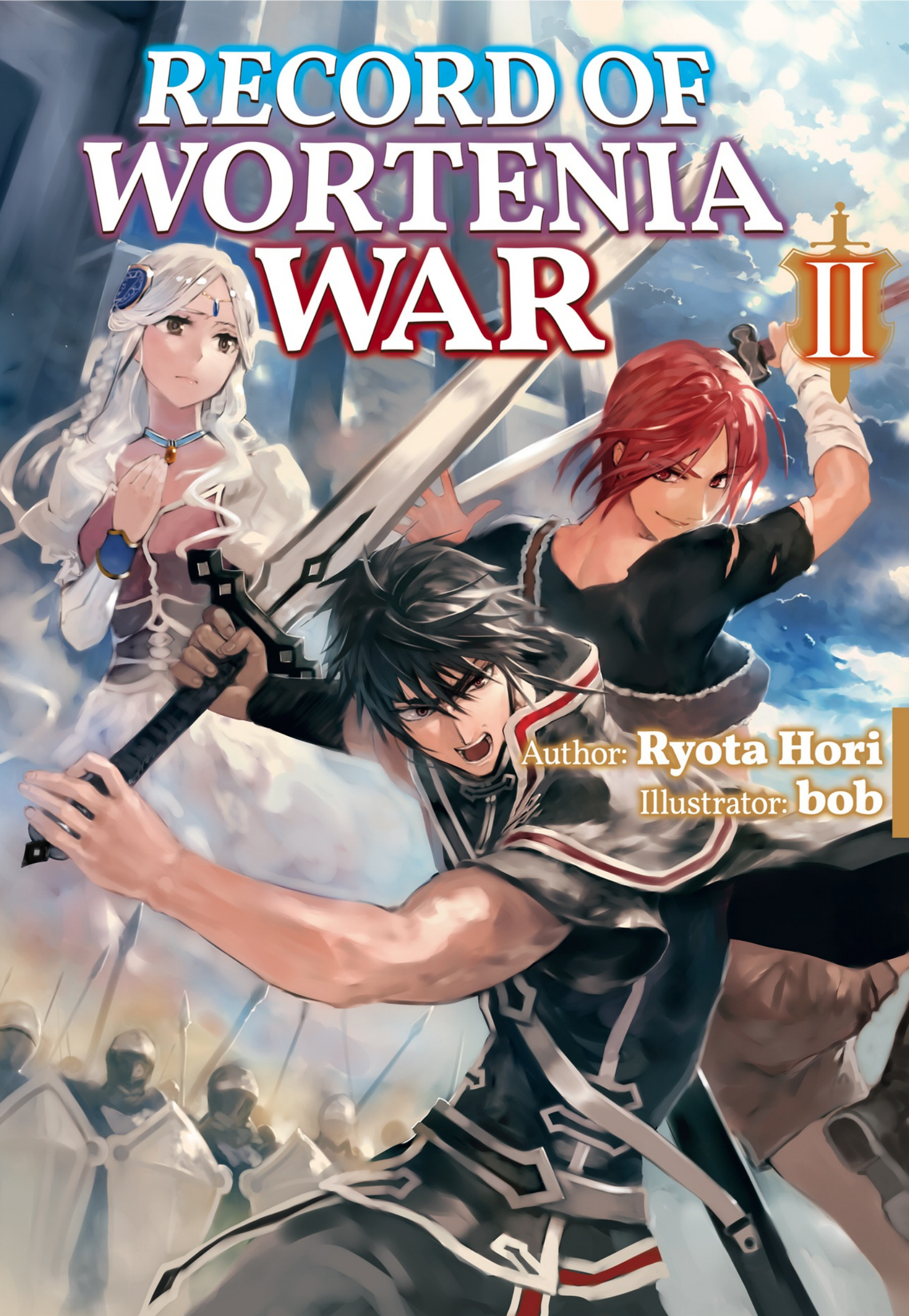

RECORD OF
WORTENIA
WAR
II
Author: Ryota Hori
Illustrator: bob


"I don't care if it kills the damn horses, don't lose any speed!"
Ryoma desperately maintained his posture, guarding Sara's body from the deluge of arrows flying their way.
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR


"You're quite the confident one, aren't you?"
"Because I'll bring you victory."
Lupis Rhoadserians
Commander of the Rhoadserian royal guard. Heir to the country's throne after her father's, that is, the king's demise, but is currently caught in a political struggle.
Meltina Lecter
Vassal of the Rhoadserian royal family and Princess Lupis's personal aide.
Ryoma Mikoshiba
A high schooler summoned to another world by the Empire of O'Itormea. Brimming with talent, he is set on the path for domination.


"Master Ryoma... It's almost time."
Laura's sweet whisper tickled his ear, pulling Ryoma out of his reading and back to reality.
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



Ryota Hori



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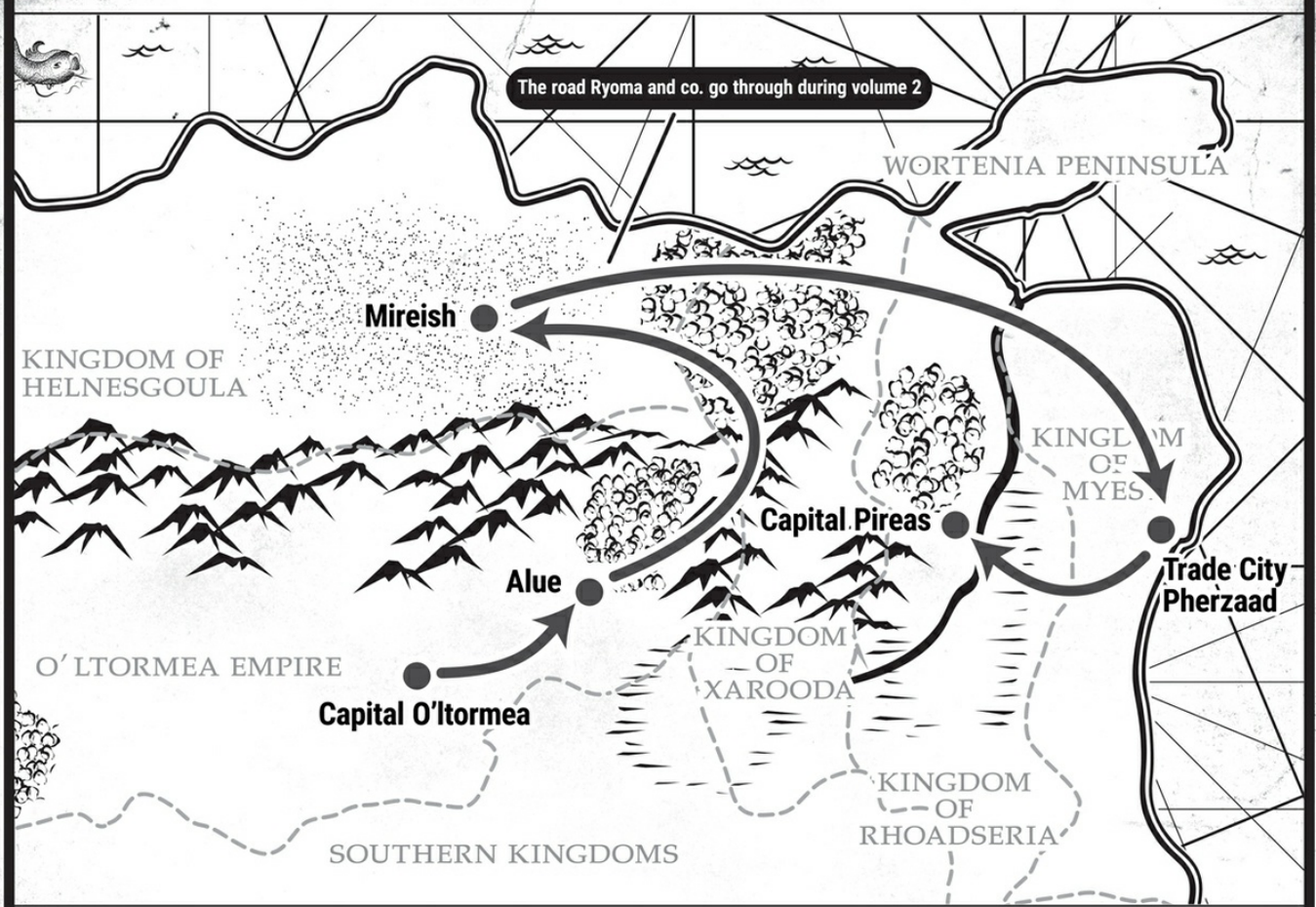
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WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》



O'ltormea Empire

An empire situated at the center of the western continent. Seeks to unite the western continent under their hegemony.

The Kingdom of Rhoadseria

One of the three countries reigning over the eastern side of the western continent. Blessed with ample water from the river Thebes, its granaries are always full. With the Kingdom of Xarooda to its west and the Kingdom of Myest to its east, it is under constant threat of hostilities. General Hodram and Duke Gelhart have seized power over the country, and now serve as its de facto leaders.

The Kingdom of Xarooda

A mountainous country that shares its western border with O'ltormea. Surrounded by steep mountains which form a natural fortress around it, its production consists mostly of iron ore, which it has an abundance of. Has been capable of somehow holding back the Empire's advance so far. Relies heavily on food imported from the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, its eastern neighbor.

The Kingdom of Myest

A trade country that shares its western border with Rhoadseria. Also holds trade relations with the central continent; the largest trade city in the western continent, Pherzaad, lies within its borders.

The Kingdom of Helnesgoula

The kingdom that reigns over the northern part of the western continent. Also advocates hegemony over the continent, and longs to set foot in the central part of the continent. Has an extremely bad relationship with the Empire of O'ltormea.

Holy Qwiltantia Empire

The Holy Empire that reigns over the western side of the western continent. Is in a state of cold war with the Empire of O'ltormea. Plans to invade the southern regions.

The Southern Kingdoms

A generic term describing the assortment of small countries in the southern regions of the western continent. The largest battle zone of the western continent, the conflicts there are incessant.

Prologue

A single man walked through the pleasure quarter in the northern districts of the imperial capital, clad in a hood and mantle and mingling with the darkness of the night, trying to avoid attention. The cries of the drunkards and the coquettish voices of the barmaids echoed distantly in his ears. He hurried to his destination, the unpleasant scent of alcohol mixed with smoke invading his nostrils.

He'd already given his report to his official superior— the Emperor— but right now he was about to report to his other, behind-the-scenes superior.

While Shardina was delivering the account of what happened to the Emperor, Saitou had simply kneeled with a grave expression, but this more shadowy superior would require him to make a more detailed explanation of what happened.

The Organization. Such a gathering of people existed on this Earth, and its members simply referred to it as such. A place which those plucked away from their home world and thrown into this one could congregate in. And, at the same time, where those burning with endless hatred and loathing resided.

"Heh... What a vexing matter." Imagining the face of his superior made a leaden sigh escape Saitou's lips.

Saitou's behind-the-scenes superior, Akitake Sudou, was by no means the kind of man who didn't take circumstances into consideration, nor did he have the kind of personality that made him hard to get along with. In fact, considering it was Sudou who granted Saitou a place in the Organization, the man was effectively the savior of his life. If one were to look past the fact that he was something of a cynic who took a bit of pleasure in teasing other people, Sudou was an ideal employer.

But the one thing he wasn't was a soft person.

If one were to consider the recent incident from the perspective of Saitou's position as the vice-captain of the Succubus Knights, this whole affair was far from a failure. True, the fact that Ryoma Mikoshiba had slipped through their

fingers after he had briefly been in their grasp was a strike against him, but the chances of catching him in the first place were already slim, and Shardina had to assume all responsibility for the matter as captain.

In fact, after the audience, the Emperor personally gave Saitou a few words of encouragement. He'd more than just fulfilled his role as the vice-captain of the Succubus Knights which supported the empire, and as Shardina's right hand man.

But from the perspective of whether he succeeded here as a member of the Organization, the outlook was a touch more dubious. Part of the mission appointed to Saitou was to advance Shardina's political standing.

After receiving permission to come in, Saitou opened the door and was greeted with the sight of Sudou sitting on the room's sofa, enjoying a meal and a bottle of wine sitting on the table.

"I hear things have been quite hectic for you. My, you've worked hard indeed, have you not?"

Having been greeted in a teasing, superficial fashion, Saitou's expression stiffened. There was a lot he wanted to say, but no matter how much of a mean-spirited, twisted person the man sitting before him was, he was still his superior.

Saitou moved to sit down on the opposite sofa without asking for permission, aware of how impolite that was. Such was his silent form of protest. Watching Saitou's expression with amusement, Sudou poured some wine into the glass in front of him.

"My, this is something of a surprise... From your expression, I assume Mr. Mikoshiba's escape from Princess Shardina's grasp wasn't a result of your scheming. And here I was convinced you purposely gave him an opening..."

Sudou's gaze suddenly took on a sharpness that could seemingly cut through everything, and Saitou felt a chill slithering down his spine.

"Are you implying I allowed my personal feelings to mingle with my responsibility?" Saitou nearly stood up, the words he feared hearing the most reaching his ears.

If Sudou were to answer this question in the affirmative, it would spell a death sentence for Saitou. The Organization was fundamentally intolerant of failures, and if one's actions were perceived as trying to deliberately hinder the mission, it would result in instant execution. That was an obvious form of self-defense for an illegal organization.

The Organization had ordered Saitou to aid Shardina, or to be more exact, to help her gain merit and increase her influence in the court; in that regard, this turn of events was a particularly painful blow for the organization.

True, the Emperor had covered for his beloved daughter Shardina and granted her a chance at conquering Xarooda, but there was no avoiding the fact that some nobles would likely go on to doubt her capabilities. Shardina's influence had been reduced somewhat, and that was an irrefutable truth.

However, he had won Shardina's deep trust in numerous ways; the fact that he was able to quickly set up the blockade by the border and lead Ryoma Mikoshiba into the forest as she had planned, the fact that he advised her to slay Ryoma upon his capture despite his understanding of the Emperor's wishes, and most of all, throwing himself onto Shardina to protect her when the wind generated by the verbal thaumaturgy spell swept through the camp.

If the Organization were to kill Saitou now, they would have to send someone else to serve under Shardina, but that hypothetical replacement would take a considerable amount of time to build up the degree of trust Saitou had earned. Ergo, it wasn't profitable for them to kill Saitou now.

But that all hinged on the Organization's understanding that Saitou put his all into capturing Ryoma Mikoshiba. Saitou was both an operative and a spy for the Organization, and as such, allowing his personal emotions to influence his mission was unforgivable.

In the end, whether the Organization recognized that this chain of events was beyond Saitou's control depended on Sudou's opinion. It was only natural, then, that he would go pale upon hearing Sudou's words.

But Saitou's cautious expression merely made Sudou raise his voice in pleasant laughter, without a sliver of the sharp look he'd had before.

"Well, perhaps I've threatened you a bit too hard... Come now, no need to be

so nervous. If I were seriously intent on disposing of you, you'd have bid this mortal coil farewell a long time ago."

Their gazes remained locked together for a single, interminable moment.

"Yes... I suppose that's true." Saitou said, evidently convinced.

Heaving a heavy sigh, he sat back down on the sofa.

What a terrifying man... He knew everything about the situation before I even reported it to him.

He realized Sudou's words were said in jest, but that also meant his power and influence extended far and deep into the Empire. Yes, deep enough to know even the most minute details of one of the Emperor's meetings.

Saitou's throat was dry from the suspense, and he felt an innate need to quench his thirst. He took the glass sitting in front of him and downed it in one gulp; the sour flavor of red wine, matured and ripened by years of storage, filled his mouth. He would have liked to linger on its taste a bit longer, but right now it was nothing more than liquid to erase the dryness from his throat.

Seeing Saitou's face contort as he gulped the wine down, Sudou's smile deepened as he handed him a glass of water.

"Well, while it's certain that Princess Shardina's influence took a blow as a result of recent events, her trust in you has increased just the same. The murder of the court thaumaturgist, Gaius Valkland, was not something we planned for, but it has merely moved things slightly ahead of schedule... Unfortunate as it may be for those who wished to slay Gaius themselves."

"Which is to say?"

"Well, I do not find much fault in your judgment during this incident, Saitou, and I intend to say as much in our planned meeting two weeks from now... Oh, yes, since I've gone to the trouble of having this meal prepared, feel free to help yourself."

Relieved by those words, Saitou reached for the dishes set in front of him.

"But to think there's a man who could take one such as you by surprise... That Mikoshiba fellow is quite impressive, given his youth."

“Yes... Though I would not say he is strong, so much as I would say he is terrifying.”

“Terrifying?”

Feeling Sudou’s probing gaze on him, Saitou stopped moving the spoon in his hand.

“Yes. I find his ruthlessness and adaptability to be rather frightening, if I am to be honest.”

Were things to come down to simply arm strength and agility, Saitou would surely overwhelm Ryoma Mikoshiba. Having lived in this world for nearly eight years and fought through countless battles, Saitou had developed one of the skills unique to this world, martial thaumaturgy, allowing him to exhibit a strength exceeding what human muscles could normally produce. If Saitou and Ryoma were to clash, Saitou would, objectively speaking, no doubt be the stronger of the two.

But in a battle to the death... Well, I’ve slipped through many of those in the past. I have confidence I won’t lose to some brat, but he...

What made Ryoma Mikoshiba so frightening was not his physical strength or his transcendent martial arts skills, but rather, the way his method of thinking wasn’t bound by common sense, and how ruthless he could be against his enemy.

That was a strength Saitou sought; a strength he had lacked in his younger days.

“I see... the strength of his heart.” Sudou seemed to have picked up on everything from the look on Saitou’s face. “But if that’s the case, it makes his talent all the more outstanding. To say one’s potential is ominous truly must mean people like him.”

“Which is to say?”

Gazing at Saitou’s doubtful, questioning face, Sudou smiled like a mischievous prankster.

“You’ve spoken to him yourself, Saitou. How old would you say our young Mr.

Mikoshiba is?”

Regarding the unexpected question doubtfully, Saitou gave his honest impression.

“Yes, let’s see... Well, I’d assume he’s the same age as me, or a bit younger, perhaps?”

“Hmm, hmm. So, in his mid twenties or so... Yes, I see, I see.”

That was a reasonable assessment. Had anyone else asked the question, Sudou and Saitou would have answered the same way. Assuming, of course, they didn’t know the answer ahead of time...

“Apparently, he is actually sixteen years old.”

Sudou’s words rang decidedly loud in Saitou’s ears, but he couldn’t quite understand them. Or perhaps it would be more apt to say, he didn’t want to believe them.

“What?”

Glancing at Saitou’s face, Sudou tilted the glass in his hand. He likely felt the same way as Saitou deep down.

“I refer to Mr. Mikoshiba’s age, of course.”

“It can’t be... Are you sure that’s true?”

“I confirmed the documents he submitted when he registered at the capital’s guild. There’s no mistaking it.”

Those words made Saitou fall silent.

Sixteen? I suppose I could believe if you’d tell me he was a teen who just happens to look a bit older... But sixteen? No, wait. He did mention he was a high-schooler back then...

It was certainly possible for a person to fake how old they looked, the countenance they had, and the impression they left. Makeup and one’s attire could greatly influence how old they looked. Depending on the circumstances, a sixteen-year-old could be made up to appear thirty years old, and vice versa.

Things were so hectic in that moment, and it had been pushed to the back of

his mind after having to deal with the aftermath of the incident and returning to the capital, but those words clicked with what Saitou had now remembered.

“Come to think of it, he did say something about that... But if that’s true... He truly is a monster.” Saitou said, verbalizing the terror surging up in his heart.

If that’s true, just what kind of life did he lead in Japan? This can’t be chalked up to just his personality or talent... It’s like he had always been ready for the moment he’d be summoned.

Compared to how Saitou was in his high school days, Ryoma Mikoshiba was far too unusual of a person.

A long, long silence fell over the room. Saitou stared intently at Sudou, who sat silently, deep in thought.

“Very well... Considering what went down, there’s quite a bit to mull over, but in the end, we’ll have to take a ‘wait and see’ approach with Mr. Mikoshiba.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, toying with him needlessly could very well end badly. I would have considered having the Hunting Dogs dispose of him if the situation permitted, but given how much awe he struck into you, I’ll inform the Organization that he is not to be approached carelessly... Your words have forced me to slightly reconsider things.”

The Hunting Dogs... The Organization’s elite force. He’d even considered sending out those monsters that surpass Rank S...

The level of force felt almost too excessive, considering it was all for the aim of killing one summoned boy. Sudou feigned composure, but it seemed the Organization saw this matter as one of vital importance.

Well, given how well the plan is progressing, it makes sense they’d want to eliminate any uncertain factors... But going that far?

Judging from Sudou’s words, the plan seemed to have changed.

“Whatever the case, now that he’s escaped the empire, the first thing he would do is seek a method to return to our world.”

Saitou nodded silently at Sudou’s words. Returning to their home, Earth, was

the greatest dream of every member of the Organization. But they called it a dream because they knew it could never be... That was a truth Saitou and Sudou were all too bitterly aware of.

“Despair will soon descend upon our Mr. Mikoshiba, and once that happens, he will come to a parting of the ways. We can decide on how to handle him, depending on the choice he will make. I have no desire to needlessly antagonize such a promising, prospective young man, after all.”

“You’re considering recruiting him?”

“It’s hard to say at this point. It all depends on our good Mr. Mikoshiba, I suppose...” Sudou regarded his subordinate’s question with a smirk before changing the topic. “Well, leaving our young friend aside, let us discuss what comes next for us, shall we?”

“We’re moving away from the capital?”

“Yes, just as you’ve surmised. His Grace the Emperor himself has ordered us to expedite work on what Gaius was working on in preparation for the invasion of the Kingdom of Xarooda.”

“So you’re driving a wedge into the kingdom of Rhoadseria...” Saitou said, his expression changing at those words.

“Yes, and as such I’ll be away from the capital for a while. I’m actually quite looking forward to working on-site for once.” Sudou said, and raised his voice in jovial laughter.

Three travelers moved through the Dosh Desert, dirtied by its warm, billowing yellow sands. They were currently in the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, ruler of the north of the western continent. The Dosh Desert lay at its center, a land of sands and winds covering a tenth of the country’s surface. However, it was far from an infertile land where no vegetation grew, thanks to its countless oases and the Avul river that cut through the southern mountain range and flowed into the sea.

If nothing else, the land around those oases and the river allowed for the prosperous raising of crops and stock farming. And in addition, since trying to circumvent it only increased the journey by far too many needless days, a trade

route was built across the desert. Cities were built around the oases dotting the land for the sake of the merchants, which flourished as relay points for trade.

Still, it was by no means a safe land. The cloaks the three travelers wore made it clear their journey was not an easy one.

“It should be right past that dune.” Laura pointed to the dune towering ahead of them, while shielding her eyes from the sunlight.

Beyond that dune was an oasis, and the city built around it was their destination. The town of Mireish, a local center of commerce and trade.

Using the trade through the Avul river, Mireish, which had deep connections with the cities sitting on the river’s mouth, boasted a prominent size even within the Kingdom of Helnesgoula. People naturally gathered where goods would gather; and where people gathered, information was abundant.

“Will she really be there? That woman...”

Removing the hood that shielded his eyes from the blowing sand, a virile man scoured the sky spreading out over the desert. His eyes were filled with a tragic light, borne of deep despair mixed with a flicker of hope.



His name was Ryoma Mikoshiba.

An unfortunate young man, plucked out of his ordinary life in Japan at the hands of the late court thaumaturgist Gaius Valkland of the Empire of O'ltormea, and summoned into this other world full of chaos.

"I'll spare your time and cut to the chase. Sad as I am to say it, returning you to your old world is essentially impossible."

The dim room was full of tomes covered in yellowing bindings. It was the very image of a scholar's room. Ryoma stood in front of the desk, as there was no place to sit with how crammed with books the room was; he looked at the room's owner with a clinging, pleading gaze as she mercilessly cut down his expectations.

The mistress of this room filled with moldy, somehow moist air was a woman clad from head to foot in linen. She looked to be in her mid thirties or forties, and her appearance seemed unremarkable overall. The same held true for her attire, which was the sort of plain outfit worn by commoners. If one had to point out anything remarkable about her, it was that her black, sleek hair was a bit conspicuous.

She looked to be a common individual, the type one could encounter anywhere. But this woman's true value lay in something one wouldn't be able to judge from her seedy appearance. Her true value lay in her intellect, in her vast knowledge that made her among the most knowledgeable ones in the continent when it came to thaumaturgy. That was what decided her value, and the reason Ryoma crossed a perilous desert to arrive in Mireish. To meet Annamaria, the woman known as "Mireish's Recluse," and find a way back home...

"Do you mean it's impossible with the current techniques?" A hint of mocking glinted in Ryoma's eyes.

In the two months since he had escaped Shardina's pursuit, Ryoma went in all directions, seeking out famed thaumaturgists. Annamaria's words were the same ones spoken by the many thaumaturgists he'd spoken to up until now.

The same from her, too... Shit.

Ryoma clicked his tongue, annoyed by his efforts once again coming up in vain. But what the woman said next exceeded Ryoma's expectations.

"No, it's not because I have no technique to send someone back. It's because a technique to send someone back simply cannot be produced."

"What?!" These unexpected words made Ryoma raise his voice in anger.

It was a countenance of wrath that the Malfist sisters hadn't seen on Ryoma's face in the two months he'd traveled with them. For two months, the three of them ignored all guild-related work, traveling in search of thaumaturgists who might have a way to send him back to his Earth.

Of course, having killed Gaius and been driven out of the empire of O'ltormea, Ryoma couldn't visit any thaumaturgists in the empire's sphere of influence, so he put them aside... And so they went from place to place, but whoever they visited, they always gave the same answer.

There was no way back.

But they also said that the technique simply hadn't been developed yet. Which prompted Ryoma to ask them, "Can you develop that technique?" But their answer was unanimous. "It is impossible for me."

Very few verbal thaumaturgists were capable of making use of the technique to summon someone from another world, which was a guarded, secret art. Its existence may have been well known, but very few could actually make use of the technique, and Ryoma was asking them to reverse engineer the craft and form an entirely new one. Anyone would naturally hesitate.

He'd heard that same answer repeated more times than he could count already. Some of those he asked named a few people who might be capable of creating a new technique, and one of them was the woman before him, Annamaria.

If a technique to take him home didn't exist, it only needed to be made. That was what Ryoma simply thought. And he was aware that it was far more easily said than done. He was prepared for the process to take years and require vast resources. But if the technique simply could not be produced, that would be entirely different.

His escaping from Shardina's clutches and traveling from place to place, evading his pursuers, would have all been for naught. It was only natural Ryoma would lose his temper.

"Calm yourself. Getting angry will not change that answer."

Even in the face of Ryoma's anger, Annamaria didn't change her expression. Apparently, she had once been a civil official for some country and had to leave her post for opposing a minister over national policies. Ryoma could agree with those rumors being plausible.

Even before the threatening pressure Ryoma's massive frame gave off, her expression didn't so much as budge. She had a grit one wouldn't expect out of a woman. Realizing threatening her wouldn't help him here, Ryoma changed his tone. Buying Annamaria's ire here wouldn't do him any good. He needed to gather any information that might help him get back home.

"I apologize for losing my temper... I'm fine. Could you explain why it's impossible for me to go back?"

Suppressing the hatred and anger brewing in his heart, Ryoma found the presence of mind to speak those words. Shouting here wouldn't change the facts. If he was to advance even a single step forward, what he needed was to remain cool-headed, not to stew in anger.

Perhaps he'd clenched his teeth too strongly, because the taste of rust spread out in his mouth.

"The reason is clear enough... Before I explain it, though, I need to confirm something. How much do you understand about how thaumaturgy works?"

"How thaumaturgy works...?"

Annamaria's question caused what the Malfist sisters had taught him about thaumaturgy to resurface in his mind. Thaumaturgy was a general term for techniques that made use of prana, the fundamental life energy that all living beings in this world had. And depending on how it was used, thaumaturgy could be divided into three main categories.

The first employed the prana within oneself to strengthen one's body; martial thaumaturgy. This technique required no incantations and was used to

augment one's physical ability, making it extremely menacing when used during close quarters combat. Its greatest flaw was that the scope of its influence ended with strengthening one's body; it only augmented what the human body was capable of to begin with. So in other words, it could boost your muscle strength and stamina, but couldn't enable you to fire flames or anything of the sort.

The second was closer to what fantasy novels described as magic; verbal thaumaturgy. This allowed the user to temporarily borrow a bit of the power of existing gods, demons and spirits in exchange for their prana. It required reciting incantations, but it allowed one to unleash flames, fire bolts of electricity, and to make use of all kinds of powers and phenomena that humans wouldn't normally be capable of exhibiting. At its core, verbal thaumaturgy was a method for humans to achieve what was normally impossible.

And as for its biggest flaw, it was certainly the requirement of the incantation itself. It was possible to shorten and omit parts of the incantation depending on the caster's skill, but all the same, mortal combat rarely allowed one the time to recite a spell. As such, verbal thaumaturgists showed their value only when given distance between their foes.

In addition, since they were asking for the assistance of others, i.e. gods and demons, they would need to have a thaumaturgical technique made up of knowledge regarding the one whose power they were borrowing. Those were, however, secret arts only held by those in positions of power within the different countries; since the rate of illiteracy in this world was exceptionally high, very few people had the freedom to choose to learn by reading books.

In other words, compared to martial thaumaturgy, verbal thaumaturgy had a much higher running cost on the battlefield. It was for this reason that among the many thaumaturgists, only very few employed verbal thaumaturgy.

The final type was endowed thaumaturgy. It involved carving thaumaturgy into a tool that lacked prana of its own, like a sword or a spear, allowing it to exhibit a predetermined effect when enveloped with a user's prana, and in so doing endowing an effect on the material.

While it required no incantations, on the other hand it required the

thaumaturgic carving to be etched by a knowledgeable craftsman, and was only capable of the single effect it was endowed with. But since the user himself didn't need to be the one doing the engraving, the number of weapons wasn't very limited.

Of course, depending on the quality and material, endowed weapons could be extremely expensive, so in other words, this was effectively something the power of money could acquire.

Each system had its own pros and cons, and the system one chose to make use of depended on the environment they were in and the skills they had.

Ryoma's explanation made Annamaria break into a grin.

"Correct. So you understand the basics... Then allow me to ask. Which system of thaumaturgy does the spell to summon someone from another world fall under?"

She wore a smile like that of a teacher testing a bad student. Ryoma whispered, as if spitting out the answer distastefully.

"Verbal thaumaturgy..."

"Exactly." Annamaria nodded with a smile. "And the biggest hurdle with sending someone *back* to another world is in determining: to which god do you offer up your prana?"

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm here, in this world. This world's thaumaturgy is what called me here!" Ryoma's voice grew rougher. "So just tell the god they told to summon me to put me back where I was!"

His face, usually serene and calm, was uncharacteristically awash with panic and annoyance. And that was obvious, in a way. It had now been two months since Ryoma was summoned to this world. His patience was at its limit.

"Yes, leaving this world is possible." Annamaria said, not changing her expression one bit.

"Then—!"

Ryoma tried to cut in, but the next words Annamaria spoke would send him plummeting to despair.

“But you would be cast out to wander the fabric of space-time for all eternity.”

“What...?”

The moment they heard those words, a shiver ran through the Malfist sisters’ shoulders. Annamaria, however, continued speaking without budging an eyebrow, even as Ryoma cast his verbal wrath and fiery gaze in her direction.

“And wandering within the fabric of space-time... would effectively mean death, or even a fate worse than that.”

“Don’t bullshit me!” At that moment, something that had been bottled up inside Ryoma ever since he was summoned to this world loudly crumbled to pieces.

The powerful sound of a blow echoed through the room. Ryoma’s clenched fist bashed into the wooden table, causing countless cracks to run through it. The table seemed rather valuable, but Ryoma could hardly care at the moment. His fist would have surely flown into Annamaria’s face, if not something else to unleash his anger upon.

“Master Ryoma!”

“Your hand!”

The Malfist twins, who were standing at his side, screamed in shock.

He’d probably broken the skin. As he struck his fist without restraint, reddish blood dripped down to the floor.

“Master Ryoma, your hand! Sara, get a clean cloth!”

“Fuck off! Don’t get in my way!”

Shooing away the sisters who rushed over to treat his wound, Ryoma ignored his bleeding and glared at Annamaria.

“Hey. I dare you to say that again.” He growled in a subdued voice, that almost felt like a grumble from the pit of the earth.

Cold, dark hatred burned in Ryoma’s eyes, and his voice was steeped in blatant murderous intent. Neither notions of respect for his elders nor the

worried glances from the Malfist sisters held any meaning for Ryoma right now.

Emotions that he'd kept restrained until now shook Ryoma's whole being. The man standing there with his eyes bloodshot seemed to be nothing less than a savage, frenzied demon.

"Threaten me all you want, it won't change the conclusion. There's no going back to your world, which is to say, Rearth."

"Rearth?"

"Yes, your original world. We call it Reverse Earth— Rearth for short. The other side of this world we live on, Earth."

Annamaria spoke without a hint of wavering in her expression, which made Ryoma regain a bit of composure. No amount of anger would overturn the facts, which meant that listening to Annamaria's words right now was of the utmost importance.

I gotta keep it together. What I need right now is information.

Annamaria wasn't guilty here, and Ryoma understood this perfectly. But his heart still rumbled with anger and hatred at how her merciless words shattered the hope in his heart. So Ryoma focused on the reasons for keeping her alive. He repeated in his head time after time that if he was to survive, he needed Annamaria's information.

So they call this world Earth, and the world I came from is Rearth... Well, I guess that makes sense. That's just how the people in this world call it...

This happened a lot in his old reality, too. The sun shines equally on all countries of the world, but Japan still called itself the land of the rising sun, and the world is round, which meant no matter where you were, you were never in the middle. That didn't stop China from calling itself the Middle Kingdom.

If there existed two sides to the world, it would only make sense for people to name the world they live in the 'true' side and the other side as 'the reverse.'

"Of course, there's no true and reverse side, at least not physically." Annamaria continued, noticing the anger had diminished in Ryoma's expression. "But the only worlds we've discovered that are inhabited by

humans are ours and your own, and the people of the past conveniently named them as such."

"I don't give two shits which side is true and which side is reverse. Why can't I go home?"

"It's a simple matter." Annamaria answered with a light shrug. "In order to summon someone from Rearth to Earth, one is required to offer up their prana to a god residing in Earth. That's because there's a barrier set around the world that prevents anyone from encroaching on it from outside. The same barrier is set around Rearth."

"Wait a second... Let's leave the whole barrier thing aside for a second. As a matter of fact, I've been summoned here. Why can't we just pray to the God that let me into this world?"

Rationally speaking, any entrance could serve as an exit.

"No. Whether anyone can enter a barrier is bound to the approval of the gods governing each world. What this means is that after you leave Earth, you'll need the approval of the god who set up the barrier around Rearth to enter."

Ryoma tried to organize Annamaria's words in a more understandable manner.

So I'm welcome to leave, but if I want to get in I need to be approved... So it's like when the door to a hotel room locks by itself and leaves you stuck outside, then.

Auto-lock systems were common in hotels. Getting out from the inside was easy enough, but once the door closes, it locks automatically, and there's no going back in without the key. Imagining the worlds were like hotel rooms and the fabric of space-time was the corridor made it easier to understand.

So the key to the room is the name of the God in my world... That's tricky.

