saying that he’d protect them, and a place where he was offering to do so, then it was only natural they would be swayed.

To capitalize on this, Erhin went around giving speeches to the refugees.

“If you come with me now, there may be a lot of uncertainty, but I guarantee you that your lives will not be at risk! I will give you farmland, and exempt you from taxation for the time being. You can settle there permanently! But I’ll be taking back the lands of Runan eventually, so you can return home then too! If you’ll believe in me, I’ll do it all! I will serve as your shield!”

Word spread, and the refugees’ Opinion of Erhin rose to over 90.

*

It wasn’t just the refugees who were thrilled by my victory. The lords of the southwestern territories of Runan and their troops started coming to me too. Even if they stayed in Runan, they’d have to surrender to Naruya. Cassia wasn’t known for being a merciful king, so the lords of the southwest decided to side with me instead.

Of course, since, unlike Lican, they had only come to me after the battle where I broke the Naruyan Army, they had clearly taken their time to read the situation.

Anyway, for all of his faults, Lican had stuck with me to the end, without running away.

Although, it seemed that was at least in part because he was too indecisive to decide whether he wanted to fight with me or flee. Regardless, I intended to treat him better than these new fair-weather friends. Ultimately, relocating this many people to a new domain was a huge undertaking, and things were going to be hectic for a while.

Things wouldn't all get sorted out until the migration was complete.

After the large-scale migration, I took my key retainers through the secret passage, and we emerged just a stone's throw from Bertaquin.

And when we arrived in Bertaquin proper...

There was an army of thirty thousand men waiting there for me. Unlike my own exhausted troops, these thirty thousand were fresh and full of vigor. Everyone tensed up for a moment, but... This unit wasn't wearing the black uniforms of Naruya.

They wore the Runanese blue.

"I want to speak with you, Your Excellency! I've done as you said, organizing all of the domains, and now I have come here to greet you!"

The commander of the great army got down from his horse and bowed before me.

His troops bowed too.

The leader of this massive force was Fihatori.

Fihatori Delhina

Age: 24

Martial: 81

Intelligence: 85

The commander who’d saved Rozern with me—a young genius with the talent to command over a hundred thousand troops.

Afterword

Thank you for reading the third volume of Only the Villainous Lord Wields the Power to Level Up. This is the author, Waruiotoko.

We were able to publish Volume 3 thanks to you, the readers! Who would have thought I'd get to write an afterword for a third volume! Thank you so, so much.

Just a little while ago, the original work was suddenly removed from the site Shosetsuka ni Narou where I had been serializing it. That caught me by surprise, and I must have made the people who were following my work there worry that the story wouldn't continue. I'm so happy to be able to let you all read the continuation in book form.

I've resumed serializing the original on Kakuyomu now, by the way. I'd like it if people would read the story there too.

Now then, in this third volume, our protagonist Erhin finally starts making moves in order to found his own country and try to beat the game. The turbulent world unleashed by Erhin and the Naruya Kingdom is only going to heat up from here.

Mind games to overcome the fleet of another nation! The protagonist becoming a king! That's what I have planned for Volume 4. Oh, and the new heroine, Medelian, will have her chance to shine there too, of course.

That's assuming they decide to publish Volume 4...

Also, there's a manga adaptation starting too!

It's currently serializing in Gangan Online and on the Manga Up app.

This adaptation is quite different from the original work, with a more comedic flavor. It doesn't have the serious tone that the original work does very often, so I had my concerns about how it would turn out, but once I saw it, I was more entertained and satisfied than I expected (lol).

Thank you so much, Esuo-sensei, for your work on the manga adaptation.

Now then, everyone, I know that times are hard right now with the coronavirus, but let's all keep on doing our best!

I'm looking forward to seeing you all again next volume.

Waruiotoko