The two big differences, though, were that in this case, you couldn't phone the front desk to have them unlock the door for you, and there was no guarantee he could survive while wandering the fabric of space-time.

"So I can get through the barrier on Earth's side, but the problem is getting

through Rearth's barrier, and me getting lost in the fabric of space-time and dying..."

"Yes, put concisely." Annamaria said with the same unchanging expression. "Sadly, no one's ever returned from there, so it's unknown what would happen to you out there. But your way of putting it is apt."

"But what if I do figure out the name of the god who put up the barrier around Rearth?" Even as Ryoma continued refuting Annamaria's words, he tried predicting her next answer in the back of his mind.

He didn't know how long the people of this Earth had been summoning people from Rearth, but it certainly wasn't just ten or twenty years. A century or two also seemed inadequate.

Which meant that for centuries, perhaps even for millennia, people were forcibly summoned from his world to this one, all to be convenient pawns in a war. But what if some of those summoned escaped their summoners like Ryoma did and tried to find their way back home? If nothing else, Ryoma doubted he was the first person summoned to try to make his way home.

Annamaria placed a faded book she retrieved from the bookcase on top of the cracked table.

"This is a record of otherworlders who have tried to return to your old world." Opening the book, which was thick enough to pass off as a dictionary, she continued. "Crafting a thaumaturgical technique to send you back isn't complicated in and of itself, but that alone won't take you back to your world."

Opening the tome to a certain page, Annamaria stuck it out in front of Ryoma.

"The names of gods from your world are chronicled here. In other worlds, all the names written here are ones that were used for the spell but showed no effect."

"So you're saying that so long as I don't have the name of a god that isn't chronicled here..."

"Returning to your world would be impossible, yes."

Annamaria's icy warning stabbed into Ryoma's heart. Ryoma snatched the

book as if stealing it away, and left with it under his arm. He then went to a tool store to buy ink and parchments, and shut himself off in his room at the inn.

“Tsukuyomi, Susanoo, Amaterasu... Yahweh, Jehovah... Indra, Agni, the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara...”

These were all the names of Gods passed down since antiquity. All famous names anyone had heard at one point or another, but the book also contained the names of unknown Gods that were buried in the sands of history and time.

After Poseidon’s name was Odin’s. The names were listed without a trace of order or regularity. Ryoma’s predecessors were grasping at straws, indeed; they wrote down any name they could think of, without regard for religion or ethnicity.

“Dammit! Like hell I’m giving up. I’m gonna get back home if it’s the last thing I do.”

Those emotions spurred Ryoma onward. He repeated to himself that, so long as he took every advantage he could, no matter how low the probability of success was it wasn’t at zero. As if trying to fool himself into believing it...

The sisters stood in the corridor leading up to Ryoma’s room. Ever since they had returned from Annamaria’s home, Ryoma’s expression was thick with gloom, and he didn’t respond to any of the Malfist sisters’ words.

“It’s been five hours...” Sara said, and Laura nodded in silent agreement.

Nighttime was already approaching, the time when most people would be setting off to the world of dreams.

“Master Ryoma...”

The Malfist sisters knew Ryoma’s feelings painfully well. Imagining themselves in his position made a shiver run through them. But they couldn’t save Ryoma from this. The only thing they could do was wait in front of his room, concerned for his well-being.

At some point, the morning sunlight began streaming through the windows. It was sunrise. Exchanging a glance, the sisters hardened their resolve and knocked on the door. In their hands was a tray with a late night meal they had

especially asked the innkeeper to prepare for them.

Ryoma didn't leave his room once from nightfall to daybreak. He'd ignored the twins' suggestion to get dinner, and the late night meal they presented him. The only thing they could hear through the door was the faint sound of him flipping through the pages of the book he borrowed from Annamaria.

The sisters' faces were thick with signs of exhaustion from staying up all night. Still, the only thing on their minds was concern for Ryoma's health, as he continued leafing through the book like a man possessed.

They knocked a bit harder this time. The sisters had no intention of getting in the way of his research, but they couldn't leave him be when he hadn't taken any food or drink since the previous night.

"Master Ryoma...?" Laura timidly spoke through the door, but no response came from Ryoma, and the only sound she could hear was the faint movement of paper. And eventually, even that sound ceased.

"Sara..."

"Yes... It seems we have but one option left, Laura."

Exchanging a gaze, the Malfist sisters placed the tray on the floor and faced the wooden door. The two took deep breaths and crouched down.

The next moment, their legs, reinforced by martial thaumaturgy, crashed against the wooden door with a thud like that of a large hammer, tearing it clear off its hinges.

""Master Ryoma!"" Calling out Ryoma's name, the girls rushed into the room governed by darkness.

Despite the sunlight filtering in through the windows, the air in the room was terribly bleak and cold. And the source of it was, without a doubt, the man sitting at the back of the room.

"Master Ryoma...?" Sara's fearful question blew into the gloomy air.

But without even regarding the Malfist sisters' kicking their way into his room, Ryoma simply gazed at the book lying upon the table. He'd read through it countless times. The pages were partially torn and the paper was moist with his

sweat. Pieces of parchment littered the table and the floor around it, filled with crossed out names.

Good God... He wrote down the names of all the gods he knew and referenced them against the ones in the book...

Laura could tell with a glance that there were dozens of pages lying around.

“Laura...” Sara pointed at two pieces of parchment lying on the floor. Names were scribbled onto one of them in dense lines, and they were all crossed out. The other one had the same lines in the same order.

“He...” Sara whispered, and Laura nodded at her assertion.

Ryoma listed off all the gods he knew and checked against the book, crossing out any that were mentioned. And after crossing them all out, he started over, making sure there were no mistakes, making sure that he didn’t overlook or fail to notice something. He’d repeated it time after time after time... In search of a hope that wasn’t there.

“...Nothing...” A small whisper escaped Ryoma’s lips.

“Master Ryoma?”

“I... I can’t go back...” This time the sisters heard him clearly.

“Can’t go back... Can’t go back... Can’t go back...” The words leaving Ryoma’s mouth gradually grew louder.

His body filled with strength and his muscles tensed up, and the darkness in the room grew thicker in accordance to that. Rage and hatred filled his expression... Alongside bottomless despair.

It wasn’t anger aimed at any one person in particular, but anger against this world itself. His wrath turned to burning black flames, and his hatred to a sharpened blade of ice.

It had been two months since he’d been summoned to this world, and the feelings he’d suppressed all that time had now crushed the shackles of his reason and common sense which had bound them until now.

“Laura!”

“Yes!”

The Malfist sisters felt something was awfully wrong since the moment they barged into the room. Their image of Ryoma was that of a calm, cold-hearted and yet kind person. But the Ryoma standing before their eyes gave off a feel that seemed awfully fragile and unstable, and at the same terribly ominous and frightening.

The two exchanged wordless nods and gently cradled Ryoma’s head in their arms, pressing it against their bosoms. It was as if they were soothing a baby, encouraging a weeping child.

“It will be all right, Master Ryoma. We are at your side. We will always be there for you...”

How much time passed afterwards? The dark, oppressive atmosphere that overturned the room dissipated, leaving only the gentle morning sunlight flowing in from outside.

And with his head cradled between the sisters’ bosoms, peaceful, rhythmic breathing emerged from between Ryoma’s lips as he fell asleep.

“Laura, let us carry him to bed.” Sara said, looking down at him.

“Yes... You hold onto him on that side. Let’s carry him.”

Carrying Ryoma’s body of one hundred kilograms, the two sisters somehow managed to put Ryoma in bed.

“What do we do now?” Sara’s gaze turned to the broken door.

They may have had no other choice, but a kick from two people reinforced with martial thaumaturgy had blown the door away and smashed it to bits. The inn wouldn’t easily forgive them for leaving behind such conspicuous marks of destruction.

“He hadn’t slept all of last night, so I don’t believe he will wake up until sundown...” Laura said hesitantly, looking at Ryoma as he slept on the bed. “Until he does awaken, let us explain the circumstances around the door and pay him generously in apology.”

“Master Ryoma... I was so scared...” Sara whispered faintly, slight fear

wavering in her eyes.

“Yes... But that doesn’t matter. We owe Master Ryoma our lives, and so, we belong to him. We need only serve him.”

If one were to honestly ask, Laura was frightened by the expression Ryoma showed, too. It was the madness of a man beset by despair, the kind that struck fear in any person who saw it. But that was all the more reason for them not to abandon him.

But were those feelings simply from the fact he saved them from the bandits’ evil hands, or proof of a deeper affection? The sisters couldn’t discern that yet.

“Yes, you’re right, Laura...” Sara nodded at her sister’s words, casting her gaze on their master, resting on the bed.

With gentle smiles on their faces, they prayed for his well-being, as he peacefully slept away...

What is this place... Where am I?

Ryoma’s consciousness was submerged in deep darkness. Cold and black, it threatened to freeze his heart over. Ryoma simply floated through that dark void.

I... Right! I was in my room at the inn, researching something...

Ryoma’s consciousness was gradually growing clearer.

“This is the depths of your heart.” An artificial, emotionless voice resonated in Ryoma’s ears.

The depths of my heart...? This is inside my consciousness?

“Correct.” The voice replied.

But I’m not speaking words here.

“This is the depths of your heart; words are meaningless here.”

But you are *speaking.*

“No. That is simply how you perceive it.”

Who are you?

“Me? I am the one who is closest to you, who understands you better than any other.”

The hell?

“For now, that will do... You will someday come to the answer on your own.” The voice then asked Ryoma, “What do you desire?”

I want... to go home. After a moment of thought, Ryoma said his deepest, most ardent wish. *I want to meet Asuka and Gramps again. I want my old life back.*

Honestly speaking, Ryoma’s life wasn’t the most blessed one could wish for. He was born with a strong will and body, but that overwhelmed others and made them avoid his presence. Being stronger than others made Ryoma feared and excluded from the rest of the pack.

But still, he had a family that loved and supported him. A grandfather that, despite his vicious tongue, raised him in place of the parents he never had. A cousin that was his childhood friend, who always meddled in his business like a nosy sister.

True, some people tried to exclude him, but on the other hand, there were those who loved and cherished him.

“But that wish cannot be granted.” The voice mercilessly cut Ryoma’s wish down. “You’ve seen that for yourself.”

I can’t go back? I’ll never live that life again?

“No going back. The chances aren’t quite zero, and you would have to resolve yourself to make a terrifying amount of sacrifices, but your only way is to cling to luck. And you know this. All that remains is whether you’re willing to make those sacrifices, or if you’re going to give up.”

What? What do you mean? What are you saying?

Even as he understood the truth behind the voice’s words, Ryoma pretended with all his mind that he had no idea what it meant.

“You know and understand everything perfectly... You simply do not wish to acknowledge that answer.” The voice coldly discarded Ryoma’s lie.

If this cold, merciless voice truly was a manifestation of Ryoma's heart, then it was only sensible that it would see through him. He could spin his lies as well as he would like, but there was no deceiving himself...

"If you let loose your wrath, grinding this world into dust would be easy. You've been thrown into Earth against your will to fight a war that has nothing to do with you. Whose fault is that?"

That's... the fault of that shitty old man and his empire.

Gaius's face surfaced in Ryoma's mind as he answered the question. The source of it all was that old man, who had summoned Ryoma into this war-torn world to use him as a pawn in his conflict.

"Wrong." The voiced denied his answer. "The problem lies with the fundamental structure of this world. This is a distorted world, made up by the premise of taking advantage of you people, who have been summoned from that world."

Distorted world...?

"That's right, this is a world that presupposes one would pillage away from the other! Shatter this world. Kill. Ravage. Take back what was taken from you. You have the privilege, nay, the right to do so!"

I have... the right?

Such sweet, gratifying seduction.

The voice whispered, trying to unshackle the desires that had been held in check for years within Ryoma.

I...

Emotions he'd bottled up turned into surging, violent currents. There was no clear reason for it; suddenly, an anger Ryoma couldn't quite attribute a reason to flared up in his heart.

Anger was simply anger, and hatred was simply hatred. The particularities of why and how faded away, and any sense of morals or ethics disappeared. The anger and hatred overflowed from Ryoma's heart. It was fundamentally different from how, upon being summoned to this inexplicable Earth, Ryoma's

sense of morals disappeared momentarily when he had to defend himself in times of emergency.

If the situation were to linger, the man known as Ryoma Mikoshiba would shed away his heart and become a demon spurred forward by nothing but hatred and wrath.



But just as Ryoma was about to give in to the merciless voice's seduction, the voices of the sisters rang out across this world of his unconscious.

"It will be all right, Master Ryoma. We are at your side. We will always be there for you..."

Those were warm, soft words, filled with tranquility. And as he heard those words, Ryoma once again lost consciousness and disappeared from that dark world.

"Hmph. So you went back without unleashing me... Well, so be it. You will make the choice someday, whether you wish to or not. Will you subdue me, or will you be consumed by me...? That is something only you can decide... For I am you yourself."

With Ryoma gone, the cold, inhuman voice echoed alone in the darkness.

When Ryoma woke up on top of his bed, the sun had already gone down, and the curtain of night hung over the view outside the window.

"Mm... Ah... Wait, what's with that hole?" After stretching, a large yawn escaped Ryoma's mouth.

He'd felt truly refreshed, but as if to shatter his pleasant awakening, the first thing Ryoma saw upon surveying the room was the pitiful sight of the broken door. It had been ruthlessly smashed, and light poured in from the exposed hallway.

The next thing on his mind was his current position. The last thing he could recall was sitting at the table reading, but now he was somehow lying in bed. His luggage, which had been in the room before, was also missing, so that was another point of concern.

The bag with my money is still on me, so that's good, but...

Confirming the weight of the sack that he hid inside his clothes as an impromptu wallet was still there, Ryoma tilted his head as he surveyed the room. It looked as though it had been ransacked by robbers.

Well, I guess I can ask the twins later... That aside, though, I'm really hungry.

He'd ended up fasting the whole day yesterday, so it was only natural Ryoma

would be hungry. And as if picking up on the cue of his grumbling stomach, the tantalizing smell of food wafted in from the missing door. It seemed food was being served in the dining hall on the floor below.

Between the hole in place of where the door was and him being in bed despite not remembering how he got there, there were a lot of questions that begged answering. None of them triumphed over his empty stomach's protests, though.

Patting his ruffled hair down and adjusting his outfit, Ryoma went downstairs.

"Oh! You're finally awake!" The innkeeper raised his voice when he noticed Ryoma approaching.

He was apparently in the middle of tending to his business ledger.

"Oh, hello. Good morning."

Ryoma hadn't really greeted them since checking in, but the innkeeper greeted Ryoma with a smile.

"The girls who came with you paid the fee for fixing the room, so you don't need to worry about that."

The innkeeper's casual words made Ryoma's expression turn dubious. Having been asleep up until now, he didn't have a grasp on what situation he was now in.

"Oh, I see. You've been asleep the whole time. You can ask the girls for the details, then. They did it for you, you know."

"Yeah..." Ryoma replied vaguely.

"We've already been reimbursed for the damages, so don't let it bother you. You'll move to a new room tonight. Those two already took your luggage there."

He'd be staying in another room, it seemed. Ryoma could hardly object, since he wasn't privy to the idea of sleeping in a room with no door and no privacy.

"All right."

"Oh, right! You didn't eat anything yesterday, right... The wife made some

stew, so take it to your room." With that said, the innkeeper called out to his wife, who was standing in the inn's kitchen. "Hey, that boy's awake now, could you fix him something to eat?"

Almost as soon as those words were said, the plump, aged proprietress walked out of the kitchen with a tray in hand.

"Sure thing! No need to shout, I got everything ready!" Apparently she heard Ryoma and the innkeeper talking and got everything ready. "Here! Take it and scramble to your room."

She vigorously stuck the tray out for Ryoma to take. The scent of well-simmered stew whetted his appetite. There was also a basket full of bread, whose aroma signaled it had been freshly baked.

Still, Ryoma was stricken with doubt. The tray had food for three on it. The stew, which was poured into a largish plate, was certainly not just for Ryoma. And even if they were to assume Ryoma's hunger would prompt him to take extra servings, it wouldn't be poured into other plates; a small pot would have been enough. So why were there three plates on the tray?

As the confusion showed on his face, Ryoma felt a light impact against his right leg's shin.

"That's the share for the girls!" The proprietress said with furrowed brows, as Ryoma's 190 centimeter tall, 100 kilogram physique jolted in surprise from a kick to the shins. "Do you have any idea how worried those girls were over you? Huh?! You big lummox!"

She apparently didn't like the look on Ryoma's face. The proprietress continued explaining the situation to Ryoma, who still seemed oblivious.

"I don't know what you were reading in there, but you came back with your eyes bloodshot, and shut yourself in your room without a bite to eat... Now, if you don't want to eat, that's up to you! But those girls said they couldn't eat if you're not eating, and went hungry the whole time!"

"Huh? They haven't eaten?" Ryoma went pale the moment he heard her say that.

He hadn't expected the two of them to abstain from food for him.

“That’s right. I swear, all you men are the same... Listen up! Those girls should be waking up right around now! Take that to your room and eat together with them!”

Heaving a heavy sigh, the proprietress headed back to the kitchen with her shoulders sagged in exasperation.

“Just goes to show you’re not alone, y’know? I dunno what’s eating at you, son, but dwelling on it will just make you lose other things you hold dear.”

Tapping Ryoma on the shoulder as he stood stock still, the innkeeper went back to work on his business ledger.

That was a warning from those with greater age and wisdom to a young man who was on the verge of losing his way. The innkeeper’s words were said casually, but they sank deeply and sharply into Ryoma’s heart.

I...

The words those two people left him with spiraled around in his mind. All he’d cared about was going back to his world, and that was his only purpose in traveling. But he’d become acutely aware of just how much Laura and Sara had supported him since the day they met.

I haven’t been paying mind to anyone else at all...

That thought was a barrier around Ryoma’s heart. This world stood as nothing but suffering for Ryoma, and he could never come to like it when he’d been thrown into it against his will. If anything, Ryoma loathed this world.

But even in this world he hated, there were people who supported him. Looking back, even in O’ltormea’s capital, he’d met the owner of that back alley restaurant and the clerks in the guild, who taught him things he had to know to survive in this world, when he needed it the most.

Such were the connections between people. In the end, a person can’t survive all on their own, and hate this world as he might, that was one fact that would never change.

Whatever god governs fate, it must have been a cruel, whimsical and ill-natured bastard with a taste for irony. He’d robbed Ryoma of the family he

loved and trusted on the one hand, but granted him two irreplaceable girls in the Malfist sisters.

Ryoma hesitantly knocked on the door to the sisters' room.

"Yes, one moment..." Laura's serene voice said from behind the door.

"It's me. Mind if I come in?"

"Ah! I'll be right there!" Realizing their guest was Ryoma prompted Sara to hastily open the door.

Ryoma walked into the room slowly and cautiously, so as to not spill the contents of the tray.

"Is something the matter?" Sara looked at Ryoma's face quizzically.

Laura, who was sitting on a bed set in the back of the room, had the same expression.

"Nothing major... I just thought it'd be nice if we could eat together."

Seeing Ryoma place the tray on the table with an awkward smile, the sisters broke into happy grins.

The meal Ryoma had that day with the Malfist twins was by no means a luxurious one, but to him it felt like the warmest, tastiest meal he'd had since arriving in this world.

Chapter 1: Assailant

Three figures moved through the dark forest, trying to stifle their footsteps as they went. This was the forested area extending to the north of Pherzaad, the largest trade city in the western continent. This place was far off the main road, several days away from the nearest village.

Never thought the techniques Gramps taught me would come in handy here...

Parting his way through the trees while trying to hide his presence as best as he could, that thought crossed Ryoma's mind as he felt the presence of the Malfist sisters at his back.

Ancient Japanese martial arts were a comprehensive, systematic set of techniques developed to ensuring soldiers' survival on the battlefield, and wasn't limited simply to methods of killing the enemy. It also taught how to dampen one's presence and sense the presence of others, which was imperative for scouting purposes; how to swim while wearing armor and a helmet; what native herbs could be used for medicine; and other techniques necessary for survival.

At the time, I kept asking myself when the hell would I put these skills to use. Pretty ironic... Skills that were useless back in Japan became so much more meaningful once I was summoned here.

When people hear the words "ancient Japanese martial arts," the first things that come to mind are jujitsu and kendo, and those technically weren't incorrect associations. Most currents of martial arts that have persisted since the time of the warring states into the modern age have systemized, and ended up becoming specialized and refined for a peaceful world.

As a result, jujitsu and swordsmanship were sublimated into judo and kendo respectively, cutting out what was deemed unnecessary in the process. There were many techniques that, despite being written in the manual, weren't practiced by most people.

But even in such a period, Ryoma Mikoshiba's grandfather taught him all the family traditions which had been passed down since ancient times, not leaving

out a single one, and among them were skills that one wouldn't, or rather couldn't, put to use in the modern age.

This method of walking that Ryoma imparted to the Malfist twins was one such technique that was lost to the ages. Walking while muting the sound of one's footsteps was an obvious technique for those who spent their lives in the forest and lived through hunting. Failing to do so would not only result in prey escaping, but also put one's life at risk.

That said, in the modern age, where most people live in cities, this technique likely only remains in use by the Matagi, the small population of native hunters that live in the Tohoku region, or otherwise in special guerilla training in the military.

Whatever the case, such techniques for surviving in a forest were deemed as unnecessary for modern life. Nature, however, was different. They may have been unnecessary in Japan, one of the more developed countries in Ryoma's world, but were immensely useful on this Earth, which had many areas that were undeveloped and untouched by man.

These skills were useless for life in Japan, but here in this world they served as his lifeline, and Ryoma couldn't help but break into a self-deprecating smirk at the irony of it all.

Standing at the lead, Ryoma suddenly stopped and raised his right hand.

It's up ahead... As always, I'll act as bait and draw his attention. You two look for a chance to get the drop on him... Go!

Without turning around, Ryoma silently signaled as such with his hand to the Malfist sisters, and then crouched and took a chakram out of one of his leather sacks. Abiding by his signal, the sisters' presences disappeared from behind him.

This was their tactic for certain victory, one they'd practiced and pulled off countless times by now. Prowling at the end of Ryoma's line of sight was a single praying mantis. It had a slender, green body and two massive scythes for hands. But one thing set it apart from the type of mantis Ryoma was used to seeing; its massive form stood at one hundred and forty centimeters tall.

A Large Mantis.

Infamously known as the Woodland Butcher, it was a type of monster feared even by seasoned adventurers. In Ryoma's old world, praying mantises were never any larger than a dozen or so centimeters, but the one standing before him now seemed to openly mock the idea of common sense.

Ryoma could only see its back from where he was standing, but the large mantis seemed to be currently occupied with eating. The severed lower half of a wolf lay at its feet.

Bending his body like a bow, Ryoma unleashed the chakram, which cut through the wind and flew toward the mantis. Despite having compound eyes that were capable of seeing in every direction, it still wasn't able to pick up the sight of a chakram whizzing through the air from a thick forest.

The next moment, the chakram drove itself deeply into the large mantis's defenseless back. He didn't know if this thing could feel pain, but the large mantis turned around without so much as a moan of agony, tossing the carcass it carried in its front legs, and facing Ryoma, its wings spreading out to intimidate the one getting in the way of its meal.

Its eyes seemed inorganic and cold; the emotionless, glass bead-like eyes of an insect. But Ryoma could tell it was enraged for having been attacked and injured by surprise.

That's right. Keep your ugly eyes fixed on me, big boy! Your enemy's right here.

Holding its front legs before its face like a boxer, the large mantis approached while tightening its defense, looking for an opening.

Its sharp mouth was dyed red with wolf's blood, and its two saw-like scythes gleamed in expectation of the blood of a new prey.

Taking it from the front is impossible...

Ryoma threw two more chakrams with the intent of keeping it in check, but the mantis swiped them away with its front legs. They truly were menacing weapons, capable of tearing prey to bits, and yet the iron-forged chakrams had no effect at all.

Ryoma silently unsheathed his sword, holding it beneath his right side while

hiding the blade behind his back.

A flank stance.

It was a stance that allowed one to adapt ad-hoc by observing the opponent's movements. And Ryoma didn't divert his gaze from the mantis for a moment. Because if he would look away for even a second, the large mantis would cover the ten meters between them with a single bound and attack him. Both animals and insects flock enemies the moment they show an opening.

Good boy... Stay focused on me!

Their gazes remained locked for only ten seconds or so. Still in his flank stance, Ryoma covered the distance with one bound, and the mantis swung its front legs as if rising to the challenge. Fluttering its wings, its green body rose into the air.

A hard impact crashed against Ryoma's body. His tempered muscles swelled, clashing with the large mantis's massive frame. His face went red with effort and his breathing stopped in his throat. The mantis kept pressing downward, intending to crush Ryoma.

The sword and the scythes locked and pushed against each other. If Ryoma were to relax his strength for even a moment, he'd be knocked down against the ground immediately. Instinctively realizing this, the large mantis's thoughts were fixed entirely on finishing off the prey before its eyes. And that would render the wide range of its compound eyes meaningless.

Its consciousness was fully concentrated on Ryoma, and not knowing that doing so would only hasten its journey to the grave, the large mantis slowly approached Ryoma's face, opening its sharp jaws at the same time.

"Now!"

With Ryoma's shout as their cue, the Malfist sisters jumped out of the bushes, their blades whistling through the air as they swooped down on the mantis.

The Malfist sisters' prana streamed to their first chakra, the Kundalini Chakra located in the perineum, filling their bodies with superhuman strength. Their blades were aimed at the four hind legs supporting the large mantis' massive frame.

Even this creature, which prided itself on its vitality and agility, couldn't have blocked a surprise attack from both sides, and the sisters' slashes, reinforced by martial thaumaturgy, dug into its joints and cut through them.

"Sara, keep cutting off its other legs. Laura, aim for its torso!"

Cutting off the front legs of the mantis, which had collapsed due to having lost the ability to support its own weight, Ryoma urged caution. It was when one was most confident of their victory that they were the most vulnerable.

Ryoma was determined to snuff out the enemy's life. Some may call it abnormal cowardice, but Ryoma instinctively knew that those who lacked it could never survive in this world.

"Let's take him out in one go!" Ryoma shouted, seeing the mantis' severed legs twitching on the ground at the edge of his field of vision. "These tenacious buggers have a bad habit of not staying dead when they should!"

No matter what world it was, insects boasted the highest vitality of all living things. Even with their heads sent flying into the air, they were capable of continually fighting until their vital signs were completely quelled.

That said, something truly unexpected would have to happen to overturn Ryoma's victory. Even with a sword plunged into its body, the mantis would have unflinchingly retaliated, but having lost its scythe-like limbs which served as its greatest weapon, it had lost the means to strike back.

The time to finish it off was now. Ryoma plunged his sword into the mantis' head, gouging at its wound. The mantis struggled desperately at first, but its movements gradually grew duller until its large body became completely still.

What a feeling. I could never taste this back in my peaceful life in Japan... But...

An exchange of lives. Ryoma looked down on the mantis's remains, a savage smile on his lips. He'd felt so alive, as if he was basking in the afterglow of an exhilarating moment. It stood as proof that Ryoma Mikoshiba was adapting to this world.

But on the other hand, Ryoma felt as if there was a lump in his heart that simply wouldn't go away.

What am I going to do from now on?

Pleasure and emptiness stood back to back. With those two conflicting emotions in his heart, Ryoma began skillfully dismembering his prey.

After leaving Mireish, Ryoma and his group made their way to Myest Kingdom, where Pherzaad, the greatest trade port of the western continent, waited.

According to the book they borrowed from Annamaria, Ryoma learned that any chance he had of returning to Japan was essentially close to zero. So he decided to give up on finding a way back, and instead focus on surviving in this world.

No amount of crying would change the situation, and once he'd realized this, Ryoma's heart went through a great change. That change was profoundly influenced by the Malfist sisters' great devotion and affection for Ryoma.

Still, if he were to live in this world, he would need some kind of purpose or objective. If he was some hero summoned to save the world, things would be simpler and his objective would be made apparent soon enough. But as things were, Ryoma didn't have any purpose to speak of.

Of course, even if the environment he lived in before being summoned to this Earth was a bit unusual, he enjoyed a fairly normal high school life, and naturally had dreams and aspirations just like everyone else.

But those aspirations were limited to the frame of life in Japan, and in this Earth, which was inferior to Japan in terms of both cultural and societal development, they were only unattainable dreams.

If he had to think of a single purpose, it would be to exact revenge on the empire of O'ltormea that summoned him to this Earth. But he'd already killed the one who directly summoned him, Gaius, and lacked the power to exact revenge on the country itself. And even if, on an individual level, he would slay the emperor, he still wouldn't kill the system that made this empire function.

So he gathered his strength, for the day he would be able to exact revenge. He hadn't given up on his dream of going back to Japan, but living for nothing but vengeance felt all too barren. If revenge was all one lived for, they would

eventually degrade into nothing but a demon.

And so Ryoma traveled the continent, earning money by completing the guild's requests. He thought that perhaps by seeing many places with his own two eyes and gaining experience, he'd find and earn something.

Of course, there were other options he could take. In Ryoma's bank account slumbered a sum of money the common person in this world wouldn't be able to earn in a lifetime. That said, Ryoma had no intention of reaching for the money he'd gained from the slave merchant Azoth. It was a large fortune, enough for him to spend the rest of his life without having to work.

Even in such a turbulent world of war and strife, the power of money remained as mighty as ever. Money might not have been able to buy everything, but it did enable one to force their will in most matters. If he'd wished for it, settling down in some safe town and living a comfortable, extravagant life was perfectly possible.

But that wouldn't give any meaning to his life. Ryoma craved it, from the bottom of his heart... A purpose to live for in this world...

The trade city was surrounded by sturdy walls. In the city's east was the largest harbor in the western continent, where circulated not only merchandise from across the continent, but also goods imported from the eastern and central continents.

People walked busily through the streets, which were lined on both sides with buildings made out of stone. The trade city of Pherzaad was such a lively, bustling city.

"Let's stop by the second-hand store first."

"Stopping by the guild to report our requests would be more efficient."

The group of three walked down the main street, their large sacks digging into their shoulders. They were full of monster fangs, claws, skin, flesh and bodily fluids, which were useful for producing food, medicine, weapons and tools.

In many fields, the developed nations of Ryoma's world were far more advanced and affluent than this world, but this Earth wasn't inferior to Ryoma's world in every way. A major factor in that was the existence of monsters, which

were only products of fantasy and imagination in Ryoma's world. The many items one could produce from their bodies sometimes yielded effects far more advanced than anything Ryoma ever saw. While monsters were pests that threatened people's lives, they were also an irreplaceable resource unique to this world.

"Laura... Our guild requests still have plenty of time remaining. Can't we dispose of the goods we've harvested, have lunch once we're light on our feet and do it then?"

They were careful to pick things that wouldn't be too bulky but would still fetch a decent price. Though, given the amount, each sack weighed slightly more than forty kilograms. The large mantis's bodily fluids were especially precious, and would have to be processed quickly by an expert; otherwise, its quality could degrade.

Of the materials one could gather in the forest near Pherzaad, the large mantis's bodily fluids— which served as a key ingredient for extremely effective medicine for external wounds— was among the more valuable ones, and was constantly in a state where the supply for it never quite kept up with the demand. As such, it sold for a pretty sum.

In addition, the guild request they took to pick medicinal herbs still had several days remaining for its time limit, but reporting it as soon as possible was the wiser choice. There was no telling when something unusual might happen.

"Really? I thought it would be better to report it now, than forget and panic about it later. That way, we'd be able to relax at the inn with nothing to be concerned about... What say you, Master Ryoma?"

The Malfist sisters' glances fixed on Ryoma's back, who was leading their stride ahead. For all they were concerned, both choices were moot. What mattered was their master's opinion. Still, each of their gazes were filled with the honest expectation and hope Ryoma would pick their own personal suggestion over the other's.

"Well, let's see... I'd love to kick back at the inn for once, but forgetting to report our quests wouldn't be good... Well, I guess we could split up, finish all the work and go back to the inn for a dip in the bath. I'd rather not look for

some place to eat in when I smell like this.”

The sisters beamed at Ryoma’s words. After several days of hunting, their bags were full of materials they got from the forest. Walking around town with those bags was taxing, and having spent days in the wilderness, they naturally didn’t have any chance to bathe. The most they could manage was wiping themselves off with a wet cloth. This was, of course, more of an issue for the sisters, being young ladies as they were, but this was unfortunately an unavoidable part of the mercenary and adventurer lifestyle.

All of these were circumstances Ryoma came to realize after traveling with them for several months, of course, and seeing their master show them casual consideration made the Malfist sisters grin happily.

“Give me your sack, Laura. You go report our requests for the guild. Sara and I will get rid of this stuff.”

“As you wish.”

Laura’s expression was a bit disappointed, but she realized Ryoma’s suggestion was the most efficient.

Not getting to be with Master Ryoma is a shame, but... I suppose this is for the best.

And looking at it another way, he’d permitted her to handle this on her own because he trusted her more than her little sister.

“In that case, while I report our requests, I’ll also check for any promising requests we could undertake.”

“Yeah, you do that. Maybe we could decide what jobs to take next over lunch.”

Before leaving Mireish, the three of them registered in the guild as a squad. This allowed for any one of them to accept and report requests in the name of the whole squad, which saved a lot of time and trouble.

“I will see you two later, then.” Laura bowed her head slightly, and disappeared in the direction of the guild.

“All right. Let’s go cash these in, then.”

Ryoma spurred Sara forward, and took off with two sacks on his shoulders.

“Right, so that’s ten blades of moonlight grass. Please give me a moment.”

“Thank you.”

The guild’s clerk confirmed the contents of the small sack Laura placed on the table, and then smiled.

“Great! We were just running low on these, so this is a great help. It’s actually become a bit of an issue, since most people have been avoiding the northern forest recently. Even intermediate level adventurers have been hesitating to go there.”

Moonlight grass was a medicinal herb crucial for refining medicine, but it was hard to preserve for long and couldn’t be cultivated artificially. Because of this, it would need to be periodically picked from spots where it grew naturally.

It had very characteristic light blue petals, which made it easy even for an amateur to identify, so one didn’t need to be an apothecary to pick them. However, they only grew in forests, so the only way to collect them was to hire adventurers or mercenaries, as any inexperienced person loitering about in the forest would obviously only serve as prey for the monsters.

No, even an intermediate level adventurer might find themselves in trouble. Forests were the kingdom of insect-type monsters, which were among the most fearsome of monsters. The fighting potential of an insect-type monster, which felt no pain and counterattacked unflinchingly, was not something to be underestimated.

And on top of that, insects tended to live in large groups. Given each individual one’s size was different from those in Ryoma’s world, they didn’t mass in the tens or hundreds of thousands, but they still proved a very menacing threat.

Areas near the road weren’t as dangerous thanks to the protection of the barrier pillars, but the deeper one went, the more they would advance into territory where mankind was the weaker species. The depths of the forest were simply that dangerous.

In fact, even Pherzaad, the largest trade city in the kingdom of Myest, lacked

people capable of completing this request, and getting those who were capable to accept it was difficult, even for the guild.

“Really?” Laura tilted her head at the receptionist. “I didn’t get the impression it was that dangerous.”

There was certainly danger involved, which was obvious given many monsters, the large mantis among them, were on the prowl. But on the other hand, they hadn’t run into any kind of monster they knew they wouldn’t be able to beat.

Even the large mantis, abhorred by many an adventurer with its terrifying insect’s vitality and two sharp scythes was certainly a threat, but during this one visit to the forest, Ryoma and his group had defeated at least ten of them.

“That just goes to show how skilled you all are, Miss Laura. The moonlight grass only grows rather deep into the forest, so your recon skills must be impressive... Oh, here is your reward. Be sure to check it.”

As the receptionist handed Laura her card and the bag containing their payment, she eyed her with concern. Apparently she thought Laura and her group collected the grass by avoiding battle with the monsters.

Certainly, Laura was still a novice in terms of her rank, so she couldn’t imagine her beating a large mantis, which even seasoned warriors struggled against. And Ryoma took all the materials they gathered from the northern forest’s monsters to be converted into money in the second-hand store, as they didn’t accept any delivery quests from the guild.

“Thank you.” Laura nodded after checking the contents of the sack. “Everything looks to be in order.”

“But really, though, don’t push yourself too hard. Your group is still only beginner rank, and there’s plenty of easier requests you could take, so I think it’d be for the best if you focused on raising your rank for now.”

“Yes, I’ll consult the others about raising our rank... But that will be all for today. I’ll come again.”

Replying to the receptionist’s innocent concern with a vague answer, Laura took the bag containing their reward and turned her gaze to the request board.

She'd looked around for any requests that seemed worthwhile, but they were all the kind Ryoma couldn't undertake.

That wasn't to say there were no requests they could take at all, of course, but they were all time-consuming or bothersome tasks that weren't worth their pay.

I think raising our rank might be a good idea at this point...

Laura herself thought raising their rank wouldn't be bad at all, but Ryoma seemed to have little interest in raising his rank. He didn't say anything of the sort directly, but she realized this naturally from seeing which requests he did accept.

It's like he doesn't want to make a name for himself...

It was true in this case, too; he'd accepted the request to collect the moonlight grass, but no subjugation requests for the monsters on the way in or out of the forest. Of course, Ryoma's low rank meant he couldn't accept many subjugation requests, but there were some that he could. Despite that, the only request he took was the one for delivering moonlight grass.

It was an obviously ineffective way of taking requests, and frankly speaking, Ryoma could increase his rank basically any time he wanted. Even without yet having gained access to thaumaturgy, Ryoma had enough strength and tactical foresight to defeat a large mantis.

But still, for reasons unrelated to their actual strength, the three of them were still at a novice's level.

Maybe he has something in mind... Or perhaps he's still worried about pursuers from the empire of O'ltormea?

A small doubt sprouted in Laura's heart regarding Ryoma, but it disappeared almost immediately. To Laura, the life of her master took priority over all.

"Oh. Moonlight grass, I see. Thank you very much."

As Laura turned around to go back to the inn, a man who had been sitting on a table behind the reception desk and handling some paperwork called out to her.

He seemed to be in his mid-thirties or so, and his golden hair was neatly combed back, giving him a refined appearance. Judging from his well-tailored clothes, it seemed he had something of a high standing in the guild.

“Laura Malfist, yes?” The man asked her with a serene tone. “Partnered with Ryoma Mikoshiba and Sara Malfist. I’m not mistaken, right?”

“That’s correct... Who are you?”

They’d used Pherzaad’s guild a few times already and recognized the employees by face, but she’d never spoken to this person before. The most she could remember was seeing him seated at his desk, working through a mountain of paperwork.

“My apologies. I am Wallace Heinkel, this city’s guildmaster. Could I have a moment of your time?”

As the man called Wallace suddenly appeared before her and claimed to be the guildmaster, Laura could only nod.

Ten or so minutes later, Wallace ascended to his office on the second floor of the guild.

“What do you think?” Looking down the window, Wallace asked the man standing next to him. “I think the girl fits all of the criteria you were looking for.”

The two watched Laura walking toward the inn like merchants appraising a piece of merchandise.

“Yes... Her silver hair is quite eye-catching, and her age is just about right, too. But I’m curious. How did you get her to accept?”

The one who answered Wallace’s question was a young man with black hair, which was tied up at the back of his head. His body was slim, but toned from harsh training; the glint in his eyes gave anyone who laid eyes on him a cold impression. He looked to be just about thirty.

He was clad in thick armor that gave him the veritable appearance of a knight, and the elaborate design of his sword made it clear he was a high-class knight, at that. His face, however, didn’t give off the impression of someone who fought fair and square. If anything, he looked to be the type that spun plots

from the shadows.

“Her comrades are still low ranking novices. Heheh, let’s just say they don’t have a grasp of the guild’s rules.” Wallace responded to the man’s question with a clear tone, tapping himself on the chest.

It had been just ten years since he inherited his father’s place as guildmaster, and judging by their experience, he didn’t believe Laura and her group had a good grasp of the guild’s regulations, and even if they did read them carefully, he was confident his position as guildmaster would be enough to convince her.

“So you tricked her into accepting... Understood. I’ll leave the matter to you, then. If no one else fits the bill but her, we don’t have the leisure of choosing.”

“I’ll handle everything. Not to worry, I’ll be sure to work in accordance to the sum I’ve been paid.” But as he said that, Wallace’s face was dyed over with greed— an expression he wouldn’t let others see.

“Yes, I’ll be relying on you. Let me give you one warning though, as a precaution of sorts.” The black-haired man’s cold gaze stabbed into Wallace like a stake. “Don’t fumble this. The duke is not tolerant of those who fail. If you value your life and the lives of your family, you’ll do as you are ordered.”

The fact he brought the other man’s family into it as a threat cast the black-haired man’s humanity into question. It was the kind of threat the mafia or yakuza would make.

“Do you really think I’d fail a job as simple as this? I can’t help but feel I’m being looked down upon here.” Wallace shook his head, as if he’d taken offense.

If he was the kind to flinch from that sort of threat, he wouldn’t last as a guildmaster.

“Then all is good, so long as you don’t betray our expectations. Preparations are already complete on my side, and the rest hinges on your efforts. You recall the arrangement, yes?”

“Of course. I will just need a little more time.”

“Very well. I’ll be going back to my country, now.”

The black-haired man cut off the conversation one-sidedly, as if to say his business with Wallace was done, and opened the door to leave. Wallace watched his back disappear, keeping his head down respectfully until he left.

Bribery.

What sum would one have to pay to make the leader of the guild— which, at least on the surface, claimed to be completely neutral— to be this accomodating to their needs? Wallace's attitude despite his position as guildmaster and being one of the more influential people in Pherzaad made ominous implications as to the amount of money being passed around.

That said, money could buy superficial subordination, but not another's honest heart. That was one truth that didn't change, even in this world.

"Fool... Throwing threats around when you're just a traitor's lapdog." With his gaze still fixed to the floor, small words of contempt slithered from Wallace's lips. "But so be it. I'll do the work for the price I've been given."

"A compulsory request?" Ryoma asked Laura, biting into the meat he'd picked up with his fork.

It was just after one in the afternoon, and since it was past the usual time for lunch, the dining hall Ryoma and his group occupied was fairly empty.

"Yes. That's apparently what it is." Laura nodded.

They used scented oil in their hair when they bathed in the inn, and a flowery fragrance wafted from the Malfist sisters' bodies.

"A compulsory request, eh... A system where the guild's master or higher brass specify a specific adventurer or mercenary, and forcibly have them complete a request... I think that's how it goes." Ryoma kept speaking, trying his hardest to recall the contents of the booklet he'd read once before. "But that's reserved for high-ranking mercenaries and adventurers. At least, that's what the booklet said. Are you sure that Wallace guy is the guildmaster, and he's the one who told us to show up at the guild tomorrow?"

Laura silently nodded at Ryoma's question. She didn't quite know the details herself. What she did know was that, as she made to leave for the inn, a man named Wallace Heinkel approached her claiming to be the guildmaster, and

asked her to ensure the three of them would come to the guild the next morning.

“But it’s strange the guildmaster would call on us.” Sara said, placing a finger on her chin and tilting her head. “The guild knows our rank.”

“He said he’d explain everything, that matter included, tomorrow.”

The two’s gazes fixed on Ryoma. Honestly speaking, Laura wasn’t pleased with having to go along with this. As far as she was concerned, she’d simply told them what she was asked for, and it showed on her demeanor. Sara was just as unenthusiastic about this as her sister.

Compulsory requests were the kind not just anyone could accept, and were usually only made in emergency cases; if the case wasn’t an emergency, it could wait until someone more appropriate would become available. If they needed someone specific for the job, it would mean whatever task this was, it was so bothersome or dangerous that no one would take it of their own volition.

Even if Ryoma would accept Wallace’s request, it was unlikely it would end in a satisfying result for them. Ryoma had no intent of underestimating his power, but overconfidence would only get him killed.

“We’re probably better off turning that request down... Assuming we even can.”

Those were Ryoma’s honest feelings. He wasn’t hurting for money, so it wasn’t like he had to accept any request he could. There was no need to take up any requests that wouldn’t pay off, and most of all, something about the whole thing felt off.

On the other hand, though, Ryoma got the feeling that turning down the request wasn’t an option. Seeing the look in Ryoma’s eyes, Laura heaved a sigh and spoke up.

“I thought of declining myself... But apparently, if we don’t accept, our guild registrations might be revoked...”

“So he threatened you.”

“He didn’t say anything blatant, but what he did say meant pretty much the

same.”

Hearing Laura’s words, Ryoma grimaced and looked up into space. In his mind, he weighed the pros and cons of the situation.

For starters, I don’t like that he threatened Laura. And the part about revoking our registrations— can a guildmaster really exert his authority that easily? He definitely has that kind of authority, but he shouldn’t be able to revoke them one-sidedly like this.

As far as Ryoma’s individual feelings on the matter were, it looked horrible. Ryoma hated nothing more than people who pushed work onto others from above.

And he had his doubts about the validity of the threat itself. Even if this was the guildmaster, Ryoma was dubious as to whether he had the authority to just erase their registrations like that. But on the other hand, the part of him that wanted to stay on the safe side gave another answer.

But there’s always the off-chance he isn’t bluffing... I don’t have anything to prove my identity in this world except this. The money I got from Azoth is still untouched, and I earned some good money from hunting. If I use this money, maybe I’ll be able to buy myself a citizen’s standing... Nah, I’m not familiar with anyone influential enough, so that won’t fly... Even if I end up leaving the guild sooner or later, there’s still value to holding my position as an adventurer. I guess I’ll just have to turn a blind eye to him strong-arming us and stay with the guild, huh...

Eventually, it all came down to whether Ryoma thought of the potential gains and accepted Wallace’s proposal, or believed in his gut feeling that the matter seemed fishy and suspect, while aware of what it would entail. And this choice was for Ryoma alone to make, as the Malfist sisters would abide by his choice no matter what it was.

After thinking things over long and hard, Ryoma finally parted his lips to speak.

“Let’s at least go there tomorrow... We can hear him out, and if it’s too big of a request, we can reconsider things.”

The sisters nodded wordlessly at Ryoma's decision.

The next day, Ryoma and the sisters entered Pherzaad's guild, equipped with new gear. The time was just before noon. They approached a young clerk, and after informing them of their business, they were immediately ushered in and instructed to go to the second floor, where the guildmaster's office was.

"Wow, this room looks like a lot of money went into it..." A small whisper escaped Ryoma's lips.

The unblemished ebony table set near the window was obviously made by a craftsman and set with ornaments, making it a clear balance of utility and artistry. The carpet set over the floor gave an equally refined impression.

The room was also full of items that gave the pronounced feel of another culture, likely imported from other continents. Even the bookshelf, stuffed as it was with books, was made by a skilled craftsman and had the kind of quality even an amateur would recognize. Even the leather sofa intended for visitors had a magnificent lace cover weaved with silk laid over it.

One glance at the empty office put Ryoma under the illusion he'd just entered the estate of some grand noble or multi-millionaire. With the power of a man who reached the post of guildmaster laid bare before him, Ryoma could only click his tongue.

"I apologize for the wait. Please, take a seat on the sofa over there."

As Ryoma's group stood still at the room's entrance, they could hear the relaxed voice of a man speak to them, accompanied by the sound of the door opening.

"I thank you for coming over today." Seeing Ryoma and the sisters sat down on the sofa, Wallace began by bowing his head politely.

The guildmaster of a large city was bowing his head to low-level adventurers. That wasn't a scene that would normally take place.



This guy...

Judging by Wallace's attitude, Ryoma's heart hardened with caution. On the surface, his attitude seemed to be the height of intelligent courtesy, and anyone who would look at this scene without any context would surely consider Wallace to be an upstanding person.

However, if Wallace's attitude right now was genuine, why did he hint to Laura that he might have their registrations erased?

"Not at all. I've heard you had a request for us?" Ryoma asked, keeping his true feelings hidden. "I'm actually a bit unsure as to how we should answer a request from the guildmaster himself."

Choosing his words carefully so as not to commit to anything too soon, Ryoma probed at his intentions.

"Yes, that's right. There's a matter that's been a bit of a problem for me... I'd appreciate your cooperation with regards to resolving it."

So said Wallace, and began his explanation...

Arrows fired from behind them zipped through the wind. Ryoma held the carriage door he'd torn from its hinges over his head like a shield. The sensation of the arrows piercing the wood reverberated through the door and into his hands.

"I don't care if it kills the damn horses, don't lose any speed!"

The highway was fairly well maintained, but since the carriage's frame didn't have a suspension system, it shook and rattled violently. Ryoma desperately maintained his posture, guarding Sara's body from the deluge of arrows flying their way.

But of course, a single door couldn't block countless arrows. One arrow brushed against Ryoma's left earlobe and hit the carriage's wagon. Drops of red blood dripped down to the floorboards. Ryoma wiped his face in annoyance.

"Master Ryoma!"

"Shut up! Just be quiet and focus on handling the horses!"

Shouting back at Sara, who raised her voice at the sight of his bleeding earlobe, Ryoma returned his focus to blocking the rain of arrows.

He had no experience riding horses or driving a carriage, and so Sara, who now sat at the driver's seat, was Ryoma's lifeline. Her holding of the reins was their only means of survival right now. Even though those words were spoken out of genuine concern for him, they held no meaning for him at the moment. One wouldn't need an overly active imagination to picture what fate would await them if this runaway carriage were to lose control.

The frame of this carriage, pulled by four horses, was dyed black. It was also currently pierced with countless arrows like a pin cushion. If all Ryoma would need was to protect his own well-being, he could have easily taken refuge inside the wooden, canopied compartment, but the situation didn't allow for it. The trajectory of the arrows from behind them flew in a parabolic curve over the compartment and toward the driver's seat. Since Ryoma didn't know how to manage the horses, all he could do was guard Sara.

"God dammit! They're still after us!" Ryoma spat out bitterly, glaring at the cloud of dust behind them.

How long had it been since this deadly game of tag started? If the ones chasing them were bandits who were in it for the money, they'd have gone after the wagons they left behind in the ambush point, and if they were simply trying to silence them to hide the fact the raid happened, they were chasing Ryoma around too persistently. It almost felt like this attack was made with the objective of claiming Ryoma's life...

"Master Ryoma, I think this really is..." The look in Sara's eyes seemed convinced.

Ryoma only nodded wordlessly. It was a good thing they considered this possibility and planned accordingly.

"That son of a bitch Wallace pulled a fast one on us... But now's not the time to be dwelling on that..." Stifling the anger bubbling up in his heart, Ryoma kept his eyes fixed ahead. "Sara! We should be near where Laura and the others are hiding. Don't miss the signal, no matter what!"

"Yes!" Sara held on tight to the rampaging horses' reins, whipping them to go

forward.

Desperately blocking the rain of arrows with his wooden shield, the conversation they'd had in the camp on that night seven days ago flashed through his mind.

That day, a trade caravan departed from Pherzaad on a straight journey to Pireas, the capital of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

Rhoadseria sat between Xarooda, the kingdom known as the land of iron which lay protected by steep mountains, and Myest, which included many of the continent's greatest sea ports, including Pherzaad. The majority of the country was made up of plains, and the river Thebes blessed it with abundant water that enabled vast agriculture and farming which served as the country's primary industries, making it one of the wealthiest countries in the western continent, second only to Myest with its ports.

The contents of the compulsory request given to Ryoma and his group under the name of the guildmaster Wallace was the escort and protection of a trade caravan heading to one of the three great eastern countries, Rhoadseria. Ryoma reluctantly agreed to take the request after having been told that they would be joined by mercenaries who joined in for the money, but there were plenty of unnatural aspects to the job right from the start.

For starters, they were gathered as guards for the caravan, but the carriage Ryoma and his group were given to sleep in was a decorated one with a canopy. It was a magnificent vehicle that was suitable enough to carry royalty and nobility, and not at all something adventurers and mercenaries would ride in.

The next suspicious point was that while this was supposedly a trade caravan, all the wagons were completely empty. If some of them were empty to serve as decoys, that would be understandable, but all of them being empty made little sense. Since it had left a large trade port like Pherzaad, one would expect it would be stocked with many goods, and considering the merchants' efficiency, there was little chance of them going out to trade empty-handed.

But the merchants were another suspicious point. They all had very well-built, refined bodies, and their hands were dotted with solid calluses. One's hands wouldn't be like that without handling a sword daily. It was only natural Ryoma

would feel apprehensive after he greeted the caravan leader with a handshake. True, life in this Earth wasn't as safe as Japan, but they seemed far too proficient to use weapons only for self-defense.

I think it'd be a good idea to make sure we have some guarantees this doesn't blow up in our faces... Out of all the people they gathered, that red-headed woman looked like she'd be the most understanding.

The image of one of the mercenaries, who was looked up at as a boss and older sister by her group, surfaced in Ryoma's mind.

With the first day of their journey over, the mercenaries who accepted the job of protecting the caravan sat in a circle around the fire, discussing things. The main topic was, of course, what they were to do about this suspicious caravan going forward.

"I've been pretty dubious 'bout that, meself..." said Lione, the leader of the Crimson Lion group, with a slow shake of the head. "If nothin' else, I ain't never seen no caravan like this before."

She was an experienced mercenary, with a physique that towered over 180 centimeters in height and brown, tanned skin. Contrasting her supple, feline-like muscles, she also had a prominent bust, which declared proudly of her status as a woman. Her red hair reached shoulder-length, and complimented her golden eyes, which burned with strong will. Overall, she was an attractive woman that gave off the charm of a matured female.

"We been in the mercenary business for a long time now, but it's the first we've heard of anything like this." So said Boltz, a man who looked to be thirty or so years old with short cut, black hair that had been brushed back. He served as Lione's staff officer.

His face looked rather tough, but his most distinctive feature was his missing left arm. Apparently he'd lost it in some previous battle, but from the impression Ryoma got during their first meeting, he seemed to have a fairly plain personality.

"We've handled security for caravans before, but..."

Boltz had served as a mercenary for even longer than Lione, and if he'd never

run into this kind of job before, it was certainly suspicious.

“And what’s... your take on it?” Lione turned to Ryoma, who was simply listening quietly until now.

“Me? I’m honestly regretting I took this request...” Ryoma replied honestly.

Something felt off about the whole thing from the very start, and apparently his hunch was correct. Looking back, he should have gone with his gut feeling and refused, even if it meant having their registrations erased. That regret reflected in the bitterness mixed in with his words.

Lione and Boltz nodded at Ryoma’s response.

“We took this job because the pay was good, but looks like this one’s a bust...”

“Aye, it looks like we stuck our necks into somethin’ fishy.”

These two, who had been mercenaries for many years, said their intuition was warning them that this was trouble. But there seemed to be some people around here who didn’t share that sentiment.

“But Sis, we took this gig from the guild. Don’t you think you’re being too itchy about this?” One mercenary voiced his objection at Lione’s words.

Hearing this mercenary, whose name he didn’t know, speak made Ryoma’s expression fill with scorn.

I’m surprised this guy’s survived this long...

This Earth was a place where death was much more of an everyday occurrence than Ryoma’s old world. Lione seemed to have thought the same thing as Ryoma.

“Ya got rocks for brains? I’m surprised ya can function as a merc when you’re this oblivious to danger.”

The man went red as Lione looked at him with cold, contemptuous eyes and shook her head.

“What...!” He shouted. “Even you don’t get to talk to me like that, Sis!”

Even with no sense for danger, he apparently had enough of a head on his

shoulders to realize when he was being mocked. Lione shook her head with pity at the man's temper, and Boltz's lips contorted with disdain.

"You're a rank B, right? And sure, ya have the strength to back that rank. But when it comes to straight up judgment, that boy over there has ya beat."

Lione's words prompted every mercenary present to turn their gazes in Ryoma's direction.

"It may've been me who called ya'll here, but it's this boy who spoke up first."

A stir rustled through the mercenaries.

"Heh! Taking instructions from a kid like that? So much for Lione the Crimson Lion, I guess!" The man shouted with his face red. "The kid's a damn novice! I dunno what the guildmaster's thinking, sending an amateur like him to handle security! Who cares what a brat with no experience has to say?!"

True, Ryoma was the youngest person present. He was sixteen years old, but his mature face made him appear to be in his mid-twenties; still, everyone around him was in their thirties at least. If his guild rank matched theirs, things would be different, but Ryoma was indisputably still a beginner with a rank of E, and to top things off, since he hadn't gained thaumaturgy yet, he was still at level 0.

It made sense for the mercenary to run his mouth at Lione after she humiliated him, but Lione wasn't going to take him running his mouth sitting down, either. For mercenaries, nothing was more important than strength and honor. Anyone who backed down from another person treating them like a fool wouldn't survive as a mercenary going forward.

"Aaaah?! Didja forget who yer talking to here...?" Her voice was calm.

But Ryoma could only see it as the calm before the storm, and apparently the other mercenaries felt the same way, as all the cheering that followed as he ran his mouth earlier had died down. A long silence fell over the place.

"Fine. I understand how you all feel." Boltz, who had thought now would be a good time to break the silence, soothed the strained air.

None of them really wanted to antagonize the Crimson Lion's captain, who

held the most power in the group.

“We haven’t really gained anything concrete out of this conversation anyway, so how about we break it up for today?”

Accepting Boltz’s suggestion, the mercenaries got up hurriedly. Lione didn’t have any intention of arguing with them any longer, either, simply watching them retreat.

“Well, ain’t this a shitty situation...” Lione muttered.

Boltz and Ryoma both nodded at her words.

There wasn’t much they could do about the mercenaries being dense, but letting their comrades die over that wasn’t acceptable, either.

“Looks like we’ve got a nice little gallery of morons gathered up here...” Boltz said with a sigh.

For how calm he seemed on the surface, the man had quite a bit of displeasure at their attitudes, it seemed.

“No point bitchin’ ’bout it, though.” Lione nodded at his words. “If we don’t think of some counteraction in case things go south, we’ll be in trouble.” She then threw a probing glance in Ryoma’s direction. “What’re yer plans now, boy? Got any brilliant ideas?”

“Well, for now I don’t think there’s much we can do but focus on the job. We can’t throw away the request just because things are a bit suspicious.”

It was an official request they had accepted from the guild, and if they were to discard it without a valid reason, the guild would enforce severe penalties on them. Their hunch that it seemed suspicious wouldn’t be seen as valid grounds to resign from an official request.

“Yeah, that makes sense. But boy... If there really is an angle to this whole request, what do you think it could be?”

“Using us as bait to lure something or someone out, maybe. In which case, we should probably have some kind of backup plan ready.”

He didn’t have any basis for this theory, but them being here to act as bait to draw out bandits felt like it fit everything they knew the most. Ryoma answered

Lione's words with a deep sigh.

Ryoma knew full well something was off about this request. But all he could do was gain Lione's support and make a backup plan as insurance in case things went south.

Four days passed since the meeting with the mercenaries, and they didn't run into a single problem during their journey. Not a single unwanted guest, bandit or monster, had descended on them.

It was truly a safe, peaceful journey. And of course, if nothing happened, that was fine in and of itself. There were a few small clashes between Ryoma and the other mercenaries that weren't part of Lione's Crimson Lion group, but those were trifling matters.

But Ryoma was convinced. The times which were most quiet were the ones heralding the coming of a storm...

And on the afternoon of the seventh day after they left Pherzaad, Ryoma's premonition proved to be correct.

A rain of arrows descended upon them.

It happened as they passed through a woodland near the border to Rhoadseria. Arrows were suddenly fired from the trees on both sides of the road.

""What the hell?!""

""Ambush!""

"What are you doing?! Protect the horses!"

As the soldiers raised their voices in panic, one of the merchants came out to scold them.

"Calm down! Don't break formation!"

Warnings left the lips of the mercenaries who were standing guard around the carriages. There were ten carriages overall in the caravan, with the merchants sitting at the driver's seats. The mercenaries guarded them by riding alongside on horseback.

Even experienced mercenaries would be taken aback when attacked by surprise, but Ryoma eyed the merchants suspiciously, as they seemed to be giving commands calmly despite the chaos around them.

“Everyone, calm down! Hide yourselves from the arrows! Use boards, cloaks, whatever you can find! Cover your heads and block the arrows for as long as you can!”

Their orders were perfect and precise. Though, when subjected to such a barrage of arrows, such a way of ordering the others around was probably ideal.

“Master Ryoma!”

“Yeah. Looks like it’s happening now. Everyone, listen up!” In contrast to the other mercenaries, Ryoma’s voice wasn’t trembling from surprise. “Just like we agreed to earlier, protecting the horses is top priority! Don’t mind anything else.”

Ryoma had already predicted someone might attack the caravan, but there were still problems. Namely, the questions of who, when, and why they would have attacked.

“You ready, Sara? Everything’s hanging in the balance here.”

“Yes, I know. But Laura...”

Ryoma nodded silently at Sara’s words. They’d checked the map ahead of time and noted this place would be the most apt point for an ambush, so they had already completed their countermeasures for the hypothetical attack. All that remained was to put that plan into action.

“It’ll be fine. We can trust the mercenaries Lione placed with her...” Ryoma swung the spear in his hand, knocking down the incoming arrows. “The rest depends on how long we can keep them on our tail... Shit, I knew it was going to end up like this!”

The carriage Ryoma and Sara were riding on was receiving far more arrow fire than the other ones. As proof, it only took a short time for Ryoma’s carriage to become so covered in arrows that it looked more like a pin cushion. This made the attackers’ intent clear.

“Master Ryoma! Take this!” She had removed a part of the wagon to serve as a shield.

Ryoma clicked his tongue, taking the wooden pane she gave him to shield the driver’s seat from the flurry of arrows.

I knew something was fishy, but they’re definitely after us. Which means Wallace set this up... The question is, who put him up to it...

The most obvious candidate was the empire of O’ltormea. It had been several months since he shook off Princess Shardina’s pursuit, so it wouldn’t be surprising if she’d acted in some way by now. However, Ryoma decided to stop thinking for now.

Am I stupid or something...? I need to focus on staying alive right now. I can leave the sleuthing for later.

What mattered was surviving this situation...

The deluge of arrows finally stopped. In terms of time, it was likely only a few dozen seconds, but to Ryoma, they felt like an eternity.

Seven mercenaries had been hit and killed by the rain of arrows. There were fifty mercenaries hired to guard the caravan, and roughly a seventh of them were dead in the first wave. In addition, most of the horses attached to the carriages perished in the onslaught. The only horses left unharmed were those from Ryoma’s carriage and the ones the mercenaries were riding.

Ryoma cast a rapid gaze around. His carriage was just at the center of the caravan, which meant there was nowhere to go, either ahead or behind.

“Sara, move the carriage ahead!”

At Ryoma’s order, Sara gripped the reins tightly and glared at the road ahead.

“I cannot. The other wagons are blocking the road ahead.”

The line had gone out of formation because of the attack. The road should have been wide enough to accommodate for the carriage’s width, but things were different with the wagons blocking the way. The positioning was odd, almost as if it was all set up to trap Ryoma.

Hearing Sara’s reply, Ryoma clicked his tongue and cast his gaze behind them.

The road was blocked all the same back there, too.

“Boy!” Lione approached him, with her group members following in tow.

Since they’d somewhat predicted this was coming, Lione’s group didn’t suffer any casualties. They all got away with minor wounds. The mercenaries who did die were the ones who didn’t take Ryoma’s words seriously.

All of a sudden, battle cries erupted from the rear.

“Here they come...”

The arrows were meant to nail them down while another group swooped down to attack them. A safe, reliable tactic that stuck true to the basics. Had they not seen the attack coming, Ryoma and his group would surely have been killed at this point. The raid was that meticulously planned.

“Boy!” Lione exclaimed with annoyance as she heard Ryoma mumble to himself.

“Lione... Stick to the plan.” He directed a gaze as sharp as a blade at her.

There wasn’t a trace left of his usual, pleasant countenance. Lione nodded, as if overwhelmed by Ryoma’s unflinching words. They’d already agreed on what to do if their path of escape was cut off.

“I know. We’ll blow away the wagons ahead of us and open a path!” Ignoring the protests of the mercenaries around her, Lione ordered one of her group members to go ahead and destroy their obstacle.

“Sis... Are you serious? Are you really going to abandon the merchants?”

As her subordinate directed a clinging, frightened look at her, Lione replied with cold eyes.

“Quit yer yappin’ and do it! If ya don’t like me orders, ya can stay here and die for all I care!”

“Ah... Sis...”

“I ain’t tellin’ ya to believe me! But if ya wanna live, you’ll do as I say!” Lione silenced the other mercenaries with her shouting.

They stood there, their ethics grappling with their survival instincts.

Eventually, some of them silently turned around and ran toward the carriage, but soon turned back around and shouted.

“Sis, the merchants are still in the carriage, and the mercenaries aren’t moving away from it either! What do we do?!”

Apparently, the scales tipped in favor of their survival instincts, it seemed, but they still hesitated to blow away the wagons with the merchants still inside. According to Ryoma’s plan, the merchants would have abandoned the battlefield as soon as the raid began.

What is this? Weren’t the merchants in cahoots with the attackers...? Wait, no. If they’re allies, they’d have no reason to run...

Lione directed a gaze at him that seemed to ask, ‘what now?’ With no time to bother explaining himself to a bunch of morons, Ryoma had only one choice he could take. He looked back at Lione and nodded, his eyes hardened with unwavering resolve.

“Forget about ’em! Blow ’em away along with the wagons!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

The mercenaries that looked up to Lione’s words nodded back with their faces full of fright, and ran back to where they were.

A few dozen seconds later, an explosion shook the air. The carriages and wagons were enveloped in flames and blown away along with the mercenaries around them. Screams and shouts of vilification filled the forest.

“Sis, the road’s opened!”

“Good! Don’t look back if ya wanna survive!” Ordering her men, Lione turned to face Ryoma. “Everything’s gone as ya planned so far, hasn’t it, boy?”

“I only considered the possibilities. Have you finished the preparations for what comes next?”

Ryoma’s eyes burned with cold murderous intent. Their lives hinged on this plot being successful.

“Y-Yeah. Everything’s ready on our side.” Lione answered with an overwhelmed look in her eyes. “Only thing’s left is hoping yer little missy and

Boltz handled their side of things well.”

“That’s good, then. I explained the plan to Laura already. She’s smart, so I don’t see her screwing this up.” Ryoma’s trust for Laura was absolute. “As for the rest... That’s up to us.”

“I gotcha. You make sure to stay on yer toes, too!”

“Yeah, you take care too, Lione.”

With Lione in the lead, the Crimson Lion group’s set forward on horseback. They had a vital role to play in what was to come.

“Master Ryoma, they’re coming!”

Before Ryoma knew it, the sound of clashing swords reached his ears from all around. All the mercenaries, barring the Crimson Lion members who went ahead, were likely being disposed of by the attackers.

“Let’s go!”

Sara gave a nod at Ryoma’s words and whipped the horses into a gallop. The view that streaked past Ryoma as they rushed forward was that of an empty road. Lione’s group needed only to ride forward until they reached their objective, but Ryoma served as the bait and couldn’t afford to do that.

Theirs was a four-horse carriage, but even then, it didn’t have that much speed. Of course, discarding the passenger car and running on horseback was a possibility, but Ryoma elected not to do so.

And that was because there was a chance they’d actually shake off their assailants that way; Ryoma’s true objective was to maintain a safe distance from their foes without losing them, and lead them to a certain spot.

The wind beat against Ryoma’s face. Defending Sara’s body from the arrows coming down on them from above was rather difficult. A few arrows had already slipped through his defenses and pierced the driver seat; several red streaks of blood trailed down Sara’s body and seeped into her clothes. Ryoma was also bleeding profusely from when his earlobe had been nicked by an arrow earlier, and the blood painted him red from his neck down to his chest.

“Are we there yet?” Ryoma asked while blocking the arrows, panic seeping

into his voice.

“We should almost be there... Ah, that’s it! I can see it!”

Standing along the long road ahead of them that seemed to stretch without end, something fluttered in their field of vision. Sara clearly saw the sight of a black flag with a symbol of a red lion, flapping about in the wind.

“Good! We should make it if it’s that close...” Ryoma sighed with relief and turned his gaze to Sara. “Ready?! It’s do or die!”

Everything up until now was for the sake of this one moment. This was why they led their enemies here instead of trying to shake them off.

“I know.” Sara said, and used the reins to gradually slow down the horses’ galloping.

The silhouettes of a few men on horseback surfaced from the cloud of dust behind them.

“Right... Like that. Drop your speed just a little more... And when they slow down, too... Yes, good.”

Ryoma caught sight of the men drawing their bowstrings.

“Now! Do iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!”

The moment Ryoma’s carriage passed by a spear stuck into the road, Ryoma grabbed onto the spear and brandished it upward, towards the sky.

“““Our mother earth, abide by the will of thy children and unleash thy rage! The locks of thine hair are as lances that pierce all of creation! Rock Bamboo!”””

As Ryoma cried out, Laura’s incantation resonated through the forest accompanied by several other voices, and, in accordance with their chant, a massive circle appeared beneath their pursuers’ feet. The next moment, the sound of flesh being pierced filled the area. And with that, the sound of horse hooves clicking against the ground behind them suddenly ceased.

Ryoma descended from the carriage and walked over to the stone pillars that had sprung up behind them, with Sara naturally following behind him. Those earthen spears stuck out from the ground and toward the heavens. The raw, rusted scent of blood mingled with the wind blowing toward them.

“Looks like it worked.”

“Yeah...” Ryoma nodded shortly at Sara’s words, “But don’t let down your guard. Some of them ought to have survived.”

Ryoma didn’t think his ploy had failed. On the contrary, the timing couldn’t have been more perfect. But at the same time, it was too soon to be complacent. Lack of caution was the deadliest enemy.

Following Ryoma’s footsteps, Lione, Boltz and the other Crimson Lion members came out of the forest, with Laura in the lead. The twelve of them approached the stone spears in the center of the highway with cautious prudence.

“Make sure no one escaped from the spell’s effective radius!”

At Lione’s command, the group broke off into two and began their search.

“Hey... A few of them got away. There’s trails of blood leading into the woods.”

The mercenaries observed the assailants limping away with moans of pain and agony with a somewhat sobered gaze in their eyes. They had little mercy for the enemies who had attacked them.

“You don’t mind if we finish them off, right?”

Ryoma nodded wordlessly at Boltz’s question. Confirming his approval, Boltz made a signal by brushing his right hand through the air, and the members who saw it disappeared into the woods without a word.

“Lad, what are you gonna do now?”

“What?” Ryoma’s expression filled with surprise at Boltz’s way of calling him. “Lad?”

“Heheh.” Boltz scratched at his cheek awkwardly. “Think of it as an expression of respect.”

Apparently, seeing Ryoma’s plan succeed changed the image Boltz had of him, and so calling him ‘lad’ was Boltz’s way of showing his respect. Realizing this, Ryoma simply smiled wryly and remained silent.

“But really, boy, what next?” Lione asked, having finished issuing orders.

She didn’t have any intent of changing the way she called him, it seemed, but Ryoma didn’t mind much either way.

“Well, for now we should gather information. Looks like there are quite a few survivors, so we should have a way of doing that.”

Ryoma looked around as if confirming there were survivors, with a cruel smile on his face. Cold enough to send a shiver down the spines of veteran warriors like Lione and Boltz.

The sight of that expression made Sara and Laura inadvertently pray to God. They could likely imagine how gruesome the demise of these fools who dared place their master in danger would be...

With his body bound and pulled by rope, Mikhail Vanash was dragged to where he would be tried for his actions. The bandages wrapped around his body were stained with blood.

Mikhail’s injures were fairly severe. He had no mortal wounds or fractured bones, but the earthen lances had pierced and skewered his body. Had it not been for the thick armor he was clad in and the fact he was distant from the epicenter of the spell as he lead the charge, he would have surely been counted among the corpses.

Even if he’d simply been left skewered on the rocks there and deprived of necessary healing, he’d likely have met the same fate.

Why did they save me? The question tugged at Mikhail’s heart.

Standing in front of Mikhail were a largish red-headed woman, a middle aged man missing his left arm, a hulking man who seemed to be in his mid-twenties and two girls who waited on him from behind as if they were his shadows.

Mikhail’s heart stirred. And that was because the girl in front of him was the target of this raid.

It had been three hours since Mikhail and his group of assailants fell into Ryoma’s trap. Of all those hurt by the stone spears, only a handful, including Mikhail, survived. The majority of them perished from the linked thaumaturgy

unleashed by Boltz and his men, and those who survived and escaped into the forest couldn't shake off the vengeful pursuit of the Crimson Lion members.

The only ones left alive were those men beloved by the goddess of fate. Though if one were to consider the state they were in, it was questionable whether their fate was truly fortunate. The minimal treatment they'd been given only stopped their bleeding, after which they were gagged, tied up and thrown into the carriage's wagon.

The carriage was then taken to a safer place, after which they were hauled off of it one by one. At this point there was no questioning for what purpose they were taken. Then it was time for the commander of the attack, Mikhail, to face the music.

"You're Mikhail Vanash, the commander of the raid, correct?"

Mikhail could only nod to the largish young man standing in front of him. His voice wasn't coercive, and most of all, his tone was calm and polite. Being on the side of the attackers, a calm and polite tone of voice was nothing short of unnerving. If he were being questioned while being shouted at by someone with a reddened, angry face instead, it wouldn't have terrified him as much.

"I've heard most of the story from your subordinates. It looks like this was an unfortunate set of consequences for both our sides that landed us in this situation."

Mikhail kept quiet, but he felt something was off about the young man's words. During knight training, one would be taught how to carry themselves when captured by an enemy, and not giving the enemy any information was an ironclad rule in war.

"You really don't have to be so nervous. We don't intend to do anything to you, for the time being."

The young man's words sounded like the Devil's seductive whisper to Mikhail's ears.

"Why won't you kill me?" A question dripping with hatred escaped Mikhail's lips.

"Because we have no need to kill you, for the time being." The young man

shrugged, smiling as if they were gossiping about something trivial.

But his words carried the implication that if they were to deem it necessary, they *would* kill him.

“But that applies to both of us now, doesn’t it?”

Mikhail couldn’t find a chance to argue against the young man’s words. He himself wasn’t fond of killing; if anything, despite it being his job as a soldier, he didn’t want to kill anyone at all if possible. But as a member of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s royal guard, he would spill blood by his hand if it would benefit the royal house. This incident truly didn’t align with his pride as a knight, but it was an unavoidable act he had to commit if he was to stop the nobles’ faction from achieving their ambitions.

The young man smiled peacefully, as if reading Mikhail’s heart, and then continued to speak.

“Well, far be it from me to assume your motives here, but I guarantee you that we are not your enemies.”

“What are you talking about...” Those words made Mikhail’s expression wash over with doubt. “Aren’t you people from the nobles’ faction?”

“See? That. That right there.” Ryoma’s smiled widened with significance. “That’s where your misunderstanding is. Let me confirm a few things for the time being first, Mikhail. We can answer any remaining doubts of yours after that.”

The young man walked up behind Mikhail and pressed a finger to the nape of his neck.

“...What are you doing?” Mikhail’s face contorted with suppressed fear.

“Nothing much, just a little charm. This won’t hurt you, so you can relax... This nice girl here will ask you a few questions, so answer them as casually as you can.”

The young man directed a pleasant smile at him, and signaled at a blond girl. She nodded, and stepped up to Mikhail.

“Now, allow me to ask you a few questions. You are affiliated with the

Kingdom of Rhoadseria's royal guard, correct?"

Mikhail averted his face from her silently upon hearing that question. He had no intention of confirming or denying anything.

"Was the motive for your attack on the caravan related to the succession dispute over the Rhoadserian throne?"

Silence.

"Did you plot this raid to defend the princess?"

Silence.

"Are you affiliated with the knight's faction, and currently opposed to the nobles' faction?"

Silence.

"Did the nobles' faction attempt to interrupt the first princess's succession following the King of Rhoadseria's passing?"

Silence.

"Is the nobles' faction trying to use the existence of the late king's will to back an illegitimate child as princess and heir to the throne?"

Silence. Mikhail held his tongue in the face of the sequence of questions the blond girl presented him with. None were denied nor confirmed by his lips.

Dammit... Those traitors... What are they getting at, stating the obvious like this...?

With anger surging up in his heart and making him shiver in rage, Mikhail sent a hateful glare in the young man's direction.

"What... are we going to do with him now?" The blond girl asked the young man.

The expression on the girl's face told that she was already tired of Mikhail's insistent silence.

"Looks like he's not too eager to answer us right now. Can't blame him, I suppose..."

But in contrast to the girl’s bewilderment, the young man’s face didn’t seem particularly bothered.

“Laura, step forward.”

Abiding by the young man’s words, Laura stepped forward, her silver, glittering hair swaying. The blond girl spoke her final question.



“My last question, then. Was she the one you were attempting to kill?”

Mikhail’s heart beat rapidly and wildly. Ryoma’s fingers indisputably picked up on his pulse accelerating at that question.

“Bullseye...” Ryoma whispered softly and removed his fingers from Mikhail’s neck.

So this was the plot Wallace Heinkel of Pherzaad’s guild had brewed up, and the reason behind this raid.

The truth need not necessarily be put into words; insistent silence like Mikhail’s could speak volumes in its own right. The more he tried to stifle his expression, the more those around him were capable of reading into his feelings. And that wasn’t limited to just Ryoma, but also to Lione and the others who were watching over the scene.

“I see... That slimy bastard Wallace... He used us as bait, he did...” Words thick with vitriol slithered from Lione’s lips.

Thanks to Ryoma’s predictions, the Crimson Lion mercenary group avoided taking any casualties, but quite a few were injured in the raid. While most of the injuries were not serious, that observations was only possible with the benefit of hindsight; they only took so little damage because they were prepared. Had Ryoma not been there to make his prediction, or had Lione not taken it seriously...

This was all hypothetical, of course, but it would have come as no surprise if this raid would have claimed great casualties on the Crimson Lion’s side.

Judging by the circumstances of how Ryoma’s group had gotten their request and Mikhail’s attitude, it was clear Wallace the guildmaster was involved in the raid somehow. It was a betrayal by the guild, which advocated itself as being neutral. And this betrayal made hatred surge in Lione’s heart, in equal proportion to the amount of trust she once harbored toward it.

“I think it’s safe to say that son of a bitch Wallace duped us.” Ryoma said, prompting nods out of everyone present but Mikhail.

“The next issue is what comes next, though. What do we do...?”

“How about we report to a guild in another town?” Boltz replied to Ryoma’s whisper with a hesitant tone.

“Nah, I think that’s a bad idea. That piece of shit definitely pulled a fast one on us, but we ain’t got no proof. If we go crying to another guildmaster and they ask for evidence, we’ll have nothin’ to show for it.”

Ryoma nodded in agreement of Lione’s objection. They may have been tricked, but they couldn’t prove it. Even if one were to be tried on false charges, losing the trial would lend them the verdict all the same. What mattered in court wasn’t truth or even justice; everything hinged on being able to get the verdict one desired out of the judge.

And Ryoma’s greatest problem lay in his inability to prove their innocence. Without any physical proof, any attempt they made to indict Wallace would conclude with him playing dumb. Worst-case scenario, he would pin false accusations on them instead.

Boltz himself didn’t seem to consider his proposal a realistic one, and didn’t seem to be all that confident in it himself. An oppressive air fell over them, as if they were groping their way through a fog that obfuscated their sight in all directions, where if they took one wrong step, they would end up dead.

It was for this reason everyone doubted their ears when Ryoma spoke what sounded like borderline optimistic words.

“Well... There *is* a way out of this.”

“Are you serious?!” Lione regarded Ryoma with a clinging look as he smiled softly.

While she truly wished for a way out, some part of her heart naturally doubted something so convenient could be true. Boltz, who was standing at her side, seemed to feel the same way. But even with their anxious gazes clinging to him, Ryoma’s face remained composed.

“Yes. I mean, we just got our hands on a useful pawn.” Ryoma said with a smile and cast a meaningful look in the still-taciturn Mikhail’s direction.

“What are you saying?!” Upon hearing Ryoma’s words, Mikhail broke his silence and raised his voice.

From the perspective of not giving his enemies any information, this was a poor decision, but those rules held no meaning for Mikhail at the moment. If only he'd have killed the silver-haired girl standing before him, this Laura, all would have been well. If nothing else, this was absolute truth to those belonging to the knights' faction.

It had been two months since the King of Rhoadseria's passing, and that report reached the ears of First Princess Lupis, who was striving to inherit the throne. That report came as a bolt from the blue for the knight's faction; a girl who was purportedly heir to the blood of Rhoadseria's King Pharst the Second appeared in their neighboring country of Myest.

An illegitimate child was by no means an unusual occurrence. The stronger the ruling class grew, the more valuable their blood became, which perhaps came across as natural when one's bloodline is what decided the legitimacy of their rule. As such, rulers produced many children, so as to prevent their bloodline from dying out. They carried many wives and concubines, and at times even ravished the daughters of commoners on a whim.

And the result of such acts was illegitimate children. In which case, the existence of an illegitimate child wouldn't have been cause for such surprise in and of itself. But the timing of her discovery was far too poor. The fact she had announced her existence only now, when the former king had passed away and the throne stood empty, and claimed to be the legitimate heir to Rhoadseria's throne, at that...

When the report reached the capital, everyone simply dismissed it as "impossible" and "nonsense," and paid it no mind. But while they thought the rumors might disappear, they instead began spreading through the kingdom like wildfire in the blink of an eye. And before long, the rumors began to take on a more realistic meaning.

Duke Gelhart, head of the nobles' faction, announced to all of Rhoadseria that he would support this illegitimate child as heir, and made a will supposedly left behind by the late king public... And at first, everyone in the kingdom suspected a forgery. The timing was simply too ideal.

But as lacking in authenticity as the will may have been, it did support the

illegitimate child's right to the throne, and split the Kingdom of Rhoadseria in two. Princess Lupis concurrently also held the position of commander of the royal guard to begin with, and as such had a close relationship with the knights' faction. Due to this, and her lack of involvement with political affairs, she had little connection with the nobles' faction.

And thus, Duke Gelhart, head of the nobles' faction, declared his backing of the illegitimate heir, turning Rhoadseria's political balance from a state of opposition of 30% to the knights' faction, 40% to the nobles' faction and 30% to the neutral faction into 30% supporters of the princess, 40% supporters of the illegitimate child and 30% neutral.

Fundamentally, the knights' faction was a group of military men, and a powerful group with much martial prowess, but unsuited for politics; they struggled to bring the neutral faction to their side. On the other side of the spectrum, the nobles' faction lacked the military might of the knights, but were far superior to them in terms of political experience; they made efforts to bring the neutral faction to their side, and indeed, many of the neutral nobles did indeed switch over to their side.

As the knights' faction were in that plight, good tidings arrived; information that the illegitimate heir was being moved from Myest to Rhoadseria's borders.

Having learned of this, the knights' faction mocked the nobles' imprudence. Allowing such important information regarding the transfer of their precious banner stood as proof that the nobles' faction was far from monolithic... If the girl were to be eliminated before she reached Rhoadseria, all would return to normal, with the nobles' neutral faction swinging back to their prior stance.

And while it was true this information was carried in urgently, and having to strike while in a neighboring country meant they would have to make do with limited manpower, Mikhail couldn't pass up this golden opportunity. Even if it meant ignoring the wishes of his Lady, who was opposed to the assassination...

But in contrast to Mikhail's resolve, all the gazes of those around him were ones of pity and mocking.

"I don't know if I can make myself much clearer, friend..." As Ryoma glared at him like a teacher lamenting a bad student, everyone else present nodded

silently.

They'd already seen this play out, and were merely checking their answers at this point.

"Well, let's put it this way: you were duped. By the nobles' faction, that is."

Even while Ryoma explained it in the most succinct manner possible, Mikhail's mind refused to accept it.

"Th-That's... nonsense! You won't fool me!"

"Call it nonsense all you want, but..." Ryoma shrugged, as Mikhail refused to listen. "Well, just calm down for now. Let's go over things one more time, from the top." As he spoke, Laura stood in front of Mikhail. "Let's start by setting one thing straight. This is not the girl you're looking for."

"You lie!" Mikhail's bloodcurdling shout echoed through the woods.

If Ryoma was right, the entire purpose of going on this raid was null and void. He would have taken this counterattack and sacrificed his men for nothing. That feeling spurred Mikhail's heart forward.

"To begin with, did you think Laura was King Rhoadseria's illegitimate daughter because of her silver hair?"

"That's right! She's a silver-haired adolescent girl!" Mikhail affirmed with a raspy voice, as he brushed away the faint suspicion in his heart.

"Well, Laura certainly is a silver-haired adolescent girl, but... Okay, let me ask you this instead. Are those the only physical attributes you have to identify the illegitimate daughter by?"

Ryoma's question made Mikhail sink into thought.

Silver hair is rare in this continent, and she's the right age, too.

"That's right! That's all the proof I need!"

The most striking visual attribute of members of the Rhoadserian royalty was their beautiful silver hair. Of course, that didn't mean that every person with silver hair had to belong to the Rhoadserian royal bloodline, but all those who did definitely had that hair color; that was what kept Mikhail going.

“...I’m sorry, but you guys are pretty dumb...” Ryoma answered Mikhail with a complicated expression. “I’m sure there’s plenty of silver-haired teen girls on this continent.”

“If anyone is the fool here, you are! We’re not searching for just any silver-haired girl, but one who attempts to travel from Pherzaad to Rhoadseria at this time of year! Do you honestly think a girl who would fill every other requirement would just happen to be here in this place, at this time?!”

Mikhail’s face was overtaken by a smile.

That’s right! A silver-haired girl wouldn’t happen to be in this place at this time by pure coincidence! I don’t know what this man is getting at, but I won’t be fooled!

The information that led him on this raid was provided by one of his fellow members from the knights’ faction. Of course, Mikhail knew that not everyone in the knights’ faction was necessarily on his side, but they were all united in their antagonism toward the nobles’ faction. Even if that weren’t so, they wouldn’t think Mikhail— who in spite of some lack of prudence was still given education as a high class knight— would so easily resort to assassination.

“True, that probability is extremely low.” Ryoma said, eyeing Mikhail’s convinced gaze with pity. “No, to be honest, it’s probably closer to zero. But what if one such girl passed by here deliberately?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Unable to comprehend the meaning behind Ryoma’s words, Mikhail’s expression was awash with doubt.

“What I’m saying is, a bunch of people who have nothing to do with this— i.e., us— were sent to Rhoadseria from Pherzaad on some arbitrary request, and that information was intentionally leaked to the knights’ faction. And of course, being at a disadvantage means the knights’ faction would have to jump on this chance to break the deadlock while they safely smuggled the real illegitimate child into the country. How about it? I don’t think it’s that hard to wrap your head around. If anything, I’d start wondering if the people who delivered you that information might be in cahoots with the nobles’ faction.”

As Ryoma spoke, Mikhail’s proud, elated expression gradually froze over.

“I-It can’t be...” As those words squeezed out of his lips, Ryoma shook his head and continued speaking.

“Someone from the knights’ faction having that kind of insight into what the nobles’ faction were doing is pretty suspicious to start with, if you ask me.”

Everyone’s expressions turned puzzled at those words.

“That illegitimate daughter is an irreplaceable ace in the hole for the nobles’ faction. If they were going to smuggle her into the country, they’d put all the power at their disposal into planning it meticulously, and exert all the caution they could to make sure the information wouldn’t leak. And yet, it still leaked to the knights’ faction.”

Ryoma then stopped talking and looked around at everyone present, as if making sure they understood what he meant.

“So they leaked it on purpose, then? Is that it, boy?” Lione asked, and Ryoma replied with a silent nod.

“If you think about it reasonably, that’s what it comes down to, yeah. Plus, it seems the nobles’ faction got Wallace in their pocket and got him to hire mercenaries. Namely, a silver-haired mercenary girl in her teens.”

“And that... would be me.” Laura said, to which Ryoma nodded.

“But Wallace is a guildmaster. Would he really act in such a risky fashion?” Sara asked hesitantly.

The guild advocated neutrality. If they didn’t have absolute trust from both their clients and the mercenaries, they wouldn’t be able to manage requests the way they did. From that perspective, Wallace’s actions were extremely inappropriate. He’d gathered people under the pretense of guarding a caravan, and intended to use them as bait without consent.

The chance of Wallace not being aware of this wasn’t zero, and Laura mentioned that possibility. But Ryoma shook his head in denial.

“No, the chances of Wallace being unrelated to this are slim. We had to take this job because of a compulsory request, after all.” Ryoma then turned the conversation to Lione, who was standing next to him. “Let me ask you too,

Lione. Aren't compulsory requests assigned to high-level guys only... Specifically, people with a rank of single B or above? And it only applies to highly urgent requests, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yeah, that's all written down in the guild's protocol." Lione gave a slight nod at Ryoma's question.

"Ergo, there was no grounds for us to have this request forced on us. In all likelihood... He was looking for a silver-haired, adolescent mercenary, and only found Laura. He then counted on us being inexperienced, and bluffed on the compulsory request to force us to accept. Then we'd just have to die in the knights' faction raid, and that would be that. On the off chance we survived, we wouldn't suspect the caravan's merchants— or rather, the nobles' faction soldiers disguised as merchants— who would go on to finish us off. And no one would be the wiser."

As they listened to Ryoma's explanation, the image of the whole incident was pieced together in everyone's minds. The caravan's wagons were all empty because they knew an attack was coming. The calluses on the merchant's hands and their toned physiques were owed to them being knights and soldiers in disguise. Ryoma's group alone got the canopied wagon, in order to fool Mikhail and his men into thinking the illegitimate child was in there. And the formation was set up so as to block Ryoma's path once they attacked, to ensure they were killed.

All of those seemingly unnatural factors came together to form one conclusion.

"Impossible... This is far too..." Words of regret and agony escaped Mikhail's lips as he heard Ryoma's reasoning. "But that would mean he fooled us... No... But, in that case..."

The person Mikhail was speaking of was likely the person in the knights' faction who supplied him with the information on the nobles' faction. As Mikhail sat there devastated, Ryoma made him a proposal.

"Well, there's no point in crying over spilled milk."

Mikhail raised his head powerlessly, his gaze questioning.

“I mean, you and us both were set up by the nobles’ faction, so this is kinda our problem too now and all.”

That much was obvious. This request was supposed to be an escort for a caravan, and false as it was, it still existed in the guild’s records. Ryoma had attacked the merchants’ carriages, even though it was the only road to getting out of the situation alive, and fled the attack, leaving the merchants behind.

If one were to look at the situation on a surface level, Ryoma and his group were despicable cowards who abandoned their guard duties and killed the merchants in order to escape. To make matters worse, if Wallace were to claim the raid was a bandit attack, it would be very easy to make it seem as if they’d been bribed to sell out their employers.

And the worst part was that they had no way of stopping Wallace from doing so. After all, everything Ryoma had said was conjecture based on circumstantial evidence. Even if they were to use Mikhail as a witness, there was zero chance he’d testify truthfully, because this whole incident was a stain on the honor of the knights’ faction.

And in the end, the one who’d decide what counted as truth would be the guildmaster, Wallace. It went without saying that telling the person who duped them that he set them up wouldn’t get them out of this mess.

Plus, depending on the other guildmasters when they had no proof to back their claims up was a poor hand to play, too. Pherzaad was the largest trade port in Myest, and since he’d been appointed as guildmaster of that city, Wallace’s power within the guild was likely considerable. Who would be resolved to pursue the truth against this man when placed in such an inferior position? And who was to say if such a person could even be convinced to lend Ryoma his aid?

“So, what do you say, Mikhail? Will you cooperate with us?”

Ryoma’s words didn’t prompt a change of expression from any of his companions. Because they all realized they had no choice but to cling to the final ray of hope that was Ryoma’s wisdom...

That day would go on to be one which would greatly change the fate of the kingdom of Rhoadseria.

Chapter 2: Entangled Plots

“Behold! Before you stands the capital of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, Pireas!”

Jerked awake by Mikhail’s words, Ryoma rubbed his eyes groggily and cast his gaze ahead. He’d been wary of a possible attack over the last few days, and hadn’t gotten much sleep.

“Whoa. So that’s the capital... It’s pretty big.”

There was still some distance to cross before they got there, but the spires of the royal castle were coming into view beyond the plains. The castle stood at the center, and the city was formed by the ramparts which divided it into wards. The outskirts had long expanses of wheat fields, and people were walking in an orderly fashion along the stone-paved road to the capital. Seeing how the baskets on their backs were full of vegetables, they were likely farmers who lived nearby heading to sell their crops in the capital’s market.

I see... So you can’t farm inside the walls after all... Still, I felt like this was similar to medieval Europe, but it really is a whole different world. Clinging to any preconceived notions could cost me my life...

The crops which cities consumed were produced in the surrounding farmlands. Cities were established to distribute those goods and store them in case of emergency. In that regard, it was no different from Ryoma’s world. But on the other hand, the sheer scale and scope of this city was larger than any town in medieval Europe could ever hope to reach.

A massive city, standing at the center of the plains. It was hard to tell from a distance, but it was large enough that Ryoma wouldn’t be surprised to hear it supported a population as large as one million people.

“Naturally! This is the capital of Rhoadseria, one of the mightiest countries in the continent! To begin with, in the olden days of our grand country...”

Smiling wryly at how tinged with superiority Mikhail’s explanation was, Ryoma turned his gaze to the fortified town which was beginning to take clear shape before them.

Passing through the slums spread outside the gate, they went through the outermost wall into the city. Mikhail sighed and whispered, “Well, it’s a good thing we got here in one piece. I was expecting an attack from the nobles’ faction...”

The area beyond here was governed strictly under Rhoadserian law. There was a large difference in how strongly the law was enforced inside and outside the walls. Mobilizing troops required the palace’s approval, and any group of armed people moving around ran the risk of being interrogated by the guards. Being violently attacked was very unlikely.

“Well, I thought the chances of that were slim to begin with, honestly...”

“What do you mean?” Mikhail cast a probing gaze at Ryoma.

“They went to the trouble of faking that request to arrange the raid. From their perspective, everything is probably laid out and prepared already.”

Preparing a countermeasure after confirming the situation was no small task, even in Japan’s developed society of information. And this world lacked the communication and information technology Japan had, so it would not be uncommon for days to pass before the person who set up this trap realized what had happened. If the people in charge of this plot were cautious, they would likely think they were back at square one.

But that was just Ryoma’s gut instinct on the matter, of course. That was why he sacrificed his sleeping time in order to remain vigilant. However, it seemed Mikhail didn’t take kindly to Ryoma’s words.

“However lowly the traitors of the nobles’ faction may be, you think they’d so easily ignore their master’s orders...?” So displeased, in fact, that his tone was quite sharp and vicious.

It hadn’t even been a week since they’d been attacked, but Ryoma had a pretty good handle on Mikhail’s militaristic personality. He seemed to hold a great deal of contempt for the concepts of fleeing and surrendering, and had a radical dislike of reacting to a failure or a crisis by pulling back and reassessing the situation.

He was the type to never give up a fight until he won. Saying he had great

force of will was putting a positive spin on it, but his personality was simply too direct and simple-minded.

I don't personally dislike that about him... But he's not suited for his job. He's the kind of guy I'd never want to see get into stock trading and gambling.

"Well, it depends on what the people in command are thinking." Ryoma said, directing a sober expression at him. "They've probably clued into how their plot failed, so they must have decided to stay on the side of caution and pull back to reassess things."

"At times like these, is an outstanding warrior not meant to use their strength to conquer adversity, and lay down his life in the name of his lord's objectives?" Mikhail said, his words resonating with the clear mindset of a warrior.

But Ryoma couldn't bring himself to praise Mikhail's pride and conviction. As a single knight, perhaps Mikhail's way of thinking would be lauded as valiant and brave, but not knowing when to retreat was a major flaw for a commander. And, perhaps unfortunately, Mikhail was no low-ranking knight.

"Not everyone clings to a knight's honor like you do, Mikhail."

"You intend to insult chivalrous honor?!" Mikhail met Ryoma's exasperated tone with a face reddened by indignance.

"That question rings pretty hollow, coming from the man who turned his back on chivalrous honor to stage an assassination."

Ryoma's reply made Mikhail's face contort in frustration. That was the very last thing he wanted to hear right now.

"Rrgggh... Th-That was... I had no other alternative..." He stuttered his excuses powerlessly.

That stood as proof that even he couldn't justify assassination as a means to an end. He must have been wishing the ground would swallow him up in that instant. As if fleeing the conversation, Mikhail moved to the wagon where the injured were lying. His heart was torn between his pride and the wellbeing of his kingdom.

"Heh. What's the point in crying over spilt milk, anyway? Besides, I don't think

assassination is the wrong way to get things done.” Ryoma said quietly with a sigh, looking at Mikhail’s back as he began tending to the injured with Laura.

“Not the wrong way, you say?” Sara, holding the reins on the driver’s seat, tilted her head quizzically at Ryoma’s defense of Mikhail.

Her surprise came from several days of listening to her master’s conversations with Mikhail, and coming to realize their worldviews didn’t mesh.

“Huh? Well, yeah... There’s nothing wrong with picking assassination in and of itself.” Ryoma replied to Sara’s innocent question with a bitter smile. “Depending on the situation, I might decide to go for it too.”

Indeed, if one used their own common sense, assassination was a terrible thing. But if a single person’s death could lead to preventing the death of many and stopping discord and strife, Ryoma didn’t think it was an option one should easily discredit. In terms of good and evil, assassination certainly fell under evil; Ryoma didn’t question that. But what mattered now was a question of necessity.

“At the end of the day, assassination is just a means to an end, and what matters is whether you can fulfilll that objective...”

In this example, the objective of the knights’ faction was to prevent the nobles’ faction from elevating the illegitimate child to the status of Queen of Rhoadseria. So if one were to ignore good and evil, in terms of efficiency, assassinating the aforesaid princess would mean greatly minimized losses for Rhoadseria, rather than an open war between the two factions. No matter which faction won, if the country fell into discord, the only ones to suffer would be the citizens and farmers. The public order would deteriorate and the country’s productivity would decline.

So in that regard, assassinating the princess may not have been a praiseworthy idea on the surface, but it wasn’t a bad idea in and of itself. If nothing else, it was better than the statesman in charge of the country thrusting needless strain on the citizens due to their adherence to justice or ideals.

That hinged on them gaining accurate, detailed information, though. And it was that point that caused Ryoma to think the knights’ faction were fools.

The fact that they'd planned and executed an assassination plot while not suspecting or scrutinizing the information they'd received, for no reason other than one of their own had delivered it to them, was all too reckless. If they were to fail, it could very well cause their target to see the very fact an attempt on their life was made as a reason to employ violence in return, giving them a justified pretext to strike back. Ryoma doubted they'd thought that far ahead.

"Well, if Mikhail and his subordinates are any indication, the knights' faction are all meatheads, but not much I can do about that, I guess..."

"What's a 'meathead?'" Sara quizzically tilted her head at the epithet Ryoma had muttered.

She'd likely never heard that term before.

"Oh, it's a person who's all brawn and no brains. Someone who's really strong but doesn't think before they act," Ryoma shrugged.

"I see. So that makes them meatheads, then." Sara gave a deep nod, seemingly convinced.

They hadn't spent that much time together, but the way he spoke seemed to pique her interest. And indeed, Mikhail and his surviving subordinates were all impulsive, or perhaps thoughtless, and ultimately not at all the type to think things through.

"But I'm surprised those meatheads went along with your proposal."

"Well, yeah. Mikhail might be a meathead, but he's not an idiot. He understood once I explained my reasoning."

That day, Ryoma's proposal shook Mikhail's heart to the core. And that was only natural; anyone would be suspicious if a person they'd just tried to kill suddenly asked for their cooperation. Especially after Ryoma's plan got many of his men killed.

Mikhail had led a total of fifty troops from the capital to carry out the assassination. There were only five people still clinging to life in the wagon right now. This made a total of six survivors, including Mikhail. So naturally, their hatred for Ryoma Mikoshiba was very strong. It may have been an outcome they had brought upon themselves as the assailants in that attack, but so many

of their comrades had been killed by Ryoma's counterattack...

Still, Mikhail went with Ryoma's proposal. Or rather, was forced to, regardless of his will. Refusing it would have left him with no other options. He'd failed to assassinate the illegitimate princess, and had lost most of his men. Just in terms of bolstering their military force, the knights' faction had nothing to lose by gaining the cooperation of Ryoma and the mercenaries.

In addition, inspecting the corpses of the merchants showed that Ryoma's suspicions were correct. Mingled in with the corpses were a few familiar faces belonging to the nobles' faction, which went to show this attack was all set up by someone in the nobles' faction.

Still, even if Mikhail was convinced, that didn't mean his subordinates accepted this partnership easily. Wrapped as they were with ropes, they ignored the blood moistening their bandages and unsheathed their swords, glaring at Ryoma with alert eyes. In the end, they only accepted things after Mikhail convinced them, but they still burned with hatred for Ryoma. This was also apparent from the scornful gazes they directed at Laura, even while she replaced their bandages.

"Well, Laura's spell was just that powerful. No way around that..." Ryoma shook his head as he watched Mikhail tending to the wounded. "Plus, Boltz and his group chipped in a lot too."

"Yes, they truly are experienced mercenaries. They were able to coordinate with Laura without any practice."

When several people chanted the same verbal thaumaturgy spell, its power could skyrocket and have even greater effects. Though the timing had to be absolutely precise, and it all came down to Boltz and the others being able to work with Laura.

"When I first heard about it, I wasn't sure if it would work."

"Lucky for us that it did."

"Yeah. After all, we couldn't afford to completely wipe out the enemy, but looking back at it, asking them to greatly diminish their numbers and nothing else was a bit crazy... But Boltz's group did good."

Since Ryoma needed some of the enemies to survive so he could get a handle on the situation, killing all of them wouldn't work, and their means were limited. Honestly, just ordering to kill them all without mercy would have been simpler...

"Oh! You called, lad?" Hearing his name called, Boltz drew his horse close to the carriage.

"No, I was just saying you really did a good job back there, and that we wouldn't have gotten out of it if it weren't for you."

"Well, I'm real glad to hear you say that, lad!" Boltz responded to Ryoma's praise with a proud smile. "But the credit's all yours for getting us through this alive, you know? We just chanted a little thaumaturgy, can't compare to that."

With that said, Boltz jovially moved his horse away from the carriage. He was probably a bit flustered by Ryoma's words, and upon realizing he wasn't being called on, went back to his position.

"But what will we be doing now, though?" Laura suddenly asked from behind Ryoma.

"Whoa, where did you come from? What about the wounded soldiers?"

Ryoma's question made Laura's expression cloud over. "Yes, Mikhail said he would take care of them. It's probably better left in his hands than mine..."

She'd taken on tending to the wounded out of genuine goodwill, but the surviving knights seemed to be opposed to her presence. They had once thought her to be the source of all their troubles, and it would take time for them to change their attitudes. Her words just now were implying all too directly that it would be better for Mikhail to do it than an enemy like her.

The moment Ryoma heard her explanation, he pursed his lips and clicked his tongue sharply. Directing any sort of grudge at Ryoma and his group was terribly misguided to begin with. They were the ones who had been manipulated by erroneous information and tried to kill Ryoma and his group, who were complete outsiders to their feud. Even if they showed anger over the friends Ryoma killed in his counterattack, it would feel like nothing but unjustified resentment.

Despite the fact it wouldn't have been odd for Ryoma's side to kill them all, they didn't mouth a single word of thanks even as their wounds were being treated. They certainly didn't seem to understand their position in all this. But putting that into words would make it impossible for the two groups to ever cooperate.

"Well, whatever. What's their condition right now?"

Even though he still felt bitter about the surviving attackers' attitude, Ryoma changed the subject. A significant number of the Crimson Lion group's people were injured during the first raid too, and their condition could greatly influence what they did going forward, so hearing about them was top priority for Ryoma.

"Well, the majority of them got away with only scrapes and cuts, but between the few who were severely injured and the mercenaries, we had enough nostrum stored to go around, and they should all make a decent recovery given a few more days. Your injuries were actually the most severe out of them."

Well, she called them severe, but it probably seemed like he was bleeding profusely because of all the cuts and scratches he'd suffered from the hail of arrows. In actuality, thanks to them having prepared a good amount of nostrum, all his wounds had already scabbed over, and all that remained was for time to work its magic and for the scars to heal.

When it came to treating visible wounds, it was a lot easier and simpler in this Earth compared to Ryoma's.

"That's good, then..." Hearing Sara's explanation, Ryoma's lips curled into a smile. "At worst, we may have to fight at least once."

Ryoma's words made the twins' faces stiffen with tension.

"Are you saying the audience with the princess may not go over well?" Laura asked.

"Well, it's a possibility." Ryoma nodded quietly.

Honestly speaking, this offer was something of an all-or-nothing gamble for Ryoma. Whether the knights' faction or the nobles' faction won the coming conflict was none of his concern, and normally, he wouldn't stick his neck into

such an irritating power struggle. But since he'd been unintentionally swept up in this political strife, he couldn't afford to not take sides with one of them.

What if he chose not to? In that case, Wallace would indict Ryoma, pushing all the responsibility onto him, and there was even the option of the guild dispatching assassins in retribution. The probability of that option felt very high, and Ryoma's group would have absolutely no means of opposing it.

They would likely be able to repel one or two attempts on their lives, but even if they kept evading every individual assassination, they would have no real solution. So long as the guild's power as an organization over the continent remained, or they didn't flee to a place where its hand could not reach them, they would never know peace.

At the end of the day, the most troublesome aspect of this whole charade was that the one person who decided who was right and wrong in this situation was the guildmaster Wallace himself, who'd concocted this entire ordeal. The culprit effectively doubled as the judge, and no matter what proof Ryoma's group presented or what testimony they brought forth, it wouldn't matter.

So, were they to perhaps ask another city's guildmaster for help? That was actually a problematic issue in itself as well. Ryoma, being a nameless mercenary, was naturally out of the question, but would even Lione's group, who had gained somewhat of a name for themselves as a skilled mercenary group, truly be able to have their word taken seriously when pitted against Wallace's? Worse still, since the affair dealt with the power struggle of a country, it was clear guildmasters in other cities wouldn't want to be involved with this case.

Both the feeling of fellowship towards another guildmaster and the strength of a country flickered behind this whole affair. No one, except for an extremely righteous person, or one who was very keen on bringing Wallace down, would be willing to discard their policy of self-defense in such circumstances.

So in this situation where they had no other allies, if Ryoma and his group were to complain to another guildmaster, it would simply seem as if they were making excuses for failing their mission, which was the greatest trap sprung against them. Ultimately, being in the right wasn't enough; they needed the

power to make others recognize that they were in the right.

In other words, in order to survive, Ryoma and his group needed to speak to a guildmaster other than Wallace, while having the support of someone with power. And to have their demands judged fairly, it would have to be someone with more power than Wallace.

And if anyone possessed the power and authority to help them right now, it was the knights' faction. The nobles' faction had already antagonized them, so they were naturally out of the question, and while it may have been different if they were influential members of another country, the neutral faction would see no merit in helping Ryoma. Which left the knights' faction as the only possible force that would offer Ryoma their aid once the fighting ended.

Ryoma's sole realistic means of breaking through this situation was to gain the backing of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria as a nation, in exchange for his assistance in the power struggle against the nobles' faction. The guild may have had branches across the continent, but they still wouldn't be able to challenge an entire country directly.

However, that was all just Ryoma's circumstances. The knights' faction had no clear reason to give Ryoma their support. On the contrary, he was even responsible for the death of some of their men. A sentimental person wouldn't lend an ear to Ryoma's excuses, and would behead him on the spot.

Hence why this was such a gamble; would such a rational person unwavered by emotion exist there? And would that person see the value in using Ryoma?

After crossing through wall after wall, their carriage finally reached the drawbridge leading into the castle.

"Right... Now it's all down to my ability to speechify." Ryoma whispered in tense anticipation as they passed under a massive castle gate set along the road to the palace, his gaze turning toward the sharpened roof of the castle looming ahead.

From this point on, Ryoma would put his life on the line in a massive gamble for the third time since his arrival in this world. The strength of his will burned in his eyes.

“The First Princess of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, Lady Lupis, makes her entrance! All those present before her, kneel!” A black haired woman entered the audience chamber, which had a red carpet laid out across it, and announced the entrance of the princess.

Seeing Mikhail kneel down and lower his head, Ryoma imitated his actions and kneeled on the red carpet. He was, after all, a person from Japan, a nation which had almost entirely abolished the concept of royalty. Japan did have the oldest running imperial household in the world, and while they weren’t shut off from the whole world, an average high schooler wouldn’t be allowed to meet them.

Ryoma’s knowledge of etiquette was limited to standing still and bowing his head, and so he had no way of knowing which courtesy was expected out of someone meeting royalty in this world. So all he could do was mimic Mikhail’s actions with a dubious expression on his face, in a spectacular embodiment of the expression “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

That said, Lione, who had been granted permission to meet the princess with them, was also only capable of awkwardly following Mikhail’s example; this likely meant the majority of people were just as clueless about how to behave in the presence of royalty as Ryoma was. By contrast, though, the Malfist twins carried themselves with elegance and dignity. They may have been slaves until just recently, but they were still descendants of a line of high-ranking knights which held important posts in their country. They had likely been strictly taught such forms of etiquette since they were infants.

I should’ve asked them to teach me this stuff ahead of time...

With that thought in mind, Ryoma simply awaited the princess’s entrance.

A solemn air hung over the audience chamber. This room Mikhail led them into had a great deal of depth and length to it. A red carpet was spread from the entrance all the way to the throne, and on both sides of it stood armed guards with menacing expressions on their faces. There were roughly twenty of them. They had no intent of harming the princess, but this was dangerous for Ryoma’s side, as there were only four of them.

I suppose there’s not much we could’ve done about that. I’m just glad they let

us actually meet the princess... Though a private audience with her would have been better...

After entering the castle, Ryoma and the others spent, or rather, were confined in a room for several hours alloted to them at Mikhail's order. That treatment was to be expected, though. Even if Mikhail could guarantee their identities, as far as the residents of Rhoadseria's palace were concerned, Ryoma was a suspicious stranger of unknown origin.

But while Ryoma didn't know exactly what kind of report Mikhail gave, when he showed up in the room they were confined in again, he took them straight to an audience with the princess. Based on what information he delivered, the group may have been taken to have their heads lopped off without any audience held, but the odds seemed to be in their favor. If nothing else, Ryoma would at least be given a chance to speak.

After a few moments of kowtowing, Ryoma could hear the sound of a door on the other side of the throne room opening, followed by the echoing of several people's footsteps.

Princess Lupis and her entourage, in all likelihood. Ryoma's group waited for her to speak, still kneeling.



“Raise your heads.” A dignified woman’s voice echoed through the room.

As Ryoma raised his head respectfully, his gaze met that of a young woman clad in nobles’ clothes. Her hair was a dazzling silver shade, just like Laura’s. In terms of age, she looked to be in her mid-twenties.

She was Lupis Rhoadserians, candidate for future ruler of this kingdom.

Not taking a seat at her throne, Lupis simply looked down at Mikhail, who remained kneeled and did not raise his head.

“Mikhail Vanash, vice-captain of the royal guard. Rise to your feet.”

As she spoke Mikhail’s name, Lupis’s expression was steeped with severity and calmness. But at the same time, Ryoma sensed a great deal of immaturity from her, stemming either from her age or her lack of experience.

Vice-captain? I thought this guy was a hotshot, but he’s gotten to a fairly high standing in the kingdom, hasn’t he? No wonder he managed to get us an audience with the princess so easily... But that said, he’s pretty impulsive. And he led the assassination attempt himself... Either the knights’ faction really is that understaffed, or maybe they’re just picking people based on pedigree and not ability? I guess in the end, the question is whether or not he’s profitable.

Upon realizing that Mikhail held a stronger position than he’d first suspected, Ryoma couldn’t help but thank God. His individual martial prowess aside, Ryoma recognized Mikhail’s extreme inaptitude as a commander because of his impulsive nature, and wouldn’t have guessed he held such an influential position as vice-captain of the royal guard.

But conversely, the fact that someone as impetuous as Mikhail reached such a high rank in this kingdom was worrying its own way. In order to gain more things to consider, Ryoma kept silent and listened to Lupis’s words.

“I’ve already heard of your report from Meltina. I can only say that I was quite disappointed to hear you failed to carry out your mission. Your failure this time has cost the lives of many promising knights... All of whom laid down their lives in the name of keeping this kingdom’s order. And yet you stand before me, as both commander and survivor... As princess of this country, I would have no choice but to order your death.”

Lupis's seemingly rebuking words heavily chilled the atmosphere within the audience chamber. But then, Lupis softened her cold, stiff expression.

"However, you are an exceedingly valorous knight, loyal to the royal family, and this kingdom cannot stand to lose one such as you now, when it stands on the brink of crisis. And so, in consideration of that, along with your past achievements, and this mission being the result of a sly deception by the nobles' faction, I have decided to postpone the execution of your sentence until the day we conclude this conflict with the nobles' faction. And I permit you to absolve yourself of your crime with your deeds in the battles to come."

A stir ran through the audience chamber. Her ruling was likely an unexpected one, as Mikhail's face was frozen in shock.

"Your Highness." The black haired woman who had entered the room before Lupis spoke up. "Are you quite sure about this?"

"I have no qualms about this. I cannot do something so foolish as sentence such a loyal, skilled knight to death when a civil war looms ahead. I may have granted him a stay of execution, but I have not declared him innocent."

With Lupis's words echoing through the audience chamber, the murmuring in the room gradually died down.

"I give you my word that I shall answer your expectations, Princess Lupis!" Mikhail bowed his head deeply, showing the deepest gratitude he could toward the princess's kindness.

I see... So she values his usefulness. Their faction is already in a weakened state, so she doesn't want to weaken her position any further... Plus she only stayed his execution, and didn't deem him innocent. If Mikhail doesn't garner enough achievement to buy his own life back, he's finished... Yeah. Not bad. I thought she was just inexperienced, but she definitely takes other people's feelings and stances into consideration while she manages them... I'm not sure if Mikhail's that skilled of a knight, though.

While he had some faint doubts regarding her appraisal of Mikhail's skills, her judgment was far more sound than he'd anticipated. If all she wanted was to spare Mikhail's life, the bereaved families of those who died under his command during the raid against Ryoma wouldn't sit by idly.

Still, pushing all the blame on the field commander when this ploy had fooled the entirety of the knights' faction higher echelon would not have been right, either. In that regard, the compromise of allowing him to offset his punishment by gathering merit through his achievements in the immediate future could be seen as a decision which served to maintain the delicate political balance.

Not bad... I suppose I've been dealt a better hand here than I thought... If she's really what she seems to be, she should be able to understand the validity and advantage of my plan... But there's still one problem...

Ryoma had cautiously examined the reactions of the people around them when Princess Lupis announced her clemency of Mikhail, and noticed something; several of the people present in the audience chamber scrunched up their faces in frustration and enmity. It wasn't a blatant expression, of course, and they didn't so much as click their tongues. But for just a brief moment, their honest feelings had broken through.

Looks like this doesn't just boil down to a conflict between the knights', nobles' and neutral factions...

Putting aside whether Mikhail was skilled enough to buy anyone's ire, the problem here was that people within his own faction existed who would rejoice at the prospect of his death, when normally one wouldn't wish for one of their allies to die. If they were wishing for a comrade to meet their demise, then...

Is this just a power struggle within the faction? Or could it be, not everyone in the knights' faction is loyal to Princess Lupis? Well, I guess that would explain it, but... In that case, that's another reason I can get on Lupis' good side.

Though he was pleased to see the chips were falling in his favor, Ryoma refrained from showing it on his face. Being smug right now, at an ill-suited moment, could fatally damage his chances.

Hold on, now... I'm not out of the woods yet. The battle's just starting. I have to persuade the princess and that woman first... If I rouse their suspicion by mistake, they could have me executed on the spot...

Ryoma directed a probing glance at the woman standing beside the princess. She was a large-built woman, with long, sleek and tied up black hair. She stood at the princess's side, seemingly serving as her shield, and was clad in heavy

iron armor with two swords sheathed at her waist; she seemed to be quite adept at using them. She also appeared to have the deep trust of the princess, who didn't show so much as a hint of displeasure at the fact this woman had questioned her judgment.

"Thus, the matter of Mikhail is settled. Now, let us move on to the main topic." Lupis turned her gaze to Ryoma's group of four.

"I see. Sure enough, you are a girl of adolescent age with silver hair..." Princess Lupis first tried to dispel the greatest source of doubt. "Is it true that you are not a daughter of King Pharst the Second?"

"Yes. My name is Laura. Laura Malfist. And this girl right here is my sister, Sara." Sara nodded silently at Laura's words.

They looked like reflections of each other in terms of their features.

"I see... The resemblance between you two is uncanny. Hair colors aside, one could say you are each the spitting image of the other..."

Lupis's words made everyone's gazes gather on the Malfist sisters. Indeed, being twins, their faces and physiques were practically identical with the exception of the color of their hair. It was quite visible the two were related by blood.

"Your Highness... We've received no intel that the illegitimate daughter had any siblings." The black-haired woman whispered in Princess Lupis' ear.

"That surname, Malfist, is familiar to me... Does it not belong to a knight family from the central continent?"

"Yes, indeed. They were a line of knights that served the kingdom of Quift, which was destroyed by the kingdom of Shadora some years ago... The color of their skin and the shape of their faces does seem similar to the central continent's people."

Their gazes were fixed on the sisters, and for a few seconds, their gaze was returned.

"I see... Certainly, you're different from the illegitimate daughter we've been told of." Princess Lupis whispered in a resigned fashion.

Her disappointment was understandable. If Laura was King Pharst's the Second's daughter, killing her would remove the thorn about to plunge Rhoadseria into turmoil. Furthermore, the fact that the illegitimate daughter was moved into the country at this time, to the extent where Laura was used as bait to hide her, meant that the antagonism between the knights' and nobles' faction would develop into an unavoidable conflict.

Regardless of whether the situation would devolve into an armed conflict or if a political solution was possible, this matter would lead to a great decline in Rhoadseria's national power. It was, naturally, a matter that greatly weighed down on Lupis, who was a candidate for future sovereign ruler of the country.

"In which case, we cannot hold you accountable for having fought our kingdom's knights..." Princess Lupis whispered, furrowing her lovely, well-kept brows.

They danced to the tune of false information and instigated an attack on complete strangers. If one were to consider who was at fault here, it was hardly fair to judge Ryoma's side for killing them. If nothing else, she would have to keep up the appearance of being magnanimous on the surface.

"I'm humbled. Thank you for your generous words, Your Highness." Ryoma said and bowed his head in reverence.

In actuality, Ryoma's group were victims who had become involved against their will, and could have acted indignant in this situation. But considering the class difference between a commoner and royalty which stood between them, and factoring future relations into it, being needlessly overbearing was a questionable play.

Demanding that justice be done with respect for one's rights does not always yield the highest possible profit. No, in a hierarchical society and a world without any conception of human rights, the weak crying out for their rights to be respected would only end up with their heads unceremoniously mounted on a pike.

"You needn't be so formal." Lupis smiled gently upon seeing Ryoma's attitude. "We've caused you a great deal of trouble... Is there anything you wish for?"

Her words were far more magnanimous than one would usually believe. She must have indeed been an amicable, kind person at heart.

Ryoma pretended to ponder for a moment at Lupis's words. He'd already decided everything ahead of time, but coming out and saying it would give the game away.

"It's not much of a wish, per se... But there's a matter I would request your assistance with." Ryoma spoke with an apologetic tone.

"You refer to the offer you have discussed with Mikhail?"

"Yes, exactly."

Princess Lupis's expression took on a bothered shade at Ryoma's words. Given her position, she'd have surely preferred to not get involved with Ryoma any further. If possible, she would have just given them money and sent them away at once, because as far as the knights who'd had their friends slain by Ryoma were concerned, Ryoma was quite literally an enemy.

"It's a matter I can't decide upon this very moment... Surely you understand why?" Lupis' probing gaze was fixed on Ryoma's face.

Lupis was essentially asking Ryoma whether he realized that, while she personally didn't mind joining forces with him, the act would cause unrest in her court, and she couldn't afford to have the knights' faction collapse in on itself with the looming conflict against the nobles' faction.

"Of course, I'm well aware of your position, Your Highness." Ryoma's eyes lit up with pure will, focused squarely on Lupis's own eyes. "But with all due respect, if you choose to maintain the status quo, you will almost certainly never sit upon the throne."

He wasn't allowed to show even a trace of self-doubt. Ryoma was now setting out to fight.

""Insolent fool! You dare speak above your station, lout?!""

And as expected, the audience chamber erupted with angry shouts.

Those reactions were obvious, given he'd made the provocation intentionally, but the princess and the woman standing beside her didn't change their

expressions. The one who raised his voice was a man standing one step below the throne.

“Your Highness! This disrespectful ruffian ought to be executed at once!”

A well-built man who had earlier scowled at the princess’s sparing of Mikhail directed a pleading gaze at the princess, with those around him raising unanimous voices of agreement. Their pride probably couldn’t bear to be wounded by some arrogant commoner of unknown origin.

“Please wait, General Albrecht. Should we not hear what Her Highness has to say here first?”

“What are you saying, Meltina?! Do you intend to simply take this insult and say nothing? What happened to your honor as a Rhoadserian knight?!”

I see, so that’s Meltina. The princess’s closest aide.

Ryoma tilted his ears cautiously, paying heed to the argument between Meltina and the man called General Albrecht.

“Wait just a moment. This man did not insult us specifically! He simply detailed his personal take on the matter! His tone may have been too sharp to be respectful, indeed, but to execute him for it would be far too overbearing. It would tarnish Her Majesty’s good name.”

“Are you a fool? The man clearly said that we would lose! What would you call his words if not an insult to Rhoadseria’s knights?! If anything would tarnish Her Majesty’s name, it would be letting this man walk away with his life!”

Meltina’s words were reasonable, but were not serving to placate others’ emotions. It was especially in places like these that emotions tended to run strong and cloud one’s better judgment as people obstinately clung to their honor. General Albrecht was a fine example of that.

In the end, the one who cut the pointless quarrel down was Princess Lupis, who had remained silent since Ryoma said his piece.

“Stop it this instant. We are in the presence of guests!”

Princess Lupis’s calm but clear tone brought everyone to silence. Said guests were without doubt Ryoma and his comrades. Regardless of whether she

actually saw them as guests, Lupis's words had enough power to them to quiet everyone down.

Perhaps realizing how laughable they looked squabbling in front of a man who had just been deemed lowly and uncouth, Meltina and General Albrecht hung their heads in silence.

"Pardon this shameful display... I too wish to triumph over the nobles' faction while losing as few of our men as possible. That is the only way to defend our country's people... Can you do this?"

Lupis finally asked Ryoma the question he'd been longing to hear.

"Of course. I promise to live up to your expectations, no matter what." As he said this, Ryoma bowed his head respectfully before the princess.

His audience with Princess Lupis behind him, Ryoma was led to a room deep in the castle alone. With a chamberlain walking ahead of him, Ryoma recalled the look of loathing in the general's eyes as he left.

Yikes, looks like he hates me. Makes sense, I guess. I'm just some commoner who popped up out of nowhere, after all...

There were certainly a few points to regret, looking back on the audience. He'd have wished to join the knights' faction in a way that didn't spark that much conflict. That said, regretting it now wouldn't turn back the clock.

I guess just piquing the princess's interest should be my biggest accomplishment here...

In actuality, Ryoma hadn't said a word about officially joining the knights' faction yet. Which was obvious, given he didn't have any achievements to show for it. He'd have to make his merits clear in his upcoming dialogue with the princess.

Ryoma's battle wasn't over yet. If anything, the crucial moment was just ahead of him.

The chamberlain led him to what was apparently one of the personal rooms used by the princess. Crimson rays of dusk light painted the room red through the white lace curtains.

“Thank you for waiting.”

Shortly after he’d sat on the sofa, Princess Lupis entered the room, accompanied by Meltina.

“No, I’m just grateful you were willing to listen to my unreasonable request, Your Highness.” Ryoma said, and then rose to his feet and bowed his head deeply.

They decided to discuss the rest in private, because it would be inconvenient in the audience chamber. That held true for both Ryoma and the princess, and so the two moved their conversation into this room where prying eyes wouldn’t reach them. Ryoma was the only one called over, for the sake of security.

“Well, you don’t need to be so stiff. Only Meltina and myself are here, so you may make yourself comfortable.” Lupis’s personality wasn’t very strict, it seemed.

“Yes. Excuse me, then.”

After watching Princess Lupis and Meltina sit down themselves, Ryoma sat back down on the sofa.

“Let us begin our discussion, then.”

Meltina looked at Princess Lupis’s eyes for confirmation, and began speaking. “I suspect you’ve already noticed, but our military inferiority is so dire that no matter how many soldiers we would be given, it likely won’t be enough.”

Meltina cut right to the heart of the matter, and this meant that they didn’t mind Ryoma joining the knights’ faction. But she then directed a gaze at Ryoma that made it clear she was going to cut things off here.

“However...”

“You can’t ignore the complaints of the family and friends of the people we killed?”

Meltina nodded at Ryoma’s words.

“Yeah, that makes sense... So, what are your conditions?”

“That you bring us enough merit to offset that.” Meltina answered Ryoma’s

question succinctly.

However, there were many implications to what she said. Meltina's goal was to ascertain that Ryoma was a person with enough power to make good on his promise.

"I see... so you want me to show that I have more value than just pure military might."

Lupis nodded deeply.

"I'm sure you realize this, but if all we wanted was pure war potential, we would just hire unrelated mercenaries to fight for our cause."

True enough, hiring unrelated mercenaries with no stakes in the conflict from the guild would be simpler than trying to offset an already soured relationship. However, Ryoma replied without a hint of hesitance.

"In that case, I think you'll find I'm a much better bargain, Your Highness."

"And why is that?" Meltina regarded Ryoma's confident words with a dubious glance.

"Because I'll bring you victory."

Hearing Ryoma's words, a giggle escaped from Princess Lupis's lips.

"You're quite the confident one, aren't you?"

"You humble me, Your Majesty." Ryoma bowed his head respectfully. "But I speak no lies."

His attitude reeked of hypocritical courtesy, but somehow it made Ryoma seem awfully convincing.

"We can't believe you based on words alone, though."

"Of course not, Your Majesty."

That much was obvious. If the candidate to the throne was the type to believe him based just on what he'd said, Ryoma would consider himself to be in deep trouble.

"Can you prove it, then?" Princess Lupis's tone was jestful, but her eyes burned with the murderous intent of a wild animal.

Ryoma heard that the nobles often gossiped over her tendency to be too kind to the commoners, but it seemed there was more than just naive kindness to this woman.

“Of course... That is, I’d very much like to prove it to you, but first I need to confirm a few things, if you don’t mind?”

Up until now, everything had gone as predicted, but it was a whole different ballpark starting from now. He’d felt something wasn’t right in the audience chamber, and figuring out what that was now stood as the main objective for Ryoma.

“What is the meaning of this? Did you lie to Her Majesty?” With cold enmity in her eyes, Meltina reached for the swords at her waist.

She would likely try to cut him down where he stood if he gave the wrong answer here.

“You can’t expect me to come up with a measure to solve the situation when I don’t have a full grasp of what’s going on, can you? Or rather... There were a few points I found suspicious back in the audience chamber. The situation seemed rather different from what Mikhail told me earlier. I hoped you could explain the circumstances to me directly, Your Majesty.”

Ryoma’s explanation caused Meltina to turn a questioning gaze at Princess Lupis.

“Could you explain what exactly it was you found suspicious?” Lupis asked Ryoma, trying to maintain her composure.

She wouldn’t let it show that she was flustered at a time like this. But judging by the restless movement of her eyes, Ryoma realized that his feelings of suspicion weren’t just in his head.

“Hmm, well, to begin with, from what Mikhail told me, you’re the one in charge of the knights’ faction, but it’s not actually that simple, is it?”

A shiver ran through the two of them at Ryoma’s statement.

“Why makes you say that?” Lupis asked back, trying her hardest to feign calmness.

“The thing that bothered me the most is that when you pardoned Mikhail’s life, the people right below you made some rather bitter expressions. It was just for a moment, though, but I became sure of it just now. When I saw your face.”

A heavy silence hung in the room.

“I see... And what do you think is the truth here?” Princess Lupis finally broke the silence.

“There’s no doubting the knights’ faction is united under your banner, but not all of them are directly under your command. If I had to hazard a guess, that general who was arguing with Meltina is the center of another faction... Or maybe it’s the other way around. That is to say, the knights’ faction is centered around him, and you’re just a symbolic figurehead? Of course, there’s also the chance they all just really hate Mikhail.”

Another long silence fell over the room. The expressions on the pair’s faces made it clear that their hearts were surging with tension at Ryoma’s words.

Looks like I was spot on... Which means I need to change my attitude. No, I should listen to what the princess’s objective here is first...

“You realized that during the audience earlier?”

“Yes.”

“I see...” Lupis said after yet another long silence, with Ryoma nodding at her words which followed it. “I suppose you truly are a good bargain...”

“Your Majesty...” Meltina’s voice was full of regret and sadness.

“It is fine... If he saw through everything that easily, there’s no point in trying to gloss things over, is there?” Princess Lupis said, and turned her gaze to Ryoma. “It’s like you’ve said... I’m nothing more than a nominal figurehead to them. Control over this country at the moment is divided between Duke Gelhart, who leads the nobles’ faction, and General Hodram Albrecht, who has the knights’ faction under his thumb.”

Royalty that held no real power. Lupis’s expression turned somber, as if she was being tormented by the humiliation of it all.

“I see, so General Albrecht was the man who argued with Meltina back

there?”

“Correct.”

Even if he was admonishing, his attitude was one that clearly didn’t care much for how others saw him. He was evidently an arrogant person.

“I think I understand... Could you explain the situation for now? I can’t really think of a way to change things without a clear view of the political map.”

“Yes, of course...” Lupis seemed to have become pensive at Ryoma’s words, and then began speaking. “I’ll begin by explaining what the knights’ faction is.”

Lupis’s explanation took some thirty minutes, with Meltina appending a few facts here and there.

“I can see why you’re pessimistic. The situation’s pretty bad.” Those were Ryoma’s words upon hearing Lupis’s explanation in its entirety. “Even if the knights’ faction wins this conflict, there’s nothing but the worst possible future ahead of you.”

So long as General Albrecht held all the real power, Lupis would be rendered superfluous as soon as the conflict with the nobles’ faction concluded. Having her freedom taken from her and being forced into confinement was, ironically enough, one of the less terrible ways things could end for her. If Albrecht was the kind of person to not mind having the stigma of treason appended to him, he could just claim the throne after the nobles’ faction was done with. No, he wouldn’t even have to usurp the throne, since he could just keep Lupis under his control as a puppet ruler.

In other words, there were two necessary conditions for Princess Lupis to survive this struggle. Firstly, they had to win victory over the nobles’ faction. The other condition was to increase the influence of her own side, the princess’s faction, mustering their strength to the point where they’d be able to stand up to Albrecht’s tyranny.

Achieving either one of those would be a challenge, but if they didn’t achieve both, Lupis’s fate would be sealed. And Lupis and Meltina were well aware of that.

And here I thought this was going a little too smoothly. To think only a third of

the knights' faction have sworn loyalty to the princess...

The princess's faction were like cornered rats, hence why they were interested in hearing what Ryoma, who flew in out of nowhere, had to say. They were grasping at straws, all in order to survive.

"I wish to make the princess this country's true ruler! Can you make that happen?"

"Meltina... Thank you..." Lupis thanked Meltina for her ardent, faithful words.

This stood as proof that they shared a relationship of trust that went beyond simply a master and her servant.

"All right... So, let me go over the conditions again. First, we need to make sure the princess becomes the ruler of Rhoadseria. And we also need to make sure she'd no longer be a puppet in the hands of the knights' faction. Did I get everything right?"

The two nodded vigorously.

"In that case, I think I can work it out. Whether you actually hold the throne for long after you gain it depends on your capabilities, but if it's just helping you regain your true power, I can manage that."

He did, in fact, have confidence that he could make Lupis win.

"Is that true?"

"Yes."

The pair's eyes filled with happiness and doubt at Ryoma's proclamation.

"How do you intend to do it?" Meltina leaned her body forward, as if bracing herself.

"By bringing the neutral faction over to our side." Ryoma replied.

However, as soon as they heard his answer, both their expressions filled with disappointment.

"Hmph... I was a fool to believe a man like you," Meltina whispered, as if he'd just tried to pull the wool over her eyes.

"Oh? You don't like my idea?"

“Of course not! I’ve been leading the initiative to do that for a long time now!”

“Oh, you have?” Ryoma asked with a smile on his lips.

“That’s right! Just about anyone would come up with the idea of having the neutral faction turn to our side as a way of improving our position!”

Or rather, there was basically no other way, save for asking the neighboring countries for help in exchange for Rhoadseria’s lands. And it went without saying that doing so would spell Rhoadseria’s eventual destruction. If they were to have Princess Lupis take charge of the country while retaining its independence, they would have to incorporate the country’s own internal forces into their faction.

And additionally, taking in the neutral faction, which was merely watching by the sidelines, was far more realistic than expecting to divide the nobles’ faction that opposed them or the powerful knights’ faction.

“I see, so you tried it... And no one took you seriously.”

“Wh-Why, you...!” She likely thought he was mocking her, because she unsheathed one of her swords and held it to Ryoma’s throat. “Do not look down on me!”



Yeah, makes sense... If she acts like this at every little taunt...

He'd assumed Meltina had a fairly quick-tempered personality from how she argued in the audience chamber, and as it turned out, he was right. She may have had a handsome face, but her temperament was spirited; not unlike Mikhail's in that regard.

Her loyalty to the princess is strong, but... I'd kind of wish Lupis would have gotten some brighter people to act as her aides...

That thought surfaced in Ryoma's mind, even as the sword remained pointed at his throat. It was clear as day to him why the neutral faction had rejected her invitation.

"Stop it!"

"But, Your Highness!"

"Meltina! Calm yourself!"

Hearing Princess Lupis's rebuke, Meltina sheathed her sword, however bitterly.

"All things considered, I do understand why Meltina would be upset," Princess Lupis said, anger in her voice. "Are you saying that you would be able to bring the neutral faction to our side, even while she couldn't?"

While she showed royal magnanimity, she did not swallow Ryoma's words without any proof, and was visibly quite annoyed herself.

"I'm about 80% sure I can." Ryoma answered her gaze with a bitter smile. "But before that, there's something I'd like to ask Meltina to do. Would you mind?"

Meltina and Princess Lupis exchanged gazes at Ryoma's question, and then nodded silently.

"You certainly took quite a while. Did it go well?" asked Sara.

The sun had sunk below the horizon several hours ago, and the curtain of night draped across the heavens. It was long past dinnertime, and most of the castle's inhabitants were already in their beds. Despite that, the Malfist sisters

greeted Ryoma with a smile.

“Yeah. I’m surprised to see you two are still awake at this hour, though.”

“Naturally. We could never sleep without knowing our master has returned!” Laura said, and Sara nodded in agreement.

“Ain’t like yer the only ones still awake, though...”

He turned his gaze into the room, where Lione was reclining with her legs propped up on the table, holding a bottle of alcohol in one hand and sending a dissatisfied glare his way.

“What are you doing here, Lione?”

“Oh, spare me that shit, ya berk! I’ve been on pins an’ needles this whole time over yer little chat with the princess.” Lione grumbled, draining the remaining contents of the bottle in one swig.

“Doesn’t seem that way from where I’m standing, to be honest.”

The sight of the empty wine bottles littering the table didn’t make her claim any more convincing, either. He didn’t know when she’d started drinking, but there were more than a dozen bottles rattling around.

“Sis here believes in you, lad.” Boltz, who had likely been drinking together with Lione, chuckled teasingly with his face flushed red.

“Stop running yer mouth, Boltz!” Lione shouted at him, before the smile disappeared from her lips and she turned to Ryoma. “So, how’d it go? All according to plan?”

She’d apparently sobered up for a moment, which apparently meant she was drinking with some responsibility after all. Boltz’s expression was one of utmost seriousness as well. Years of mercenary work had likely instilled survival instincts in them deeply enough that those instincts remained lucid no matter how much alcohol they consumed.

“Yeah. I figured I’d give you the details tomorrow, but all the better if you’re here now. Sara, Laura, sit down over here.”

“Erm... What about dinner?”

The sisters had grown accustomed to overseeing all of Ryoma's business. The palace's dining hall was closed by now, but they stood ready to prepare something if their master said he was hungry.

"Ah, that can wait for later. I'll make do with these for now."

Ryoma stuffed his cheeks with the beef jerky Lione snacked on while she drank, and signaled for them to take a seat.

"As you wish.""

After confirming everyone was seated, Ryoma began to explain what he'd learned from his audience with the princess.

"What?! The princess's position was that inferior?!" Lione couldn't help but raise her voice at Ryoma's report.

Boltz and the Malfist sisters remained silent, but their expressions were filled with sadness.

"Yep... Well, what're you gonna do." Ryoma shrugged with a bitter smile.

"But the knights' faction being drawn into a factional feud between those with loyalty to the princess and those loyal to the general... that certainly complicates things." Boltz, with his array of life experience, could easily see the problem.

"Well, that's just how the people on top are, innit?" Lione responded to Boltz's words with a far-sighted comment.

Be it Ryoma's Earth or this one, commoners seemed to view those in power the same way.

"But in this situation, they can help us, right?"

Boltz's question hit the nail on the head. They could get on their hands and knees and beg as much as they wanted, but Lupis wouldn't help them without any recompense. With her own back up against the wall, she didn't have the leisure to help someone she'd never met before without anything to gain from it.

"Well, not with the current circumstances being what they are. Whatever the case, if the princess's faction can't crush General Albrecht after they deal with

the nobles' faction, she's done for. But even if the princess understands this, it doesn't look like she's capable of increasing her political standing."

"So what do we do? Shoulder General Albrecht instead?"

"No. I saw the general himself in the audience chamber this afternoon, and he looks like he has his own issues. I don't think throwing in our lot with him would yield anything."

Honestly speaking, until he'd seen things play out in the audience chamber, Ryoma wasn't considering the idea of helping Princess Lupis at all costs. If it was possible to take the side of General Albrecht, he wouldn't have insisted on helping the weaker side needlessly.

But seeing General Albrecht during the audience— the way he spoke, the way he eyed Ryoma and his group— Ryoma could easily imagine him scoffing at their request and ignoring them. At worst, he'd even send soldiers to kill them, to prevent them from possibly getting in the way.

True, Albrecht was the stronger one here, but since he wouldn't help them, he was essentially worthless to Ryoma. During Ryoma's life in Japan, he'd seen plenty of people who looked at others the way Albrecht looked at them; egotistical monsters who cared only for feasting on their own gain and profit. Any promise Albrecht might make would be meaningless, since he'd never fulfill it.

"So our only choice is to have Princess Lupis build up her strength, huh..."

Boltz assessed the situation with the cold-hearted prowess of a mercenary; all the more evidence of how his words were lacking in optimism.

"It's not all bad, though. At the very least, if we support the princess's faction, we can count on them to support us."

Pacts and promises made in times of inferiority, where the odds of victory were slim, had strong binding power. And in addition, Ryoma realized from their brief meeting together that Princess Lupis wasn't the sort of person who'd renege on a promise.

"But can we really split the neutral faction?"

“Yeah. I asked Meltina earlier about exactly how she handled the negotiations last time. If I go, I’ll be able to win them over for sure.”

Everyone looked at Ryoma with amazement as he answered Lione’s smile with a confident smile of his own. They had no idea what made him so certain of that.

“I’ll explain once I actually succeed with the negotiations, but for now, I’ve arranged to have Lione’s group integrated into the princess’s direct chain of command. You’ll mostly be handling bodyguard and training duties, but...”

Ryoma cut off his words there and turned a worried glance in Lione’s direction.

“What... Is there a problem?”

“No, but... Lione, just how many people are in the Crimson Lion group?”

“If you mean guys who can fight, twenty-two, including us,” Boltz cut into the conversation. “One got hit by an arrow during the raid, so once he recovers you can make that twenty-three.”

“That won’t be enough... Lione, think can you round up 70 or 80 more mercenaries without going through the guild?”

“Well... There’s a few groups we’re friendly with, so I could round up those numbers...” Ryoma’s words likely came as a surprise, because Lione’s reply was a somewhat evasive one. “But since we won’t be doing it through the guild, we’ll be paying more than the usual market price. D’ya have the money for that?”

“How much are we talking?”

“Well, it depends on how long we hire them for... If you want 70 to 80 people on the same level as us, it’ll be... At least three hundred... No, five hundred golds.”

“All right. I’ll get Laura to withdraw that amount tomorrow, so go and gather those mercenaries for us.”

“Uhh... Right. If ya got the money, then it should be fine. Leave it to me.” Even while she was taken aback by Ryoma agreeing to that sum so easily, she

bumped her fist against her chest in a reassuring gesture.

“Right, so starting tomorrow, it’s the real deal. Everything’s riding on what we do from here on out!”

Everyone in the room nodded deeply at Ryoma’s words; they understood how they couldn’t afford to lose in the turmoil to come, if they were to weather this situation.

“My apologies for coming at such a busy time. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your patience, Count Bergstone.” Ryoma said, bowing his head deeply to the man sitting before him. “I am Ryoma Mikoshiba, an emissary sent by Her Highness, Princess Lupis. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

They were in a plot of land some two days by carriage away, to the north of the capital, Pireas, in a manor belonging to one of the neutral faction’s nobles. The sun was right at its zenith, and ordinarily this would be the perfect time for lunch; in other words, not the most appropriate time to visit a noble’s estate.

“Oh, no, I could not treat Her Majesty’s emissaries too crudely, could I? All the more when you have Her Majesty’s sworn aide, Lady Meltina, with you.”

Count Bergstone concluded his words with a haughty laugh that echoed through the room, and composedly motioned for them to sit.

Count Alan Bergstone turned 43 this year. While possessing a wealth and territory worthy of his title, he was considered a middle-class noble among the Rhoadserian aristocracy.

“So? To what do I owe this visit from Her Majesty’s emissaries?”

Needless to say, this wasn’t an honest question. Emissaries from the princess’s faction were visiting Count Bergstone, a neutral faction noble, in the midst of a very fragile political climate in the kingdom of Rhoadseria. Anyone with an ounce of their wits about them would pick up on the reason behind this visit.

“Right. Let us start with the completion of our mission, then.”

Ryoma’s words made Count Bergstone furrow his brow. The fact of the matter was, Meltina had already asked for his assistance a month ago, and his

answer at the time was evidently a “no.” Seeing the princess had sent emissaries his way again made him actually quite exasperated, as he expected this conversation to be a repeat of the last one.

But Ryoma’s unexpected words took Bergstone by surprise.

“A mission, you say?”

What is the meaning of this... And just who is this man? I don’t recall anyone like him being in either of the factions...

Bergstone was puzzled, as he was sure Meltina would be leading the talks. Why would she entrust the crucial matter of asking for official cooperation to some unfamiliar man with no name for himself? Having been forced to lead an unfortunate reclusive lifestyle for many years, Bergstone had prided himself on having as keen a sense for the political map in the palace as a tuned antenna. As such, him not knowing the name or face of this emissary ought to have been impossible.

But Count Alan Bergstone stifled those doubts, prompting Ryoma to continue with a gentle smile.

“Yes. It is with heavy heart that I must inform you Her Majesty the Princess is greatly saddened.”

“Oh? Whatever weighs on her kind heart?” Bergstone’s expression showed no hint of wavering at Ryoma’s words.

“Why, at seeing the fate approaching the long running Rhoadserian noble house of Bergstone, of course.”

Bergstone had to desperately swallow the profanity that had surged all the way up to his throat at the sound of Ryoma’s almost insolent words. He’d naturally expected to hear, just as he did when Meltina tried to bring him to their side, of the factional struggle between the nobles’ faction and the knights’ faction. But for some reason, the topic had changed to the fate of his house, and since the princess’s sorrow was brought up as the preface of the matter, it must have been a grim affair indeed for his family.

Since he’d treated him as he would anyone else asking for help, it was only natural Count Bergstone would be overcome with the desire to shout

vilification now. Was the princess's faction, weakened as it was, in any position to worry for others' wellbeing?

Despite this, Count Bergstone's many years as a noble granted him the tolerance to smile as if nothing was wrong.

"Oh? The fate of my house, you say? Why, how very honorable... Her Majesty worries over the fate of such a minor noble house as ours, even when beset by as many troubles as she is. It is the height of honor. Could you relay to Her Majesty my deepest gratitude for her kindness?"

His reply was just about perfect. It maintained his aristocratic dignity, and while being grateful to the princess on the surface, mocked her between the lines. It held the implied meaning of, 'are you truly in any position to worry about us?'

Hmm, so far everything's going according to the information I got.

Ryoma was relieved to hear the sarcastic sting in Count Bergstone's reply, because he thought that what Princess Lupis needed right now was someone capable of spinning plots who would serve as the brains of her faction. She wasn't lacking in military might alone. Politics, economics, diplomacy, culture; all of those were matters she was lacking in.

Well, I suppose that's because all of Princess Lupis's aides are from the knight class... It only makes sense they're nothing but a bunch of meatheads.

And indeed, what was sought out of a knight was martial prowess and loyalty for the crown, to serve as the shield defending the kingdom and the royal house. Ryoma understood full well that a militaristic nature had its uses.

The problem was, they persisted so much in that nature that they had a tendency to act recklessly or look down on pragmatic assessments of the situation. Their loyalty was firm and absolute, not unlike the disappearing but still present idea of selfless devotion in modern Japan.

Of course, that line of thinking wasn't flawed in itself; knights had to have honor and pride. But from an organizational perspective, having a group made up of only those kinds of people may have made for an organization that was terribly easy to control, but also made for one that was extremely incomplete

and flawed.

It was for this reason that, of all the candidates to bring over to the princess's faction, Count Bergstone was the first to catch Ryoma's eye. This middle-aged man, who once held significant political power, but earned the ire of both Duke Gelhart and the late King Pharst the Second with hypocritical courtesy and haughtiness; who was ostracized from the palace once his main backer, his stepfather, passed away, and forced into a reclusive life...

"You're too modest, Count Bergstone. You have great territory, which boasts an impressive population. From what I gather, you're capable of conscripting a thousand men? That doesn't sound like a minor noble house to me."

Compared to Duke Gelhart, who ranked highest among the nobles, the military might the Count held was certainly insignificant. But there weren't many nobles in Rhoadseria capable of conscripting a thousand men, and if Count Bergstone was considered a minor noble, some eighty percent of the nobles in all of Rhoadseria would fall under the same category.

"Oh, you hold my house in higher regard than it demands, sir emissary. Perhaps your quarrel with the nobles' faction has rendered you incapable of sound judgment? Ahaha."

His words were steeped with mocking. They may have been spoken with a calm voice and feigned friendliness, but were close to an outright insult.

"No, not at all. My judgment is quite sound, I believe. As proof, from what I hear, Duke Gelhart has shown great interest in you already. Or maybe you're already a part of the nobles' faction by now?"

Suddenly, Ryoma's serene expression inverted in an instant, taking Count Bergstone by surprise.

"What...? My, this is... quite the bother. I would have to ask you refrain from dignifying such a groundless rumor."

Deftly hiding the surprise that came over his face, Count Bergstone smiled amicably again.

"Oh, is that a fact?! Well! Then I'm sure Her Highness would be quite relieved to hear that. She was, after all, quite saddened to hear that a noble of your

caliber might be taken advantage of by the nobles' faction until they're of no use, and earn nothing for it."

"What!" Ryoma's words made Count Bergstone go pale. "What is the meaning of this?!"

At this point, nothing remained of the calm, collected gentleman he'd played the part of just a moment ago. Ryoma's implication that he might be used by the nobles' faction until they had no more need for him was one thing he could not ignore.

"Goodness, why so temperamental? I thought this was only a groundless rumor."

Hearing Ryoma's mocking words, the Count sank back into his chair and heaved a deep breath, shaking his head.

"Hmph... Enough, there's no point to us prodding at each other's motives any longer..." Count Bergstone spoke with a somewhat resigned tone. "You already know I'm part of the nobles' faction by now, correct?"

"Yes."

Ryoma spoke as if he knew it the whole time, but Meltina, who was listening in beside him, was struggling to hide just how shocked she was.

Impossible! What is going on? Count Bergstone turned to the nobles' faction?! Since when...? Did the nobles already make their move by the time I visited? No, more importantly, how long did this man know about this? Did he already know by the time he was granted an audience with Her Highness...? Blast, this is no good... I must stay loyal to my duty for now. Saying anything needless now would only complicate matters for him...

Countless thoughts were swirling around in Meltina's mind, but she desperately stifled her doubts, concluding that watching over the conversation stoically would be the wisest decision.

It was only natural Meltina would be confused, though. Ryoma told her nothing ahead of time. Her allotted role was to introduce Ryoma, a newcomer, as a member of the princess's faction. That and nothing else.

The conversation continued without regard to her confusion.

“I don’t know how that information leaked out, but I’ve made my decision, and I do not intend to change it.” Count Bergstone leveled a challenging glare at Ryoma.

Now that it was clear that he was part of the nobles’ faction, he wouldn’t make any pretenses of joining the princess’s faction, which was now his enemy. Ryoma shrugged away that expression.

“Well, I don’t particularly mind that. I haven’t any intention of imposing on you.” Ryoma’s lips then contorted into a smile.

“What?! Then what did you even come here for?!” Count Bergstone went red in the face at Ryoma’s all too unexpected response.

“You being part of the nobles’ faction isn’t that big of a deal to us. The only one who stands to lose from this is you, Count Bergstone.”

Ryoma’s words made the count sink into thought.

“What do you mean...?” Count Bergstone eventually managed to spit out that question. “What are you talking about? I stand to lose here?”

Suspicious as he was of enemy subterfuge, the idea of him losing from this arrangement concerned him.

“Oh, you weren’t aware...? I see. I suppose leaving you unaware as you are would be pitiful, so I’ll explain things a bit.”

As Ryoma proceeded to explain things with the same light-heartedness as if they were conversing over tea, Meltina and Count Bergstone gradually went paler and paler.

“On what condition did they persuade you to join the nobles’ faction, Count Bergstone?”

Bergstone replied to Ryoma’s question with a sour expression. He’d likely realized bluffing would yield little returns at this point.

“I was promised that once Princess Radine, the heir backed by the nobles’ faction, rises to the throne, I would be given more land and receive the position of Minister of Finances.”

“My, those are some very favorable terms.”

As Ryoma responded in an almost mocking manner, Meltina swallowed nervously.

The Minister of Finances? The nobles’ faction isn’t even trying to hide the way they’re throwing their power around. But to think that position was what swayed him to join their side...

For Meltina, who ardently believed both nobles and knights were to hold unwavering loyalty to the crown, this was a detestable, shameless act. She had to stop her hand from reflexively going to the sword sheathed at her waist.

“Of course! Can the princess’s faction make me any offer that would match those conditions?!”

Ryoma had to put effort into hiding his mockery of Count Bergstone’s unashamed tone. The fact he innocently believed the nobles’ faction would fulfill their end of that bargain struck Ryoma as laughable. True, they were very favorable conditions, but they held no value if those promises went unfulfilled.

“Well, putting aside whether Princess Lupis can offer you the same conditions, what were you asked to do in return?”

That question made the count fall silent. He’d exposed the fact he was part of the nobles’ faction since he was led on by the implication he would lose from that decision, but exposing the plans of the nobles’ faction to the princess’s faction was unreasonable.

Ryoma, however, predicted everything even without the count having to respond. Even if it wasn’t obvious to Bergstone, driven as he was by greed, Ryoma, who had no stakes in the matter, understood things clearly.

“They asked you to prevent the other neutral faction’s nobles from interfering, and not to mobilize your troops. How about it? That’s about right, isn’t it?”

“What?!” That single word of surprise slipped from the count’s lips.

“Well, with the way the nobles’ faction is right now, they’d have nothing else to ask from you.”

Realizing his assumption was right on the money, Ryoma gave a wicked smile inside his head.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you think the rewards of expanding your land and giving you the position of Minister of Finances are a bit inflated, given the work you’ll be doing?”

Those words caused Count Bergstone to lapse into thought. True enough, those conditions were exceptionally favorable for him. Appealing to the neutral faction and not moving his troops were both actions he would lose essentially nothing from; at worst, he had nothing to lose but the sweat of his brow while going to convince his neighboring nobles to not get involved.

“They’re only that inflated because they didn’t intend to keep that promise anyway.”

Ryoma’s icy words caused all the color to drain out of Count Bergstone’s face.

“I-Impossible... That can’t be...”

But while he claimed he didn’t believe it, the anxiety sprouted up in his heart.

“Those aren’t realistically possible promises to begin with. Both increasing your land, and making you the Minister of Finances. After all, it’s the nobles’ faction that you’re a part of.”

The problem lay in exactly what it was knights and nobles did on this Earth. The nobles were a gathering of people who were given territory by the kingdom, and were recognized as having some degree of autonomy.

A knight, on the other hand, was essentially a label applied to all those who defended the royalty and the nobles, had the ability to wield thaumaturgy, and were paid salaries by their employers. While they were a class which obeyed the nobility, knights were rarely given land. Only a handful of the most excellent, high-order knights were bestowed that honor.

Of course, knights were the central pillar of the country’s military might, and most of their position revolved around the army. There were some special positions both knights and nobles could ascend to, but fundamentally speaking,

only nobles were given posts that dealt with domestic affairs, while knights were given posts that dealt with defense.

And this was where the biggest issue lay.

If they were to defeat the knights' faction, who were in charge of military operations, would there be any seats remaining in the hypothetical new government for a role that had to do with internal affairs?

The answer was no.

Of course, there was the chance of the current Minister of Finances dying in the conflict, but there was no way of knowing that at the moment. And even if that happened, the probability of Count Bergstone being the one to take that position was decidedly nil. They would just appoint someone who was in the nobles' faction to begin with.

If a particular person helped shift a faction from a position of inferiority to victory, that kind of exceptional promotion may have been possible. But in this particular conflict, the nobles' faction had the overwhelming edge over the knights' faction already, and someone who decided to join later, as if betting on a winning horse, wouldn't be picked over those who had supported the faction since the start of the conflict. If they were, those members who were in the nobles' faction to begin with would be greatly dissatisfied.

The same held true for increasing the count's territories as well, and that was because the knights hardly had any territories to give. If Duke Gelhart were to give any territories, they would have to be those under the royal family's control.

If he were to weaken the royal house and usurp the throne at some point, perhaps giving those lands away was eventually possible. But should the nobles' faction win, Duke Gelhart would become the most influential man in the country, and putting aside any ambitions he held toward the throne, he would never give the royal family's lands away to a former neutral noble who joined his side this late into the power struggle.

No, he would have no land to give to a noble who entered the conflict so late and contributed nothing. If Gelhart were to give away territory, it would be given to trustworthy people that had served him for many years. And if he were

to do otherwise, his faction would collapse in on itself, since the nobles it was comprised of weren't offering their loyalty for no recompense either.

As Ryoma explained himself, Count Bergstone's face lost all color.

"So, I was a fool the whole time..." Words of self-derision left his lips.

If the nobles' faction was truly considering making Count Bergstone their ally, they would not have given him such a simple task. They would naturally have him earn the reward he would gain after the war by performing a duty befitting it.

They likely told him not to move his soldiers so he wouldn't actually commit any kind of military exploit by some coincidence. If he never took to the battlefield, he naturally wouldn't gain any kind of glory that others would recognize. It was likely all intentional.

Even a child could understand this logic if they were to stop and examine things carefully, but it didn't occur to Count Bergstone until Ryoma mentioned it.

They manipulated me, using my greed...

Count Bergstone realized that he had been spurred by his own foolish desires, and failed to judge things carefully.

"I see you're finally convinced." Ryoma nodded with satisfaction, reading Count Bergstone's emotions from his expression.

In fact, Meltina, who was sitting beside them, easily realized everything from Ryoma's explanation, and had nothing to add.

"What should I do?" Count Bergstone asked Ryoma.

His expression was thick with fright and concern.

"Well, let's see. You can already see where you'll end up by sticking to the nobles' faction, and turning to the knights' faction would just mean that overbearing General Albrecht would toss you away once he'd be done with you, right? And that said, you can't go back to being neutral anymore..."

Ryoma's words were thick with implication. After a moment of thought, Count Bergstone made a suggestion.

“But if I were to help Her Majesty the Princess...”

He’d trailed off, but he was essentially asking how Princess Lupis would treat him should he join her side.

“Well, let’s see. I think becoming Minister of Finances might be a reach for you, but...”

Ryoma’s words made Count Bergstone’s eyes cloud over with disappointment. Having been promised that position had left him quite attached to the idea. Ryoma’s next words, though, returned the vigor to his face.

“If Princess Lupis wins this war, most, though not all of the nobles’ faction, will likely be purged in the process... Which would naturally mean some positions will open up. And that would also open up territories she could give away, in which case... you follow?”

The seductive poison leaving Ryoma’s lips attacked Count Bergstone’s heart. In other words, if the princess’s faction won, the nobles’ faction would be greatly diminished, freeing up existing stations which would be filled by those who cooperated with her. And since the princess still served as the symbol of the knights’ faction, at least in the public eye, joining her at this point would allow him to amass a significantly strong position in her faction.

Furthermore, since the enemy was the nobles, defeating them would allow the princess’s faction to confiscate their lands, and Count Bergstone would be allowed to take part in divvying up the spoils.

This isn’t a bad offer... Much better than being used and discarded like a pawn by the nobles’ faction, and I’ll be able to pay them back for humiliating me like this. But... that’s all assuming Princess Lupis wins over the nobles’ faction. If she can’t, this whole discussion would be moot... In that case, being used by the nobles’ faction might actually be less harmful.

Count Bergstone’s heart was torn between greed and self-preservation.

“Sir Mikoshiba... I’m sorry, but I’ll need some time to think it over.”

“That’s reasonable enough. But how long will you need? We’re actually quite pressed for time ourselves, so we are not in a position to be waiting for days.”

Ryoma didn’t think Count Bergstone would consent to helping Princess Lupis right here and now. From the count’s perspective, this was a major decision that would influence the course of his life. If he were to agree to it immediately, Ryoma wouldn’t trust him.

But put conversely, they couldn’t stand to wait for him to decide too long, since they would have to go and attempt to persuade other neutral nobles.

“I would appreciate it if you could give me tonight to mull things over... I will give you my answer on the morrow, so would you care to spend the night here in my mansion?”

“Very well, then. I shall eagerly wait for you to make the wise decision.” Ryoma took Count Bergstone’s extended hand, and shook it firmly with a smile.

Meltina gazed upon the two of them silently, gripped by an inexplicable fear for Ryoma Mikoshiba.

“Oh, what am I to do...?”

After delaying his decision to tomorrow, Count Bergstone shut himself off in his study, pacing about and asking himself that question over and over.

“That man... What he said is most likely true... Why didn’t I realize it when the nobles’ faction made their offer...?”

That was his biggest lament. Looking back on it, it was a foolish decision, and no amount of regret would be sufficient. His only explanation was that ten years of reclusive life had dulled his once-sharp intellect.

Had he stayed in the neutral faction, then he would have remained unrelated to the conflict no matter which side won. Remaining neutral may not have increased anyone’s territory or enabled his comeback into the palace’s affairs, but it would have allowed him to retain the lifestyle he already had. But he was led astray by sweet temptations to side with the nobles’ faction, which left him with two choices.

Those choices: remain on the side of the nobles’ faction knowing full well he’d be used as a pawn, or bet on the tables being turned and join the knights’ faction. Returning to neutrality would be impossible now. If he would, once the fighting ended the winner would inflict severe sanctions on him.

But even while aware of the position he was in, Count Bergstone couldn't come to a decision. And the biggest reason was that the people who brought this news to his attention were emissaries from the princess's faction.

Even as he was forced to live in secluded retirement, Count Bergstone kept his ears open regarding the kingdom's political relations in anticipation of the day he'd return to political activity. And so he knew that Princess Lupis was currently little more than a political figurehead for the knights' faction to gather under, and that all the true power lay in General Albrecht's hands.

"That man came with Lady Meltina... which means he's directly connected to Princess Lupis. Which means I'm not being invited into the knights' faction, but the princess' faction."

Would Princess Lupis remain a puppet in General Albrecht's hands? Regardless of her decision, once the war with the nobles' faction ended there was a chance of another fight breaking out between the knights' and princess's factions. And so he was invited not only into the weaker faction in this war, but also to the weaker faction within it. It was only natural Count Bergstone would hesitate.

"If I support them, I'll have to be prepared to lose everything..."

He would have to be resolved to cast aside his family name, the riches he built up over the years and the territories he'd amassed to this day.

"The problem is whether Her Majesty can win..."

In the end, all of the problems came down to that question. Could the princess's faction win? Count Bergstone's loyalty to the crown was by no means weak, but his fealty wasn't so great that he would place his family at risk over it. He wouldn't say honor and loyalty were devoid of meaning, but a man couldn't live on those things alone.

"Back then, I didn't think the princess's faction stood any chance of winning..."

Meltina's method of bringing people over to their side was decidedly simple; claiming Princess Lupis's legitimacy as an heir and appealing to their loyalty. And while those were certainly important things, they wouldn't be sufficient

reason to move the heart of the neutral faction's nobles.

And why so? Because anyone who placed such importance on their loyalty to the throne or the legitimacy of the princess would not have chosen to become part of the neutral faction to begin with. Anyone who cared for those would have come to offer their loyalty to Princess Lupis long before Meltina would come into the picture to convince them.

What Count Bergstone wanted to hear was how Princess Lupis would repay his loyalty, should he choose to help her. That was what mattered. Helping the princess was all well and good, but mobilizing troops would require gear and rations, and any soldiers who'd achieved impressive feats needed to be granted due honors. Even in a hierarchical society, the simple words of 'well done' wouldn't suffice.

But Meltina didn't understand this. All she did was speak of loyalty to the princess over and over, like a broken record, and moving anyone but the most loyal nobles with that was impossible.

That was why Count Bergstone turned his back on the princess. If her closest aide, Meltina, was incapable of that level of intelligence, he had no choice but to judge that none of the people on her side were exceptional enough.

When all was said and done, a faction was only as strong as the people within it, and what decided victory was which side had the superior manpower.

And so Count Bergstone turned his back on Princess Lupis and happily took the invitation from the nobles' faction. Anyone would have wanted to take a fight they knew they could win; all the more so when presented with the tempting reward of expanding their territory and gaining power.

But after today's conversation, Count Bergstone was incredibly conflicted. It was all down to the emissary who had arrived today from the princess's faction, Ryoma Mikoshiba...

"I don't know who that man is supposed to be, but... He's sharp. Perhaps too sharp..."

Ryoma Mikoshiba. The mysterious man who appeared in the princess's faction, which he had believed was devoid of any wise, forward thinking

individuals.

I've only met him today, but I can say with some confidence that his judgment and ability to assess the situation are quite reliable.

In the short time they'd spoken, he left a strong impression on Count Bergstone's heart. His mannerisms were good, and just in terms of diplomacy, he already showed impressive prowess.

Which meant future tidings for the princess's faction may well have changed for the better. The nobles' faction had likely attempted to lure in other neutral nobles the same way they had tempted him, but after hearing that man's words, no one would be foolish enough to take their offer. In other words, the possibility of being able to recruit the other neutral nobles was certainly there.

Yes, with Ryoma Mikoshiba by their side, the princess's faction would grow in power, and it was perfectly possible for Princess Lupis to become sovereign over the kingdom of Rhoadseria. And so, Count Bergstone was conflicted.

"Aaah... What am I to do...?"

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door to his study. Count Bergstone's mind, which had been running in a maze of those thoughts and considerations, snapped back to reality at once.

"Sir?" The voice of one of his maids brought his conflicted mind to reality. "Dinner is ready, and the guests are already seated at the dining table."

Gazing out the window, he found the sun had already set, and a curtain of darkness covered the outside view. His meeting with Ryoma ended a bit after one in the afternoon, which meant Count Bergstone had spent five to six hours wallowing in anxiety in his study.

"Ah, yes... I'll be right over." Count Bergstone gave that pithy reply before fixing his appearance and setting out for the dining hall.

After having dinner, Count Bergstone's concerned wife, the countess, entered her husband's study after he shut himself in again.

"Oh, it's you... I was merely mulling over things." Count Bergstone smiled to cloak his tiredness and prompted his wife to sit on the sofa. "What are you

doing here so late at night?”

“You were acting oddly during dinner, so I was just... Did anything happen?”

The roast chicken they served during dinner was the Bergstone kitchen’s most prided dish, but in contrast to his usual gormandizing ways, the count hardly touched it. From his perspective, now was hardly the time to be enjoying a meal.

“No... Nothing’s wrong. Nothing you should concern yourself with.” Embracing his wife’s shoulders, he tried to soothe her with a gentle smile.

However, having been married to him for as many years as she had, she could easily see through the grim shadow hanging over her husband’s heart.

“No! That’s not true. We’ve been married for twelve years... How could I not tell something is wrong with you?!”

The countess was concerned for him from the bottom of her heart. They had been bound in what was commonly called a political marriage, but the countess deeply loved her husband, who was to turn forty-three this year, and Count Bergstone loved his wife just as deeply in return.

“Is it because of the guests who arrived today?”

The count had been fine that morning, but had suddenly shut himself in his study after noon time. It would only be natural to suspect they were the reason.

“Does it... have anything to do with the palace?” Noticing her husband’s expression change at her prior question, the countess pressed forward.

Being a noble’s legal wife meant she wasn’t removed from power struggles within the country, since her husband’s choices could decide the fate of the entire house. And that held all the more when these struggles dealt with the fate of the country as a whole.

“Dear...” Seeing her husband’s attitude, the countess became convinced. “Aren’t we husband and wife...? I might not be of any help to you, but if I could carry at least some of the burden, could you please tell me what’s the problem?”

Count Bergstone couldn’t help but be touched by his wife’s sincere words.

Perhaps he really did want to tell this to someone... Maybe he really was this conflicted.

“I may not be knowledgeable with politics...”

After Count Bergstone came clean about his concerns, the countess began giving her hesitant but clear take on the matter.

“But if you were to earnestly support Her Majesty now, when she is weakest, I doubt she would treat you badly.”

While she claimed to not be knowledgeable on the matter, her opinion was one that would not put the name as the lady of the Bergstone house to shame. But even as her words made him happy, Count Bergstone shook his head slowly.

“I know that, of course. But that’s not the problem. The issue is whether Her Highness can win, even with my help!”

The countess knew that well enough; it went without saying. The princess’s faction was the most inferior of all, and lacked resourceful manpower. That was why Count Bergstone would earn so much in the event of their victory. But that was only if they won... If they were to lose, he would lose everything. It was that fear which bound and paralyzed the count’s heart.

But the next moment, the countess said something that shook his heart.

“Then, Dear... Shouldn’t you just lead her to victory?”

Those words were all too unpredictable for Count Bergstone. And as her husband stood there frozen with surprise, the countess began saying what her heart earnestly believed.

“You are a talented man. Ever since I married you, I’ve not once doubted your talents... I truly believe you are a man worthy of shouldering the fate of the kingdom of Rhoadseria. And that is why I do not wish to see you waver! Take back the confidence you had before! The way you were twelve years ago, you would have never allowed yourself to falter here! Yes. The way you used to be...”

An anger that had built up over many years made the countess shiver.

“The way I... used to be...”

Blankly staring at his wife as tears filled her eyes, the image of his old self, overflowing with confidence, surfaced in Count Bergstone’s mind. Twelve years ago, when he was still in his early thirties, he was one of the most influential people in Rhoadseria. A young politician of boundless wisdom, assertively involved in domestic trade and even chosen to be one of the palace’s bureaucrats.

But pride comes before a fall, and what set Count Bergstone’s life, which seemed set to be smooth sailing, onto an off-course direction, was his greatest backer, and the father of his wife, former prime minister of the kingdom of Rhoadseria, Marquis Ernest, losing in a political struggle against Lord Gelhart. As a result, his territories were confiscated and his family brought to the brink of extinction. The majority of his blood relatives were exiled from Rhoadseria.

The only remnants of Marquis Ernest’s bloodline were Count Bergstone’s wife, who had married into his family, and her sister, who had married another noble. And before he knew it, Count Bergstone was expelled from the epicenter of politics.

It wasn’t a question of the count’s talents. Just the fact that he had wed the daughter of a past political adversary put him in the bad graces of Lord Gelhart. Furthermore, his confidence in his own talents bought him the dislike of the deceased King Pharst the Second.

No one remained to extend a helping land after he had lost his stepfather, who served as his backer, and was shunned by the king as a foolish, pompous neophyte. In the end, Count Bergstone was expelled from the palace and forced to live a reclusive life in his territory.

In the twelve years since, Count Bergstone acted only to desperately protect his lands. His joining the neutral faction was simply owed to him waiting for the coming storm to pass him by. His heart was set on defense. And little by little, that defanged him.

“I wouldn’t have wavered about this before...” Count Bergstone’s face filled with life.

Just like the countess said, twelve years ago Count Bergstone would have

taken the gamble without a moment's hesitance, and would have been completely confident in his abilities. He may not have been as talented as he once believed, but one thing was for sure; if he didn't believe he was, he would remain a loser who lost before the battle ever started.

What would I have done in this position twelve years ago? Would I have even waited for Meltina to get involved? No... I wouldn't. I would have offered myself to the princess's faction on my own, and helped Princess Lupis. No telling if the princess can win? Nonsense. If I do not know, I simply need to make sure she wins with my help!

His wife's words brushed the rust off the heart of the man who had been preoccupied with nothing but defense for twelve long years. And at that moment, the flame of ambition that once burned in his heart as a younger man was rekindled.

"If I side with Princess Lupis, either great glory or bitter defeat will await. And of course, you will share my fate... Are you still content with that decision?"

Bergstone asked the wife who had accompanied him all these years one last time. At that point, this all went without saying, but this was still a gesture of affection toward his wife.

"I am. Even if this path leads to the gallows, I will march along it by your side!"

And once he'd decided, the count would not waver any longer. He would not try to judge whether he could win or not, because he'd already decided he would use all his power to help make Princess Lupis the true ruler of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

"I will go meet Elnan at once. Help me prepare to leave."

"Right now?" The countess asked, puzzled.

He'd already waited twelve years, and it was a bit too late to leave.

"Yes. I've delayed my response to Sir Mikoshiba until tomorrow, but simply giving my assent tomorrow would be far too dull."

Count Elnan Zeleph— a neutral faction noble whose lands shared a border with Count Bergstone's, and also the man who had wed the countess's sister.

The only one to earn any merit from my turning from the nobles' faction to the princess's faction alone would be Sir Mikoshiba... But if I draw Elnan to the princess's faction, the merit would go to me. And Elnan is my brother-in-law... Likely the only man I can still trust.

Having resolved to side with the princess's faction, his mind gained the sharpness it had once had in his younger days. If he were to simply switch sides to the princess's faction as things were, the credit would go entirely to Ryoma Mikoshiba. No one would hold Count Bergstone in high regard for switching sides.

But what if he were to bring another noble into the fold as he joined? The credit would all go to Count Bergstone. So if he was to solidify his position in the princess's faction, he couldn't afford to fail.

"You do whatever you can to keep Sir Mikoshiba here! Understood?! Do not let them leave before I return!"

"Yes, dear. Be careful on your way!"

Seeing her husband's face regain the radiance of years past, the countess bowed her head deeply.

"What is the meaning of this?!"

Duke Furio Gelhart, prime minister of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria and head of the nobles' faction, involuntarily slammed his fist on the ebony table furnishing his office. His side supposedly held an absolute advantage over his opponents, but over the last few days he'd been receiving one disturbing report after another.

"W-Well..."

"Well, what? Get to the point."

Fearing his master's displeasure, Gelhart's aide hesitated to speak, which only spurred the duke's ire further. He was a man at the age of fifty-six— the prime of a politician's life. Gelhart's hair was a carefully combed shade of blond streaked with grey. The diligently trimmed mustache over his lips implied his neurotic nature. He looked quite the refined gentleman at first glance, but the enraged expression currently on his face washed away all traces of that elegant

countenance.

But his anger wasn't for lack of good reason. His aide was, in fact, just as confused at this flurry of unexpected, troubling news. The only thing they knew for certain was that members of the neutral faction they'd signed secret agreements with had been turning to the enemy's side one after another over the past week. And while they were mostly middle-class nobles, they all had lucrative lands under their control.

Of course, lucrative as they were, their lands couldn't match his lands, or those of the other nobles who formed the core of the nobles' faction. Even the strongest and largest among the middle-class nobles, Count Bergstone, could only conscript a thousand soldiers at most and a few dozen knights, and perhaps add mercenaries to the mix. Whatever the case, his forces would only number at slightly over a thousand.

But even if one noble alone couldn't turn the tide of the war, it could be problematic if those nobles consolidated their forces. There was a parable of how, during Japan's Warring States period, a conqueror by the name of Motonari Mori ruled the Chugoku region, and taught his son of the Legend of Three Arrows. While it was dubious whether that story can truly be attributed to Motonari, it was an anecdote that stressed the importance of unity.

This parable had a single meaning: no matter how small forces may be on their own, they can become a mighty army if they come together.

Of course, being a denizen of this Earth, Gelhart couldn't have heard of this Rearthian precept before, but he understood the meaning behind it on his own, thanks to many years of experience. It was for this reason that Duke Gelhart showed unusual graciousness in a plot against the most influential neutral nobles. The bait he offered them was the prospect of increasing their territories and guaranteed positions within the government once the fighting concluded.

The result was that the many nobles who were displeased with the way he had treated them for a long time turned to his side with almost comical ease. In the end, the neutral faction was a gathering of nobles who were driven out of the political core, and were out of touch with the changing of the times. Given the chance, they would pounce to his side, their eyes alight with greed, and

conveniently manipulating such fools to achieve his ends was a simple matter for the man who held the politics of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria under his thumb.

Or so it had been, until the winds suddenly started changing direction recently. And furthermore, those who switched sides were influential members of the neutral faction, ones who had been offered significantly favorable conditions.

Someone's manipulating things from behind the scenes... And it's someone bright.

Duke Gelhart's well-cultivated political sense of smell picked up on a plot being spun by some unseen enemy. The conditions he demanded of the neutral nobles were that they not mobilize their troops, and that they back Princess Radine; that was all. The risk on their behalf was minute, while the merit they would gain was quite large. And so the neutral nobles, who were forced to lead their days in misfortune and obscurity, flocked to his side.

It goes without saying that Duke Gelhart had no intention to fulfill those promises to begin with, and he didn't see them as members of the nobles' faction or his allies. He simply didn't want them to make any kind of needless movements that would throw the war situation into chaos.

Besides, if Gelhart were to calculate the number of territories he'd have to give up should he hold up on his end of the bargain, it would turn out that he'd have to give away half the kingdom's territories. And moreover, these agreements held no binding power; they were all done in secrecy, and since no contracts were written down, the law granted them no power.

Ergo, the deciding factor would be the might of the arm, and Duke Gelhart was the stronger one. Once the nobles realized they'd been duped, it would be too dangerous for them to turn to forceful measures. Everyone, save for the ones most lacking in prudence, would simply yield to the situation, keep their mouths shut and do nothing, displeased as they may be. It was a reasoning even a child could understand, if one simply disregarded their greed and calmed down to think about it.

Duke Gelhart's plot was meticulous to that extent, and it all tipped over this

late into the game.

They must have sided with someone quite intelligent... Surely.

A sharp click of the tongue escaped Duke Gelhart's lips.

"We only know two things for sure. The nobles who promised us their assistance are swearing allegiance to the princess's faction one after another, and..."

The aide then trailed off. He knew that what he was about to say would make his master explode with anger; contrary to his appearance, he had a surprisingly short temper. But at the same time, his many years of experience taught him that keeping quiet would lead to the same result.

And so, steeling himself for the scolding sure to come, he fulfilled his role.

"Some of the nobles who turned are showing an unusually firm approach towards us..."

"What do you mean, 'firm approach'...?" Duke Gelhart asked, somehow feeling as if he was being made fun of here. "Are they increasing their territories' defenses?"

Irritating though it was, in the end, he didn't take the resistance of the weak seriously. But what his aide said next made the color drain from Duke Gelhart's face.

"They're... gathering their forces and marching to the castle..."

"What?!" The duke couldn't hide his surprise.

This wasn't something which could be overlooked. Honestly speaking, Duke Gelhart wasn't particularly bothered by the neutral nobles turning sides. But the neutral faction's nobles mobilizing their territories' soldiers and stationing them in the capital changed the situation drastically.

A faction had turned coat on them. While this may have seemed like a significant loss of military might, such was not actually the case, since anyone who joined them at this point in the game were opportunists who dreaded seeing harm come to them in the first place. They were parasites who gladly took the bait they were offered, but wouldn't contribute to the faction which

graciously fed them.

So in this case, even if they did carry the banner of the princess's faction, they would be utterly uncooperative, offering no military or financial assistance to the faction. Or at least, that's how they acted until now...

This was why Duke Gelhart didn't ask the neutral faction's nobles for much cooperation when he brought them over to his side, deciding all would be well so long as he ensured they wouldn't turn against him. He knew asking for anything more would be pointless.

Hence why this report made Duke Gelhart panic as much as he did. He'd thought they would simply lend their cooperation to the princess's faction for form's sake and nothing else, and wait for the storm of civil war to pass.

"What do you mean...? They pledged allegiance to the princess's faction out of a genuine desire to help? Who would even do that to start with...?"

"Count Bergstone and Count Zeleph are the prime leaders; they are leading their forces and other small nobles' armies into the castle."

Perhaps this was his just desserts for viewing them as insects he could crush at any time. Rage bubbled up from Duke Gelhart's heart like black, adhesive pitch.

"Grrr... Damn that Count Bergstone! Just how much does he intend to get in my way?! I should have done away with him before after all..."

But the next moment, Duke Gelhart realized he was on the verge of overlooking a vital point, judging by how confused he was.

"Wait, did you say the princess's faction? They joined the *princess's* faction, and not the knights' faction?" Duke Gelhart stressed the point, which prompted his aide to nod with a hardened expression.

"Yes. I doubted it myself, but I made multiple efforts to verify, and... They have definitely joined the princess's faction, not the knights' faction."

These two things may have sounded identical on the surface, but in truth, the difference was palpable. The knights' faction certainly were backing Princess Lupis as their banner; however, they were only supporting her because on top

of being the princess, she had served as captain of the royal guard for the last few years. There was no other reason for General Albrecht to be supporting her.

The only ones who swore true fealty to the princess were, aside from the lowest ranking knights, the vice captain of the royal guard, Mikhail, and a scant number of others. The majority of middle-class knights, the ones commanding the units, were taken into Albrecht's faction, and gathering so many of them granted the faction considerable influence.

Princess Lupis was a mere figurehead for the knights' faction.

But what would happen now that nobles, however few, were offering their support to the princess? They had soldiers to match the size of their territories, and the financial resources to hire mercenaries.

If Counts Bergstone and Zeleph were to bring all their neighboring nobles over to Princess Lupis's side, she would be nearly four thousand soldiers strong. Of course, that wasn't even a sixth of the forces under Duke Gelhart, leader of the nobles' faction.

Duke Gelhart had gathered an army of 2,500 from his own private fortune, and if he were to conscript the peasants from his vast territories, his forces alone would amount to 25,000 troops. Adding the nobles' faction soldiers and mercenaries into the mix would bring that number to 65,000 troops.

Meanwhile, General Albrecht commanded Rhoadseria's six knight orders, which had 15,000 soldiers in all. Even if one excluded the forces that couldn't be moved from national defense, he could still mobilize about 8,000 to 10,000 troops.

The forces Princess Lupis had gathered at this point likely numbered 15,000 men when put together with the neutral faction's troops, but since Albrecht's forces also included knights capable of using thaumaturgy, he still held the advantage.

The most disturbing part, however, was that the nobles had defected to the princess's faction. Duke Gelhart had his aide leave, and sank deep into his chair, pondering things in a relaxed manner.

Princess Lupis... Is she trying to reclaim power over the country from Albrecht?

That thought surfaced in Duke Gelhart's mind. It was the one conclusion he could come up with, judging from the actions of counts Bergstone and Zeleph. But he was forced to reject the idea.

No... Impossible. Princess Lupis could never manage that...

Duke Gelhart doubted the princess's ability. She was currently twenty years old and had an amiable personality, lacking the haughtiness commonly found in royals. Her kindness, which placed the lives of the people first, as well as her beauty, bought her a truly immense amount of trust from the commoners.

She had also served as captain of the royal guard for five years without any fault to her name, so one couldn't claim she was impotent... At least, in terms of commanding the military.

But perhaps that was natural, because Princess Lupis had no political experience. No matter her talents and disposition, she ought not to be capable of deftly handling something she had no experience with.

If one of her associates was wise, things may have been different, but she had few supporters that were in any way worth mentioning, mainly the vice captain of the royal guard, Mikhail Vanash, and her personal aide Meltina Lecta. And Duke Gelhart was confident enough that, setting their martial prowess aside, they weren't much graced with wisdom. Experienced as they may have been, they weren't much help for managing the kingdom.

In other words, Princess Lupis was utterly incapable of ruling over the Kingdom of Rhoadseria on her own.

If Princess Lupis were to completely control either the military or political field, things may have been different... I suppose that's why Albrecht backed her; to strengthen his own influence and authority.

Duke Gelhart could easily understand General Albrecht's way of thinking, since they were both the same type of person.

Albrecht will likely abandon the princess within three years... After that, he'd likely have her secretly killed or imprisoned. Otherwise, he might have her as a mistress, given her beauty.

Duke Gelhart himself wasn't much fixated on the throne. He likely saw himself as a man who preferred substance over fame. Compared to him, General Albrecht was one to lust for both substance and fame. He made do with substance alone for the moment, but it was plainly visible he would one day wish to reach for fame. The fame of being Rhoadseria's king...

Well, if I win, she'll be put to death, so it's all the same to Princess Lupis no matter which way the wind blows...

Having gained Princess Radine as a new banner to unite this kingdom under, Duke Gelhart saw Princess Lupis as nothing but an obstacle. Having two heirs to the throne would simply serve as a trigger to spark future conflict.

That said, Duke Gelhart had his own doubts regarding Princess Radine's authenticity as an heir. True, she had the late king's silver hair, her physiognomy was similar enough to his, and she carried his will and testament, so one couldn't easily assume she was an imposter.

But as a tactician set on winning this conflict, Duke Gelhart couldn't help but feel that there was something deliberate to Rhoadseria's current state of affairs. The former king passes, and just as his heir is about to take the throne, an illegitimate child is discovered. The timing of it all was simply too suspicious.

And still, Gelhart backed Princess Radine because he absolutely needed an heir to the royal bloodline as his banner if he was to oppose General Albrecht. If he were to oppose the knights' faction while they backed Princess Lupis without a similar icon of his own, he would simply be branded a traitor. And if that were to happen, even his proteges from the nobles' faction could turn their backs on him.

Gelhart himself thought this was foolish, but having a greater cause was absolutely essential in war. Even a false, fabricated cause...

Well, so be it. Even a fake princess will become a true one, so long as I acknowledge her as such... And if she does turn out to be fake, I can do away with her later.

With that thought in mind, Duke Gelhart smiled. Now that he had a princess to use as his cause for the war, it all came down to military power, and the nobles' faction held the numerical superiority. That fact wouldn't be overturned

by the princess's faction taking in a few neutral nobles.

The question is, what spurred the princess's faction to make their move all of a sudden... Mikhail and Meltina aren't that resourceful. Just who brought upon this change?

His advantage remained strong, so he could ignore this, but the princess's faction's sudden machinations weren't a development he saw as favorable.

"Someone! Come here at once!"

Having gathered his thoughts, Gelhart called to his aides in the adjacent room.

"You called, milord?"

"Yes. The movements of the princess's faction have me quite concerned."

"Should we send over some spies?"

"Yes. Money is no object here; I'll need you to hire the most skilled people you can find."

The aide couldn't hide his surprise. He was well aware his master was by no means an extravagant person with money.

"And then, have them find out if the princess's faction has gained some kind of new, wise advisor... If such a person exists, have them killed at once!"

This was hardly a naive decision for Duke Gelhart, who had won many a conflict in the past. He made his way through by nipping potential obstacles in the bud and taking possession of authority.

"As you wish." The aide bowed his head respectfully and left the room again.

"Anyone who gets in my way, no matter what, will be crushed under my foot!"

Duke Gelhart was resolved to use any means to win, and gain the sweet fruit of power over this country...

It had been half a month since Duke Gelhart's aide ordered the investigation, on a certain afternoon. A man and a woman gazed at Ryoma's back from an alleyway, as he marched through the streets of the capital Pireas.

“So that’s our current target, then...?”

“Yeah, he’s a novice mercenary. Can’t use any thaumaturgy yet. Not much of a challenge for you.”

To avoid the eyes of others, the two wore robes and hoods to cover their faces, but judging from their voices, it was a young woman and a middle-aged man.

“I wonder about that.” The woman directed a suspicious gaze at the man. “From the way he carries himself, he doesn’t look like a typical mook.”

“You’re doubting my research?” The man seemed angry at having doubt cast over his work. “He definitely can’t use thaumaturgy, and he’s a rank E newbie. Check the guild yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“You’re crazy skilled for your age, but I’ve got confidence in my own business, ya know? Still, you’re the chief’s successor. If you’re not happy with my methods, why not ask the chief to have someone else handle this for you?”

He likely took a great deal of pride in his work; his eye narrowed to a slit and shone with a cold light.

“I apologize. I didn’t mean it like that, and I’m sorry if my words offended you.” The woman bowed her head earnestly.

A silence fell between the two for a moment.

“Nah, I’m sorry... I said a bit too much myself.” The man murmured quiet words of apology, likely feeling his attitude was immature.

“Don’t let it bother you. More importantly, what about those two with him?”

The woman’s gaze fixed on Sara and Laura, who were walking beside Ryoma.

“They’re a couple of former slaves. Evidently, they follow the kid wherever he goes. But they were both trained as war slaves, so they’re pretty capable. Watch out for them if you’re planning on taking him out.”

“Understood. Thanks.”

“Right, you can leave the itinerary to me. You’ll need to sneak in as soon as preparations are complete, so rest up at the inn for the time being.”

Leaving those words in his wake, the man disappeared into the alley.

“Ryoma Mikoshiba, huh...”

Having been left alone, the woman whispered Ryoma’s name one more time before vanishing into the crowd.

The cogs of the western continent’s history were once again shifting, with the young man named Ryoma Miksohiba as their axis. The sky was bright and free of clouds.

This was Duke Gelhart’s castle, standing in the heart of the citadel city of Heraklion. Standing beneath the pale blue moonlight, a girl standing at the castle’s balcony looked up to the night sky, leaning against the guard rail. What thoughts filled her eyes with such sorrow?

Grabbing the golden brooch dangling in the valley of her abundant breasts, the girl spoke the one question weighing down on her heart.

“Who... am I?”



That doubt came into being on that fateful day, and even months later, she hadn't yet come up with the answer.

No, there already was an answer by now. The cold, metallic sensation of the crown upon her head said all there was to say. But the girl's heart couldn't accept this answer so easily.

This gemstone-inlaid tiara, resting between her carefully-combed silver locks. That dazzling splendor was a special privilege that no one, aside from this girl and Lupis Rhoadserians, were allowed to carry on their person in this Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

I'm royalty...? This country's... Rhoadseria's ruler...?

Every time that thought crossed her mind, a shiver rushed down her spine.

She couldn't deny she had once admired and dreamed of being a princess, as most girls do. She never knew her father's face, and was bereft of her mother since before she could even remember herself. And so, the only thing an orphaned girl without a soul to care for her in this world was allowed to have was the freedom to dream.

To dream of being an heir in some affluent family; to dream that her unfamiliar father still lived somewhere, and would someday come to pick her up; to dream that she would eat luxurious meals to her stomach's content and wear dresses of silk.

As she worked as a maid in the manor of a governor of a small agricultural village on the outskirts of the kingdom of Myest, the sole pleasure she had was dreaming.

Until that day. The day those dreams ceased to be lovely, guileless phantasms and became reality.

"Is this truly the right path?" That single small question rung ever so severely in her ears.

No. It is not... At this rate, this kingdom will descend into war. All for the aim of making me its ruler.

Much blood would be spilled and many lives would be lost, all for her sake.

And she wasn't staunch enough of a dreamer to not realize the gravity of it all.

Honestly speaking, she truly believed it would be better if she were to simply disappear without a trace. Better for herself, and for the kingdom of Rhoadseria.

I want to run away... But that man won't allow it anymore.

Alas, contrary to that desire to flee, she realized better than anyone that she was past the point of no return.

Yes, that day. Since the moment that man visited the manor and spoke to her, there was only a single path she could walk down. Once Duke Gelhart, leader of the nobles' faction, became her backer, she had lost the freedom to return.

Not at this point. If she were to attempt to abdicate from this position, the responsibility of sowing the seeds of discord within the kingdom would fall entirely on her.

She was born and raised as a commoner, and so she was familiar with just how selfish and uncaring those in power were better than she cared to ever know. And from her perspective, Duke Gelhart was the most typical model of a noble.

That man will stop at nothing to protect himself and his family's name...

If the circumstances turned against him, Duke Gelhart would push all the responsibility onto her without a second's thought to protect himself. And if he did, she would be left with no support and no means of resisting him.

And it went without saying that the punishment for impersonating royalty was death.

I suppose it's pointless... The wisest move in this game, it seems, is not to play.

However, while her mind understood this perfectly, her heart remained unconvinced.

The girl's name was Radine Rhoadserians. One of the two sole heirs to the kingdom of Rhoadseria.

As the pressures of anxiety and duty bore down on her, Radine desperately sought a way she could strive on... a way that would allow her to survive.

Chapter 3: The Ivory Goddess of War

“I have great expectations for your loyalty and endeavors in the days to come.”

Princess Lupis’s voice resonated clearly through the audience chamber, and all five men standing before the throne bowed their heads in unison.

Usually, these men would come only for a courtesy visit and insist on maintaining a wait-and-see approach, but this occasion was different. They all came leading hundreds of soldiers conscripted in their territories and all the goods they could carry. More than anything, the fact they brought their families with them proved that they were serious when it came to the upcoming war.

The neutral faction’s nobles were gathering under Princess Lupis. This was a sight that truly inspired many, to see a new dawn rising over the kingdom of Rhoadseria.

In one room of the castle sat three men, pleasantly chatting as the warm afternoon sun streamed into the room. Two of them were clad in extravagant silk clothes that made it abundantly clear they were nobles, but the other one was a bulky young man clad in black clothes. As neat and clean as his appearance was, one could easily tell he wasn’t a noble.

In this Earth’s hierarchical society, and especially in Rhoadseria where social status was strictly enforced, a commoner would rarely be allowed to share a seat among the aristocrats. But not only was he there, this young man even held the initiative in the conversation.

“Everything seems to be going well for the time being.”

While his words weren’t rude, his tone certainly wasn’t one a commoner would use when speaking to nobles. And despite that, the two nobles didn’t seem upset or angry at his words. They simply nodded at each other, smiles on their faces.

“Yes, I’ve successfully convinced three more to come to our side as of today. How did things go for you, Elnan?”

“I have convinced four thus far.” Count Zeleph answered Count Bergstone’s question while twirling his mustache. “And there are three more that just need another little push before they turn to our side.”

Count Bergstone responded to those words with a wry smile and a shake of the head.

“I suppose you win this wager...”

“Yes, so it seems.”

“Understood. I shall have my estate’s most treasured wine poured for you.”

“I look forward to it. I will come and bring my wife over when we can; I am sure she longs to see her sister again.” Count Zeleph said with a smile.

This man who spoke to Count Bergstone with something of an easygoing approach, owing to years of filial bonds, was count Elnan Zeleph. He was in his late thirties, with a prominent gut already beginning to conspicuously bulge from his belly— the very image of a middle-aged noble. If one were to imagine his appearance, one could say he best resembled a snowman wearing a blond wig.

But contrary to his sullen appearance, he was a fairly strong-minded man. If Count Bergstone were to be likened to a sharp blade, Count Zeleph was a heavy hatchet.

Like Count Bergstone, the late Marquis Ernest acknowledged his talents and offered him the hand of one of his daughters in marriage; after the overthrow of the marquis he’d bought Duke Gelhart’s ire, forcing him to live quietly in his territory for years. But a grudge against the duke who antagonized him all those years before likely burned strongly within his heart.

Along with Count Bergstone, he visited neutral nobles he was cordial with, and had gathered quite a few of them under the princess’s banner over the past month.

“I knew you two would be reliable, but I didn’t think we’d be seeing our efforts bear fruit so soon.”

Bergstone and Zeleph responded to Ryoma’s words by exchanging a look and

smiling, as if to say this was the obvious result.

It hadn't been a month since Count Bergstone swore fealty to Princess Lupis. Even if they merely rekindled grudges against the nobles' faction which were already smoldering beneath the surface, the counts' performance had yielded impressive results, in Ryoma's opinion. But from their perspective, this was to be expected.

"This was only because you placed your trust in us, Sir Mikoshiba... Were we burdened by pointless limitations, even we wouldn't be able to move too much."

"Elnan speaks the truth... In the end, even the most refined, well-forged sword would be as trifling as a mountain of rusted blades should it go unused."

Ryoma regarded their words with silence and a wry smile. Calling themselves refined blades felt like overblown confidence to Ryoma, but since they had achieved the great feat of bringing the neutral faction's nobles to the side of the princess's faction, Ryoma couldn't complain very much.

And besides, their perception wasn't wrong. No matter how much power one may have, it would mean nothing unless given a chance to be put to proper use. Some powers could only flourish in such a war-torn world. And some people cannot show their worth in an age of peace. Cao Cao, a hero of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, was once described as "a capable minister in peaceful times and an unscrupulous hero in chaotic times," but not everyone can flourish in both peacetime and war. Ryoma Mikoshiba was one such example; until he was summoned to this world, he had merely been an ordinary high school student.

"Well, just watch for now. More and more nobles will swear their fealty to Princess Lupis going forward."

"Elnan is right." Count Bergstone nodded, reinforcing Count Zeleph's words. "Many of the neutral faction's nobles hold grudges against the nobles' faction. If they learn of Duke Gelhart's swindling, they won't sit idly by and remain aligned with the nobles' faction."

The neutral faction's nobles harbored heavy grudges, on account of being distanced from central politics for many years; ergo, when they realized they

might be the ones to take over Rhoadseria's political world once the nobles' faction was purged, they would hurry to the capital with an earnestness one wouldn't normally expect out of them in order to pledge their allegiance to Princess Lupis.

Grudge and profit. Those two emotions would make the neutral faction's nobles rush to Princess Lupis's side.

"On another subject, it seems that getting the knights' faction to turn to our side is going poorly." Count Bergstone changed the topic after the conversation went on long enough.

"Yes, I'm well aware." Ryoma responded with a sigh, as Bergstone sent a prying glance in his direction.

While the integration of the nobles was going over well, the attempts to convince the knights to switch sides were, frankly, turning up badly.

"That is a problem... We cannot forego splitting the knights' faction if Princess Lupis is to retain control of the country once we remove General Albrecht. Maintaining defense of the country with the forces we currently have is impossible. Your performance is coming across as a bit lacking, Sir Mikoshiba."

Twirling his well-kept mustache with a finger, Count Zeleph accused Ryoma of negligence.

"I must agree with Elnan. If we do not make allies of the knights, we won't be able to hold the throne, even if we do get rid of General Albrecht."

They were in perfect sync, almost admirably so. It seemed the two of them had a grasp of the situation ahead of this meeting. Ryoma could only accept their rebuking with a silent nod. Even without them having pointed it out, Ryoma's mind was mulling over this problem frantically.

A few problems had to be solved for Lupis Rhoadserians to rule over the kingdom, in both name and practice, and one of the biggest among them was taking back control of the knights from General Albrecht.

Knights were warriors capable of wielding thaumaturgy, who served particular nobles or royals. Perhaps saying knights were permanent employees, while mercenaries were temporary ones, would be an easier way of putting it.

The combat potential their use of thaumaturgy granted them made them the backbone of a military force. The knights were the strongest armed organization in Rhoadseria, and if they could not be made into allies, Princess Lupis's inheritance of the throne would be as fragile as a house of cards.

That goes without saying, though...

This was a tumultuous age, and one could say the rule of survival of the fittest reigned over this Earth. Both inside and outside the country, many people bore their fangs hungrily with intent to take chunks of the land for themselves, and protecting the country from these starving wolves would not be a simple task.

Military might was necessary for attacking other countries, but it was also needed to defend one's own country, and this held true even if they were to avoid hostilities by negotiations. A country with a weak military would be at a disadvantage at the bargaining table.

I can't take responsibility for how Lupis leads this country after the war... But I can't pretend like this isn't an issue. It wouldn't be right.

If they weren't going to be picky about the means they achieved their victory with, Ryoma could knit as many schemes as were needed. If taking things to the extreme, he'd be willing to butcher the knights entirely if it were the easier solution. But once one considered Rhoadseria's future in the long run, the range of available options became much narrower.

"So those two couldn't handle it... Though I suppose this is all in line with our expectations." Bergstone heaved an unsatisfied sigh.

"I didn't expect much out of them to begin with..."

There was no point in asking who they were talking about by now. Realizing the intent in Count Bergstone's gaze, Ryoma shrugged and shook his head.

He couldn't call Meltina and Mikhail fools. They were born into families of high-ranking knights and received fitting education. But their pride and conviction at being knights was too strong, and they were almost astonishingly bad when it came to listening to the other party, shouting them down at times. Their convictions got in the way of their ability to consider and respect others' positions.

“But we can’t leave matters as they are. I believe I shouldn’t need to explain the reason for that, Sir Mikoshiba.” Count Bergstone glared at Ryoma’s face with a reproachful glint in his eye.

“It’s just as you say, Count. But is there anyone aside from those two who can divide the forces of the knights’ faction? They wouldn’t even listen to what the nobles’ faction has to say.”

Ryoma’s words prompted Count Bergstone to fall silent in contemplation. As Ryoma pointed out, the knights viewed the nobles with clear antagonism. While that held true for the nobles as well, it became a great restricting factor at times like these.

Even if Bergstone were to personally come to attempt to persuade them, most of the knights would very likely refuse for sentimental reasons. At worst, they might not even show up to the negotiations. In that regard, even with their lack of aptitude for negotiations and persuasion, Meltina and Mikhail at least stood a better chance of not being turned away at the door.

After a long silence, Count Bergstone parted his lips to speak.

“I see... Yes, I understand what you’re trying to say, Sir Mikoshiba. I cannot think of anyone more suitable than those two...”

He knew full well this task was beyond Meltina and Mikhail’s abilities, but he needed someone trustworthy to spearhead the negotiations with the knights’ faction, preferably someone with a certain degree of popularity.

They were both extremely loyal to Princess Lupis, and had their own respective accomplishments as the vice-captain of the royal guard and one of the most promising swordsmen in the country. More importantly still, they were descendants of knight families that had served since the founding of the kingdom.

Abilities, trust, and fame. No one but them filled those prerequisites in the princess’s faction, which was already at a disadvantage of numbers. There was no one else to choose, and Ryoma could only make effective use of whatever manpower he had.

“But when considering the state after the war, leaving it to those two worries

me somewhat...”

They nodded silently at Count Zeleph’s words. In terms of individual skill, Meltina and Mikhail certainly had what it took, but a commander over soldiers couldn’t necessarily lead other generals. From Ryoma’s perspective, he doubted even their ability to command normal soldiers.

“This is bad... At this rate, the moment we remove General Albrecht, the neighboring countries would turn their sights on us.” Count Bergstone shook his head with a sigh.

“Xarooda and Myest are one thing, but Tarja to the south is especially dangerous. Our skirmishes with them in the southern borders have been incessant.”

“Elnan... if I recall, General Albrecht’s wife is the daughter of an influential Tarjian noble.”

Count Zeleph considered Count Bergstone’s words and nodded.

“Yes, if I recall, it was done under the former king’s orders.”

Political marriages were often done among members of the royal families of separate countries. But in cases where they were not of age, the couple was too incompatible or there wasn’t an unwed person to offer, someone from another influential bloodline was sent as a representative instead.

“In that case, we should consider that if General Albrecht dies, at worst, Tarja might open hostilities against us...” Bergstone continued, sighing heavily once again.

The situation seemed to be getting worse the more one thought about it, and time was gradually ticking away.

“Perhaps we should simply consider that maybe those two aren’t suitable to serve as general. Of course, there’s always the chance they might grow into their role, but that would take time... And that is something we lack.”

“But there’s no one else we can entrust this role to. Or did either of you have any ideas?”

Ryoma’s words drove Duke Bergstone to silence. The conversation went back

to the drawing board. It was like a moebius loop, a maze with no exit.

General Albrecht's ambitions were a massive obstacle that had to be removed if Princess Lupis was to be made Rhoadseria's ruler. But if they got rid of Albrecht, they would be attacked by their neighboring countries unless they had someone who could take over his role and unite the knights.

But it was obvious to them that Lupis's most trusted aides, Meltina and Mikhail, were unfit to lead. Even if they did have the potential to do so, they would have only achieved something after nearly a month of trying to divide up the opposition from the knights' faction.

A deep silence fell over the room. But eventually, Count Zeleph broke it.

"I believe I may know one person who would be suitable..."

Ryoma and Count Bergstone exchanged gazes. It seemed Bergstone was lacking for ideas himself.

"Who would that be, Elnan?" Count Bergstone turned his eyes to Count Zeleph, his head tilted.

"Are you not aware, brother-in-law?" Count Zeleph responded to Count Bergstone's dubious expression with a whisper. "Lady Helena Steiner."

"Elnan... Are you serious? She is..."

Count Bergstone's voice was awash with surprise; that was surely the last name he had expected to hear.

The woman sitting on the sofa elegantly sipping from a cup of tea looked to be in her late fifties or early sixties. Her wavy hair, a shade of gold with small splashes of white, had likely been quite gorgeous in her youth. Her clothes were made from elegant, well-made silk, but were by no means gaudy.

She looked to be a slightly affluent commoner woman. At least, that was the impression Ryoma received from the woman sitting before him.

Her name was Helena Steiner— the woman who had served as Hodram Albrecht's predecessor as the General of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria a dozen or so years before.



So, how do I bring it up...?

Ryoma fixed his eyes on Helena's face, while she smiled calmly at him.

"I... I must th-thank you for coming to meet us today!" Meltina managed to stammer out, bowing to her repeatedly while stumbling over her words.

She must have been quite excited, as her greeting was quite far from dignified. Her face was flushed red, and her shoulders were stiff as a board from the tension.

"Lady Helena... It is truly a great honor to be graced with your presence today." Mikhail followed suit, bowing his head respectfully to Helena as she sat composedly on the sofa.

Mikhail didn't stumble over his words, thankfully. Rather, he spoke in a courteous tone that lacked all traces of his usual haughtiness.

I guess, if nothing else, they won't have the leisure of putting their feet in their mouths if they're this nervous...

As he brought his teacup to his lips, Ryoma looked upon the two with a cool glance as they acted distinctly out of character. That said, they couldn't be faulted for being nervous, for Helena Steiner was quite literally a living legend in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

In the week since Count Zeleph mentioned her name, Ryoma had looked into information regarding Helena Steiner. Though that didn't exactly demand much effort from his side, because one wouldn't be wrong if they made the grand claim that a citizen who had not heard of her did not exist in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Any child in the streets could tell of her exploits.

The tales of Helena, who climbed to the rank of General despite her background as a commoner, were as numerous as they were well-known. Her greatest feat of heroism was the battle of the Notis plains.

Thirty years ago, the Empire of O'ltormea began an invasion of the Kingdom of Xarooda, backed with its massive national power and spurred by its ambition to unite the western continent. With only a third of its enemy's territory, and with them holding the center of the continent, Xarooda had no choice but to

request the aid of its neighbors to stave off the invasion.

Rhoadseria chose to oblige this request, dispatching four orders of knights—ten thousand elite troops in total— to their aid. And the general who led that force was Helena Steiner. Alongside General Vereness of the Kingdom of Xarooda, they set up camp in the Noctis plains, and wagering on a counter-offensive night raid against the O'ltormean forces, pushed back the invasion.

The O'ltormean commander fell to the raid and Xarooda was spared from falling under O'ltormea's control. In doing so, Helena was seen as a patriotic hero.

"Heh heh... There is no need to be so nervous. Have some tea and calm yourselves, and for goodness sake, Mikhail, sit down already."

Helena offered Meltina a cup of tea and urged Mikhail, who had remained on his feet, to sit on the couch.

"Y-Yes! I humbly beg your pardon!" As prompted, Meltina stirred his tea and the next moment, leaned forward to bring the cup to her lips.

But since the tea was still steaming and she tried to drink it without minding the temperature, she nearly burned her lips on it.

"Well, let's not mind her for the moment... Lady Helena, thank you for coming to meet us today." Ryoma moved the conversation along, consciously ignoring Meltina, who was now tearing up thanks to her earlier mistake.

"I was quite surprised when I got your letter the other day. It's been over ten years since I retired as a knight, after all..."

"I thank you once again for lending an ear to our outrageous request for an audience." Ryoma expressed gratitude again.

"Well, retired though I may be, I couldn't help but come and abide by a letter from Her Highness, Princess Lupis herself," Helena said, a thin smile spreading across her lips.

"Yes, indeed. If you say so, it was certainly worth having the princess pen you a personal letter, then."

Ryoma's words made Helena eye him suspiciously. So, he "had" the princess

of a country pen a letter, did he...

“Come to think of it, I don’t believe I caught your name,” Helena said. Ryoma seemed to have piqued her interest.

“Oh, my apologies. I go by Ryoma Mikoshiba.”

“My...” Helena’s face filled with surprise. “I see. You... didn’t quite give the impression of a tactician.”

An only natural reaction, as Ryoma’s muscular physique gave him the definite appearance of a man of brawn. If nothing else, the average first impression would be that he was the type to solve issues with his fists, rather than his head.

“You know about me?” Ryoma tilted his head at her surprised reaction.

“Why, of course I do. I may be retired, but I love this country deeply. I’m aware of most matters that go on in Rhoadseria. Even ten years later, to this day, there are still people who remember me... And they often bring me word of such events.”

A glance at Helena’s face made it clear to Ryoma she was keeping in touch with people from the knights’ faction.

I see... I suppose that’s a former general for you. This saves us having to explain everything... It’s a definite godsend.

The current state of affairs was that the knights’ faction didn’t hold absolute loyalty to the royal family, but that was mostly because General Albrecht sat at the lead, eyeing the throne greedily. Knights were normally those who swore fealty to the kingdom and the throne and served as a check to the nobles’ independent ambitions.

Though they abided by General Albrecht for the sake of their position and livelihoods, there could be more knights with doubts in their hearts than Ryoma had imagined, and Helena served as the receptacle of their concerns.

“I see. Well, I should consider it an honor that Rhoadseria’s White Goddess of War knows my name.”

“My... You do recall some old stories.” Helena’s face contorted, barely

concealing the annoyance in her expression. “I’ve not been called by that title in ages...”

“Do you not appreciate that title?”

“That is all in the past for me now, after all... Incidentally, may I ask the reason for your summoning me here?”

Apparently, Helena preferred to not touch on that, from how she changed the topic.

“I shall cut to the heart of the matter. We want you to lend Princess Lupis your assistance and take up the position of this country’s general again.”

Helena’s expression stiffened. She likely hadn’t expected Ryoma to be this direct.

“My... Just as you say, you certainly do cut right to the heart of the matter.” Helena fell silent for a moment, only for lips to curl up in a smile. “But this certainly makes it easy to understand. I admire boys like you.”

Her tone and gaze somehow felt like it was appraising Ryoma.

“Why, thank you. So, what is your response?” Ryoma replied, meeting her glance squarely.

“Oh, I’ll have to deduct some points for that one. I may be old, but I’m still a woman. A man trying to coax a woman to do his bidding must never press for an answer like this.”

Ryoma smiled wryly and bowed his head apologetically at Helena’s teasing expression.

“Oh, sorry about that. Yes, pressing you like this goes against manners... Still, we don’t have the luxury of time.”

Ryoma then fixed a sharp gaze at Elena’s smiling face, and the silent pressure in his eyes made her flinch back for a second.

“My talk of manners and etiquette was all in jest, of course...” Helena began her retort after regaining her bearings. “But I do think I can’t be expected to answer without meeting Her Majesty in person first. Right?”

But Ryoma's following words put the initiative back in his hands, just by how utterly unexpected they were.

"Oh, so you wish to meet Her Majesty, Lady Helena...? I'll be honest, then. Frankly, we don't have the time to waste on that."

""""*What?!*""""

Ryoma's statement went far beyond rudeness. It made it seem as if Lupis Rhoadserians was only a marionette. Those words made Helena, Meltina, and Mikhail all exclaim at once.

"Y-You fool! Do you intend to insult Her Highness?!" Meltina rose from her seat in rage, but Ryoma simply glared at her coldly.

His intense gaze seemed to coldly state, 'Be quiet or I'll kill you where you stand!' His eyes delivered that message all too clearly to anyone who faced that glare.

Nailed down by Ryoma's menacing gaze, Meltina sank back into her seat.

"My apologies... She just can't get used to negotiations for the life of her..." Ryoma returned his gaze to Helena after ensuring that Meltina had quieted down.

"I'm surprised... You've quite the spirit for one so young."

"Much obliged. But our survival is very much in the balance here."

Helena took a deep breath, and her expression completely inverted. The gaze she directed at Ryoma made it clear that she wouldn't forgive a single lie.

"So? Why is it impossible for me to meet Princess Lupis?"

Ryoma met her gaze head on with a shrug of the shoulders.

"If meeting Princess Lupis is all it would have taken to get you to join, you'd have approached the castle of your own volition by now... Am I wrong?"

This woman had been in retirement for ten years and was now being asked to return to service. The conditions for her cooperation were bound to be extraordinary, and Helena saw little value in money or fame. Having risen to the rank of general, she likely wasn't troubled financially, and there wasn't an offer

one could make her that stood above her existing reputation as a national hero.

And loyalty to the royal house wasn't an option, either. This woman rose from being a commoner to the rank of general; if this could persuade her, she'd have picked either Princess Lupis's or Princess Radine's side by now.

But she didn't. She had kept her position hidden until now, as if to say she couldn't judge which side had more legitimacy. Perhaps she didn't care about it to begin with.

"I see. Your reasoning is sound enough... But the question begs asking. If you know that much, why bother to call on me?"

"Because we require your help at any cost," Ryoma said, reflecting on her words with a sigh.

"Oh?" Helena's expression clouded over. "Are you implying you'll force me to cooperate against my will...? I cannot help but conclude that you are patronizing me."

If neither gain nor reasoning would sway her, then perhaps resorting to force would. Helena's face contorted with scorn.

"I had some expectations upon hearing Princess Lupis had a tactician on her side, but I seem to have judged you too favorably."

"Spare me the bad jokes." Ryoma shook his head at Helena's look of disappointment. "The thought of doing something so rude never even crossed my mind."

"What did you intend to do, then?"

Ryoma responded to her question with a smile.

"Money and fame won't move you. But you accepted Princess Lupis's letter and came to meet us here in the castle. That means there's room for negotiation, yes...? You likely have something you want. Something you can't achieve on your own... Am I wrong?"

Ryoma was in complete control of the atmosphere in the room. No one dared speak, out of sheer astonishment.

"Right... I see." Helena eventually whispered. "You *are* a sharp one."

That whisper confirmed Ryoma's conjecture was correct.

"Then, why don't you tell me what is it I wish for...? Depending on your answer..." Helena gazed at Ryoma with black flames in her eyes. "Very well, then. I will lend my strength to Princess Lupis."

"Understood... Honestly speaking, I think I have an idea as to what your wish might be."

Meltina and Mikhail reacted with surprise to what Ryoma said, but Helena's expression made it seem as though she'd expected as much.

"As you should... There's no hope for you if you can't be expected to piece together that much."

"All the same, I don't have proof yet."

"Hmph... It is difficult to tell whether you're cautious or just a coward..."

As she placed a hand on her chin, pretending to be deep in thought, Helena fixed her gaze on Ryoma, as if she was trying to see into the depths of his mind...

If his heart were to betray even a hint of fear or hesitance, she would never forgive him, but Ryoma met Helena's gaze with composure. All to make her acknowledge his worth...

"But I suppose if we're putting resourcefulness to the test, that kind of caution is a necessary evil... Very well. I shall grant you some time to think, and then you will have your answer."

Helena saw the will in Ryoma's eyes, and that made her want to wager over it. Wager her own life...

This boy... Is he what I've been waiting for...? The final piece of the puzzle I've been waiting more than ten years for...?

It had been over a decade since she retired as a knight, but she didn't do it of her own volition. She was forced to retire by that man...

By Hodram Albrecht and his schemes.

Rhoadseria's White Goddess of War? Such a pompous title... How laughable...

What Goddess of War would fail to protect even her own family...?

Helena's lips twisted with scorn. Yes, she truly had been called a Goddess of War once. That name was widespread in Rhoadseria, of course, but was even sung by the neighboring countries. Helena was celebrated by all.

But Helena didn't know. She didn't know that the assassin's blade was creeping in her shadow, its tip fixed against her family. She didn't know that the more glory her name gained, the more it bought her the ire of others.

If this boy can see through my wish... If he had that much foresight and wisdom... Then my wish... My wish might still be granted!

Expectation and anxiety mingled in her eyes. The expectation that she could possibly see her wish granted, and the anxiety that the time was not yet right.

Ryoma could feel the stirring in Helena's heart. She was holding great expectations for him, and whether he could answer them or not would be what steered this discussion.

Ryoma matched the information he'd looked up regarding her, and what he learned through their meaning, to piece together his hypothesis.

So she probably does want revenge against Hodram Albrecht after all...

Regardless of the ten years she spent in retirement, the will and vigor in Helena's body was still that of an active commander, and she still held some influence over the knights. Putting two and two together, it seemed to Ryoma that the most probable motive for her actions was revenge. Adding to that was her expression when he called her Rhoadseria's White Goddess of War; Ryoma clearly saw the contempt she held for her own title.

But... I don't have any proof.

The reason as to why she retired as Rhoadseria's general and faded into obscurity remained unknown. Anyone who knew the circumstances of that time were tight-lipped and refused to say a word about it.

I guess I'll have to gamble on it...

Ryoma steeled his resolve. His hypothesis was conjecture and nothing more, and no matter how many theories he piled on top of each other, proof wouldn't

appear all on its own. All he could do was trust in the answer he'd assembled by piecing together what he'd researched so far with his impressions from this meeting.

"Do you... want revenge on Hodram Albrecht?"

"And why would I want that?" Helena regarded his answer with a dark smile.

"I sensed it when we met. You're not retired as a knight. You haven't neglected your training, and you keep savvy about the goings-on in the knights' faction. But in practice, you retired more than a decade ago... Which means you didn't retire of your own will. And after you retired, General Albrecht took over your position. I met him the other day myself, and right away he seemed to me like a person convinced of his own privilege. I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but... Lady Helena, you were born a commoner. You come not from the house of a noble or knight, but a commoner's family. And from what I understand, Albrecht would never acknowledge you."

Ryoma stopped for breath and directed a sympathetic look at Helena. The pained expression on her face told him his hypothesis was correct.

"After I learned of you, I looked into who you were, but found almost nothing about what happened in the period you retired. In all likelihood, someone is suppressing the information so it doesn't become known. In which case, the most suspicious person is the General who took over your position, Albrecht."

Silence fell over the room. Meltina and Mikhail were struck speechless at what Ryoma had just said. Their faith in Rhoadseria's White Goddess of War was too great for them to easily swallow this story.

"Yes, if you could gather this much... You truly are a sharp one." Her voice was filled with agony that seemed to reverberate from the depths of the earth.

The hatred she had kept bottled up was finally leaking out.

"I want Hodram Albrecht's head on a pike... That man... killed my husband and daughter..."

Ten or so years ago, Helena Steiner was a general of Rhoadseria. She rose from commoner to knight, and from knight to general... Her unusual talents and accomplishments pushed her up to the highest ranks of the military, and she

was admired by all in the kingdom.

But there was someone who scorned her background as a commoner. And what started as just hints of resentment grew thicker in direct proportion to her success. Just as intense light casts a dark shadow... That man's name was Hodram Albrecht.

Hodram was blessed with an exceptional physique and talented with the martial prowess expected of a knight. He was born the eldest son of the Albrecht house, which had produced fine knights for generations, and was promised the role of family head. Hodram was the very image of the ideal knight but lacked only one thing— self-restraint.

Despite being superior to most people as a matter of course, Hodram was never satisfied. He'd reached the peak of what a knight could hope to accomplish, leading an order of knights, but craved more.

Yes, he wanted the highest position achievable in the Rhoadserian army. The rank of General.

The one who controlled all the knights' orders in the kingdom, save for the two dedicated to the defense of the monarch, the Royal Guards. Though, depending on the situation, the king could even grant the general command over the royal guards, and in that regard the general could be seen as holding absolute power over the Rhoadserian military.

Traditionally, a general was eventually nominated by the king, but in order to gain the position, one would also need to be designated by the former general upon their retirement. It was, after all, a position that consolidated the power of a country's military. One would obviously need the achievements and skill to hold this position. Candidates were vetted in terms of their character, ideology and even their blood relatives, with the king giving the final approval.

But what mattered the most was how much popularity and clout the person had from those around him. The question of how much trust the knights had in said candidate was of the utmost importance.

When the general preceding Helena retired, Hodram spun many schemes and ploys to heighten his standing among the knights. Bribery, threats, and promises of promotion. Behind the scenes, his plotting knew no limits in his

effort to get his way.

And yet, Helena was chosen as the successor. Her sociable nature bought her the title of Rhoadseria's White Goddess of War. The people lauded her fair and impartial attitude as the very image of what a Rhoadserian knight should aspire to be. It was only natural the retiring general would name her as his successor.

But Hodram didn't give up easily. His inflated ego and notion of being a superior person couldn't tolerate the idea of a commoner like Helena being above him, and he spun many schemes to drag her down from that position. Be it assassination or fabricated proof of corruption, he tried any idea imaginable to make Helena submit.

Helena cut through all those plans, with the help of her colleagues and friends among the knights. But as Hodram gradually lost his temper, the fangs of his malice finally reached Helena.

On that day, Helena returned home after a two-month campaign of suppressing a revolt sparked by a small governor of a territory in the outskirts of the country. But when she opened the door to her house, no one came to greet her. Though she may have been a commoner, Helena was still in charge of the country's military, and in order to keep up diplomatic appearances, she was given a respectable manor with several servants.

But oddest of all, there was no sight of her beloved ten-year-old daughter, who would always run to greet her. Suspicious, Helena moved to the living room, where her family usually was. And when she opened the door...

"The first thing I saw was my husband's head..."

What she saw was a room splattered with crimson, and her husband's freshly severed head resting on the table. He was likely killed after being viciously tortured, because his expression was one of agony.

Helena's mind failed to accept the reality of what she saw, it seemed, because she could only recall awakening on a bed in her aide's house several days later. Being a general was by no means an easy role, and a commander on the battlefield had a mountain of work to do. Even without a war to fight, a general watched over the results of the knights' training and kept wary attention over the neighboring countries' movements.

And so, the only day she could rest from the campaign was that same day she returned to her manor, and the next day she would need to draft and work through a mountain of paperwork. So thankfully, when she failed to arrive at headquarters for days, her aide grew suspicious and visited her house.

When her aide discovered her, Helena was squatted in her manor's living room, hugging her husband's head against her chest. Amid the smell of rusted blood and the decaying stench of the head, she sat, her eyes completely hollow.

Her aide took Helena, who had lost her grip on sanity, to his own home, and brought his colleagues to inspect her house. It was a crime scene, but letting the normal guards handle it was too dangerous. From what the aide had seen there, he suspected this wasn't just some random brigand attack.

He was swiftly proven correct.

"They... left a letter behind. Saying they had my daughter. They demanded that I retire from being a knight."

The frustration must have been maddening. Every word leaving Helena's lips was steeped with toxic grudge.

"I... I worked so hard to rise to the rank of general despite being a commoner... Can you imagine it? The sacrifices I had to make to reach that rank. After all, knights are typically men..."

The issue was less one of sexism, and more one of aptitude. In terms of muscular strength, men had an advantage over women, even if thaumaturgy could help mitigate that. It went without saying that Helena's baptism into a society dominated by men was a painful one. But she used her femininity to its utmost, exhibiting a strength which surpassed that of men.

Not the power of individual valor, but the strength of a group. When knights find themselves on the battlefield, they savor the aesthetic of one on one battles and abhor fighting a single enemy in a group. But while knightly pride may have a sweet ring to it, it was inefficient. And so, Helena proposed the knights fight in formation.

Even those who were fixated on their pride and objected at first were gradually swayed by Helena's charisma and her feats on the battlefield, and

came to appreciate her ideas. And that was a victory Helena won by effort.

“Can you imagine having to throw all that away?”

Ryoma shook his head at her question. He could imagine it, but wasn’t shameless enough to say so out loud. Only someone in that same position could truly understand.

“But still, if it was for her, I’d cast away my title of general... If it would bring my daughter back...”

It was the girl she was blessed with at the age of forty. Helena could only marry after turning thirty, due to her work as a knight, and had almost given up on bearing a child.

Unlike modern Japan, the medical techniques in this Earth didn’t amount to much and birth at an advanced age bordered on the impossible. So, when she learned she had conceived, Helena was overjoyed.

“And so, I ignored the words of my friends and colleagues and retired as a knight... Looking back now, I can acknowledge that decision was a naive one, but I had no other choice...”

“And they never gave her back, did they...”

Helena nodded silently at Ryoma’s assertion.

“I asked my friends and colleagues to keep this matter covered up, so as not to entice the culprit any longer. It was a good thing it wasn’t reported to the guards... But a month passed, then two months, and she wasn’t returned to me... And during that time, that man took the seat of general.”

If the victim had covered up the details of the case themselves, it was only obvious it wouldn’t be known to the public.

“How did he manage that?” Ryoma asked. “Wouldn’t Hodram need the recommendation of the retiring general to claim the title?”

At least, he would need that in an official capacity. But Helena shook her head.

“Fundamentally, he would... But sometimes a former general may die without a chance to nominate a successor, and in those cases, it would be put to a vote

by the knights...”

Stricken with concern for her daughter, Helena couldn’t fulfill her duties, and appointing a successor was the furthest thing from her mind. And it was in that time that Hodram’s plots showed their effect.

Helena’s aide and her friends objected, but they were soon silenced. Hodram’s pedigree had worked in his favor from the start, elevating him to the rank of Rhoadseria’s general.

“Five years passed as I waited for my daughter to return... I’d already given up by then... Even if I wanted to avenge my husband’s death, I didn’t know who it was that did this, and I couldn’t search for her without any hints... Just living had become pain.”

It was all understandable. A child is a parent’s treasure... No, they were the parent’s life itself.

“You didn’t suspect General Hodram?”

“I had my suspicions, but...”

“No proof?”

Helena nodded silently.

Many countries saw Helena as a nuisance at the time. Few monarchs would sit idly by and let another country build up their military strength unobstructed. That applied even for Xarooda, which they had helped repel O’ltormea in the past, and their neighbor Myest.

“Perhaps you’ve heard of how, five years ago, a slave merchant operating secretly in the country was executed?” Helena suddenly directed a question at Meltina, who sat stupefied.

“Huh? Y-Yes...! Though, I do not know the full details...”

Human trafficking wasn’t generally illegal on this Earth, but was only permissible for prisoners of war from other countries and those with debts they couldn’t pay off. If nothing else, no country tolerated having its citizens snatched off the streets and sold off.

But you could find a fool in any place, at any time, and there were those who

did their business openly, even though they'd have been turned a blind eye to had they merely operated in moderation. The slave merchant beheaded five years ago was one such fool.

"That man would buy and sell off anyone, so long as it turned him a profit. Even people from the capital if he could get his hands on them... And that led to his demise."

Kidnapping a blood relative of a prominent noble, and one who had relations with the royal family at that, cost the merchant his life.

It seemed his brazen confidence had stemmed from the fact that he'd bribed someone affiliated with the kingdom's guards, but antagonizing an even more influential noble led to his rather predictable end.

"It was the knights who apprehended him. He had quite the large private army, you see... That was likely why the guards couldn't touch him."

"And that's how you figured out what happened to your daughter?"

"Yes... There were a lot of rumors surrounding that man, so the knights subjected him to a great deal of torture in order to get information from him." She answered Ryoma's answer calmly, but there was a great deal of melancholy in her tone. "And eventually, the torture loosened his tongue, and he talked about my family's assassination..."

In truth, the merchant had taken the role of a mediator in order to find an assassin to carry out the job, but for all Helena was concerned, he was guilty all the same.

"The knight in charge of his torture was an old subordinate of mine, and thanks to that, I was able to meet him face to face."

She made it sound simple, but it was quite the reckless act. It wouldn't have been so concerning had Helena still been a general, but it had been five years since her retirement at the time. Despite her past position, she was a regular civilian then, so meeting a criminal was unheard of...

"I see... So that's how you found out Hodram was the one behind it all..."

"Yes."

That one short word told all there was to tell.

“So why did you wait this long?”

“It’s simple... that story never surfaced publicly. Even if it were to be exposed, it would be suppressed, and we’d be assassinated next. Ever since I retired, Hodram’s influence has only grown. The slave merchant’s testimony alone wouldn’t be enough to bring him down...”

Silence filled the room. None of them had imagined the grudge ran so deep. Mikhail and Meltina were at a loss for words.

“So that’s what happened...” Ryoma’s words were heavy, too.

He’d had his suspicions, but the resentment simply ran too deep.

Well, this isn’t good... This could be worse than letting Meltina handle the knights’ faction.

A grudge can be a powerful motivator to move people, but people who are overly occupied with it will eventually destroy themselves. And while Helena was free to drive herself to self-destruction, Ryoma didn’t want to get caught up in that.

“It’s fine. It’s nothing for you to worry over...” Helena guessed at Ryoma’s concern from the expression on his face. “What I want is Hodram and his family. Nothing more.”

And so, she put her desire properly into words.

Right... So she understands our doubts... Her abilities and sensibility all check out, for sure... And we’ll have to grit our teeth for the rest, I suppose.

The fact remained that Helena was the one person they needed for the job. No one could match her capabilities and achievements. They would simply need to fulfill her wish and hand over Hodram and his family.

Vengeance was seen as evil in the eyes of the law, and that was true even under the laws of this world. But Helena knew this well enough, hence why she had planned this for many years. To create an opportunity for her to have her revenge.

Helena made her selling price known. The question remaining was whether

Ryoma could pay it.

Guess I don't have any other options here... I feel bad for General Albrecht's family, all things considered, but... I suppose there's no way around it.

He could only see this becoming a ghastly revenge tragedy, but Ryoma easily turned his back on Hodram Albrecht and his family. The fact remained: no one was fit for the role but Helena. Ryoma didn't have any desire to condemn the evil of revenge or ascertain whether it was just. There was only one question here— which of them would be of greater use to him.

I might be content with this... But whether Princess Lupis would be is the problem...

Ryoma might turn a blind eye here, but Princess Lupis would need to approve of this as well. It had been a month or so since he'd met Princess Lupis, which was ample time to get a grasp on her character and sensibilities.

She pursues ideals too much, for better or worse... Would someone like her approve of offering revenge against Hodram as compensation...? Never... But what do I do? If I turn her down here, Helena will go straight to the nobles' faction instead...

If he were to bring it up to Princess Lupis, she would undoubtedly insist to have the issue resolved through the law, but that wouldn't resolve Helena's grudge. Her governing principle was vengeance. True, she had loyalty to the Rhoadserian throne, but her resentment was stronger than that.

If the nobles' faction were to approach her first and agree to her price, she would take their side without a second thought. The most important thing to her was to kill Hodram with her own two hands... Or worse, in all likelihood.

No choice... I'll have to bear the brunt of this blow...

Ryoma braced himself. He would have to agree to her demand for vengeance without consulting the princess.

"Very well... We'll accept your demand."

""What?!"" Meltina and Mikhail exclaimed in surprise, but Ryoma glared them into silence.

Negotiations had a way of changing. If they were to ask for time to consult the princess, Helena's interest would falter. They had to make their decision here.

"Are you sure? Shouldn't you check with Her Highness first?" Helena asked probingly.

"Yes. She entrusted handling of these matters to me, and I very well may be exceeding my authority... But I'll take care of that. You can be calm."

Helena listened to his words and then stared intently into his eyes. She wouldn't forgive him if they were to betray even a sliver of a lie. But after observing him for one interminable moment, Helena's expression softened.

"Very well. I shall trust you, Sir Mikoshiba."

She referred to Ryoma with a respectful title, to demonstrate her trust.

"Thank you very much, Lady Helena."

"So, what am I to do going forward? Help divide up the knights' faction?"

Ryoma pondered her question for a moment.

"I guess the big question is just how many people are discontented with General Albrecht."

The answer to that could change things significantly. Of course, given his haughty personality, it was likely few people respected General Albrecht from the bottom of their hearts, but that didn't necessarily mean they hated him.

Ryoma's concerns would prove to be groundless, though.

"Well, I believe roughly two thirds of them are discontented with him... To the extent of being willing to kill over it."

"Two thirds?!" He couldn't restrain his surprise at her appraisal.

Hodram couldn't have remained the leader of the faction all this time if the majority of its members were displeased with him.

"There can't possibly be that many, can there?"

Helena regarded his question with a smile.

"Yes, I suppose under normal circumstances there wouldn't... But he

managed it. He did it by having the knights mutually observe each other."

"What do you mean by that?"

"In layman's terms, he encouraged them to inform him of each other's movements."

There were countries in Ryoma's world that used this tactic, too. The communist sphere used it widely before the Soviet Union collapsed, and there were still governments that relied on it to maintain their power.

Put simply, this was a system that encouraged betrayal among people. In exchange for reporting any dissent spoken by one's colleagues or family, they would be rewarded with upward mobility in one's company or society, or with monetary prizes.

It tended to sow distrust. All too naturally, as any person was prone to complain when they didn't like the way they were currently living. There likely wasn't a person alive who wasn't displeased with their lot in life in some way.

But what if someone overhearing that complaint could lead to them being reported and killed? One would keep their hearts closed to their colleagues and friends, even their own families.

"I see... In that case, it would be easy to have them switch sides."

As firm as this system was, its major flaw was in its brittleness; even a single person working up the courage to resist would cause it to fall apart. Calling it both firm and brittle may be an odd phrase, but it was apt.

The main issue was, people found it hard to exhibit that courage to begin with. Everyone was anxious, but no one dared speak up, since doing so put one's life at stake. That was what made the system a firm one.

But what if even one person were to share their anxieties with another? Of course, one would have to choose who they told wisely, but in greatest likelihood, they would share those anxieties with someone eventually. And doing so would further agitate them, causing their discontent to overflow and reach the breaking point. And once they got to that point, no one would be able to stop them. The suppressed anxiety would erupt all at once, like lava from an active volcano.

The person most suited to throw the first spark into that powder keg was sitting right in front of him. Rhoadseria's own admired hero would do the enticement, surely causing the flames of contempt to flare up grandly.

Meltina and Mikhail, as slow as they were, didn't quite understand the implications, but Ryoma could easily envision it.

"Very well. I'll leave the execution up to you. On one condition... be sure to keep us updated on the situation."

"Yes, you can rely on me in that regard. Old though I may be, I'm still a former general." Helena nodded deeply, to answer the trust Ryoma placed in her.

"Can I ask you just one thing?" Ryoma asked Helena as she got to her feet and prepared to leave.

"My, aren't you reserved all of a sudden. What is it?"

He knew it would be insensitive, but he couldn't help but ask.

"Your daughter..."

Helena fell silent at Ryoma's query. It seemed that this was one matter she hesitated to speak of. Ryoma immediately regretted his own thoughtlessness.

"My daughter... was raped and ravaged cruelly soon after her abduction, and was driven to madness... Since she wasn't suitable for sale... that slave merchant killed her."

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked." Ryoma could only bow his head at the words Helena spat out.

He'd already suspected that may have been the case, but hearing those words from the bereaved parent's lips was extremely overbearing.

I'm such an idiot... I would've been better off not asking her at all...

He had asked purely out of curiosity, but all the same, he was better off leaving that unsaid.

"It's fine... Don't worry about it. But... that's why I can't walk away from this... No matter what!"

Ryoma could only stand still, wordlessly. As Helena left the room, he could

clearly see the flames of hatred swirling violently in her stride.

Chapter 4: Proof of Strength

The sun hung at its zenith. A single woman raised her voice amidst the tumult of men drinking in the noon of day.

“Over here, Gran!”

They were in the castle town of Pireas, Rhoadseria’s capital. In a slum sitting at one end of the town was a small corner pub, where Lione tilted her glass of wine towards a man looking into the store from its entrance.

Gran was a man in his mid thirties to early forties, who towered at over 190 cm and had an overall well-built, firm physique. The sleeveless vest he wore showed off his hulking upper arms, which were as thick as logs.

He turned his face in Lione’s direction and gave a small nod. His sunburnt, brown hair was cut short, and a thick beard plastered his face, giving the impression of a man who wasn’t quite a respectable member of society. The leather armor he wore was reinforced with metal in spots, and he had a massive war axe at his back; either item could only give him the appearance of a brigand or bandit.

But truth be told, his attire wasn’t the issue here. His body simply teemed with the vigor of a man who had lived through countless battles. A man who made his living through fighting. Any common man who fixed his eyes on Gran would awkwardly look away and scamper off.

That said, any person in this pub would simply turn their gaze in Gran’s direction one moment and lose their interest in the next, going back to their business. Because they all knew Gran was in the same line of business as them. The name of this shop was the Verde Forest Parlor, one of the pubs beloved and frequented by the mercenaries of Pireas.

“One ale for that table over yonder, lass.”

Leaving his order with a passing waitress, Gran headed in Lione’s direction to take the seat opposite hers.

“Been a while. How’s life been treating you?”

“Yer mug’s filthy as ever. And none of the barmaids are gonna want to touch ya with a stick, what with that shabby outfit of yours.”

“I see you’ve not changed a bit either. Eh, Crimson Lion?”

Smiling wryly at her loose-lipped attitude and the startling amount of empty alcohol bottles littering her table, Gran took a seat in front of her.



The Crimson Lion was not just the name of the group Lione led, but also her own nickname. The sight of her rushing through the battlefield with ruffled, crimson hair truly invoked the image of a lioness. All the mercenaries who knew of her were bewitched by that sight.

“But you, calling me to come over? Tonight must be a blue moon.”

Taking a sip from the bottle of ale that was brought to the table, Gran sent a probing glance in Lione’s direction.

Gran was the head of the Northern Wind Brigade, a group of mercenaries on par with the Crimson Lion Group. They’d met plenty of times on the battlefield over the years, but he’d never been invited like this before.

“Well see, I kinda ended up sticking my neck into some nasty business, and I’m trying to gather some trustworthy, skilled mercs to help me out. And since you happened to be free, I figured it was a perfect time ta ask.”

“Nasty business?” Gran cocked his head at Lione’s bitter smirk.

A mercenary’s idea of “nasty business” would usually be betraying a request they’d been given, but anyone in the business who was worth anything knew to stick to the contract and mind their relationships. He had his doubts that this red-headed woman, whom he acknowledged was his superior in this line of work, would do such a thing.

“Didja betray your client?”

“Yeah, somethin’ like that.” Lione downed the lukewarm wine in her glass and slammed it on the table.

“Then go talk it over with the guild, not me. I don’t think I can help you with that.”

A guild. In modern terms, it might be equivalent to a worker’s union. There were, in fact, many kinds of guilds in this world, including the merchant’s guild and the industrial guild, but when one said that word on this Earth, they usually meant the guild for adventurers and mercenaries. It was the association which sent those in that business into work involving combat and assorted danger zones.

The guild's role was to handle smooth distribution of requests, and to act as mediator in case a disagreement broke out with the client. Gran's suggestion was that if Lione had a falling out with her client, the first place she should go to for help was the guild.

"Well, the shit's kinda hit the fan with this one. Can't really rely on the guild here."

"If I know you, you're more cautious than that." Gran's expression contorted at her words. "Don't tell me you took that job directly from the client without going through the guild?"

All the requests done via the guild were processed after confirming the client's financial status and the content of the request, and in exchange, the guild took an intermediation fee for all the requests it handled.

Of course, that was a necessary expense, the guild being the massive organization that it was, but those working with their lives on the line were far from pleased to see a cut of their reward taken away. Were you supposed to prioritize your own safety, or how much you were paid? Some preferred the latter route and chose to take requests without going through the guild.

However, those kinds of requests had their share of pitfalls. Being able to haggle over the reward was all fine and dandy, but there were cases where the client would refuse to pay, and some truly vicious people would try to eliminate the people they hired to avoid future trouble. So, unless there was a great deal of trust between them and the client, no mercenary with their wits about them would easily accept a mission without going through the guild.

Thanks to the massive organization known as the guild, which spanned the western continent, the mercenaries could risk their lives on the battlefield without fearing being treated as disposable pawns...

"Nah, it's nothin' like that. The request itself was legit, and we took it through the guild."

Sensing something in her words, Gran furrowed his brows.

"Alright, I understand. Sounds like this is a little more complicated than I thought... Tell you what. How 'bout I get another drink in me, and then I'll hear

you out.”

Sensing a long conversation ahead, Gran held up his empty mug to call for a waitress.

Having heard Lione’s story, Gran folded his arms and stared at the ceiling, his face expressionless.

“So, that’s the deal, Gran. I want you and yer Northern Wind Brigade to lend us your strength.”

With Lione having said her piece, silence fell between them for a long moment, which was eventually broken by Gran heaving a deep sigh.

“Crimson Lion. Assuming everything you just told me is true... The guildmaster affair is nasty enough, and on top of that, you want to stick your neck into Rhoadseria’s civil war... This isn’t just like any other battlefield we’d be working on. Even for you, with your name and reputation, this goes a lot deeper than any one mercenary can handle. If I were you, I’d get my ass out of the western continent before the guild sends someone to finish you off.”

Though Lione was an old friend, her story was too problematic. The guild always presented itself as neutral, but so long as it was run by people, connections and favors still understandably existed. A truly neutral organization couldn’t and didn’t exist. An ignorant child may not be able to comprehend that, but Gran knew it well enough. That was simply how the world worked.

Gran himself used connections with a guildmaster he was friendly with to land himself some good jobs or reject jobs he didn’t think were worth it. But on the other hand, he’d never heard of a guildmaster setting someone up for a fall in such a blatant manner.

If Lione’s claims were true, Pherzaad’s guildmaster planned to use Lione and her group as disposable pawns. It was on an entirely different level from getting slightly smaller restitution for a mission than what was promised. It cast the guild’s fundamental principles into question.

Of course, Gran didn’t trust the guild blindly enough to assume that was entirely impossible, but he couldn’t swallow Lione’s story that easily either. And the biggest reason he was so non-committal was, even if he gained a name for

himself, the matter seemed much too big for a mere mercenary with no influence or power over society to stick his neck into. He may have had personal fame and confidence in his abilities, but they wouldn't help him much in this situation.

Lione and Gran were A-rank mercenaries, and their rank within the guild was quite high as well. They'd earned nicknames for themselves, were acknowledged by their fellow mercenaries, and the groups they led were gatherings of experienced veterans. If some country were to recruit them into a knights' order, they had the skills to soon be made squad or company commanders.

But all things considered, Gran still felt Lione's offer was far too dangerous. Particularly when it came to the idea of opposing a large organization like the guild...

"Yer not wrong. I wouldn't normally agree to something this mental, no matter the price. It's annoying having the guild ragging my ass, and like ya said, fleeing to another continent's an option. But this time the story's a little different."

Picking up on what Lione was implying, Gran furrowed his brow.

"Don't tell me that kid convinced you to get on board?"

He did sound clever enough from what Lione had told him, and Gran figured there was truth to his abilities. But even with Lione to vouch for him, from Gran's perspective he was some suspicious kid who came out of nowhere, and his guild level being E didn't help. He couldn't trust some upstart with little combat experience.

"We'll pay you good." Lione smirked at Gran with only one eye open.

"Don't be stupid... Money's not the issue here."

"What's this? A merc's tellin' me he doesn't give a shit about money?"

Gran shook his head. The sum on offer was certainly enticing, but that didn't mean he was willing to dive into the flames for it.

"What matters for a mercenary is whether they can trust their client, and

whether their client can win the war... Compared to that, our payment hardly matters. I shouldn't need to tell you that, right?"

Mercenaries risked their lives for money, and it was for this reason that they placed importance on their client being reliable and capable of winning. An ordinary, rank-and-file soldier may have cared for just how much they were paid, but things were different for Gran, who led a group of mercenaries that functioned like a knights' order. He had responsibility over his subordinates' lives. It didn't matter how high the reward may be, it would be reduced to nothing at all if they couldn't win.

In most cases, when a side lost in war, the employer alone had his head cut off, and the mercenaries were left with only the meager deposits they'd been given ahead of time, and at worst they might find themselves hunted down as remnants of the defeated army. Being baited in by the promise of a fat reward held that risk.

So it made sense Gran would hesitate. But from Lione's perspective, as the one who brought the offer up, it only seemed like Gran thought her judgment wasn't trustworthy.

"What, are ya saying ya don't trust my judgment here?" Lione's gaze sharpened.

"That's not what I'm saying, but... That boy's rank is low, and he can't even use thaumaturgy, right?" Gran desperately argued back, overwhelmed by Lione's glaring gaze. "He hasn't set foot on the battlefield once. Telling me to risk my ass for an amateur is crazy. They're not doing anything publicly at the moment, but you could end up making the whole guild your enemy."

"I'll admit the boy's a novice when it comes to being an adventurer and a mercenary."

"And you're telling me to fight under him...? Or are you the one pulling the strings behind the scenes? It'd make things different if you were..."

War meant work for a mercenary, hence why they were cautious when it comes to these decisions.

"Do you think we have no chance of winning?"

“Sorry, Crimson Lion.” Gran folded his arms and nodded deeply at her question. “Request from an old friend or not, I can’t agree to help you with this one.”

This wasn’t just about Gran’s own life. It would influence the lives and deaths of his brigade members. He couldn’t change his mind, not even for an old friend.

But having heard Gran’s reply, Lione simply smiled.

“Well, ain’t that a pity. I didn’t even think you’d decide right here and now, anyway.”

Even after Gran’s heartless refusal, she didn’t seem to hold it against him. But the next moment, Lione’s expression took on a hitherto unseen sharpness.

“But y’know, Gran... Ya got two big debts that ya owe me right now. Those couldn’t’ve slipped yer mind, could they?”

Gran grimaced at those words. Mercenaries fighting out on the battlefield made these kinds of debts in life on an almost daily basis. And there was no shirking repayment of that kind of debt. If one forgot another mercenary’s favor in the past, no one would reach out to help them the next time they’d be in need. And once that trust was lost, one would never stand on the battlefield again. No matter how strong one may be, without the aid of their comrades, they wouldn’t survive in battle, and at worst they might even get stabbed in the back if they weren’t careful.

“Are you trying to get us killed?” Gran’s body seethed with murderous intent.

From his perspective, whether he went forward or tried to turn back, the only path laid out to him was a one-way road to hell. Between sticking his neck into the inner turmoil of a kingdom and defying a guildmaster, cutting Lione’s throat while she was right there in front of him seemed like a much easier alternative.

As if ignoring the feverish tumult of the pub, the air around those two froze like ice. Gran’s hand reached for the handle of the war axe on his back.

“Heh, I wouldn’t do that. Ya know my skill well enough, don’t ya? ’Sides, try working that pea brain of yours a bit and imagine what would happen if ya start wavin’ your axe around in here.”

At some point Lione's hand had gripped the handle of the dagger strapped to her waist. The axe certainly boasted impressive power, but it was too long and heavy. In a situation where they were both in range of each other, its long reach would put him at a disadvantage.

The moment he reached for his axe without considering where he was and Lione reached for her dagger, Gran lost. As used as he was to this weapon, his actions were too rash. He could only bitterly curse his own decision.

With Lione's gaze stabbing at him, Gran bitterly took his hand off the handle of the axe. But this wasn't to say he had accepted things. He regarded Lione with a look of spite as she pleasantly downed another glass.

Heh... Looks like that really pissed him off. Guess I'll throw him a bone.

The way Gran eyed her as if she'd gutted his parents was all part of the plan Lione had concocted with Ryoma earlier.

"Ah well, I'm not out for yer blood or anything. I'm another leader of a mercenary brigade, same as you. I'm not gonna use that debt to force ya into my war."

Lione's seductive words made Gran tilt his head in confusion.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Given the flow of the conversation, it only felt natural based on how the conversation had gone so far to assume she'd brought up the debt for that reason. And indeed, it was because Gran assumed so that he was willing to take her life.

"All I want is for ya to hear my boy out. Ya can decide if you'll help us after you meet him... Whaddaya say? That'll write off one of yer debts."

Gran gravely considered her proposal, as it practically begged him for an answer. It truly was a tempting offer.

"All I need to do is meet him? That's it?"

"Yeah... Meet the boy, and if ya still think we don't stand a chance and refuse, I'll give up quietly."

The offer didn't seem to have any downsides for Gran. Having one of his

debts wiped clean just over meeting someone was an easy enough offer.

“Fine. I’ll meet him and hear what he has to say.”

In the end, Gran had no choice but to accept her proposal. With their talk finished, Gran headed for the pub’s exit, and Lione watched his back as he left.

Sorry, Gran... I didn’t want to have to do this. But we don’t have the leisure to choose our means right now. Well, I’ll wipe that other debt ya owe me for this, so just make do with that.

Just how many times had these words crossed Lione’s mind over the last few days? From the moment Lione called Gran here to this pub, he didn’t have a choice in the matter, and nor did any of the other mercenaries she called for.

Given the circumstances Lione and her group were in, it was obvious even fellow mercenaries and friends would hesitate to help them out. So they had only one means available to them— forcing them into voluntarily joining the fighting.

Lione held this clandestine meeting with Gran in this pub. Normally, a secret meeting would be held in a more fitting place, but Lione deliberately picked the Verdant Forest Parlor, where the eyes of their fellow mercenaries were gathered, so it would reach the ears of Pherzaad’s guildmaster. Or rather, whether that information reached Wallace in Pherzaad wasn’t the main issue here. People meant to tail Ryoma and Lione’s movements may have been dispatched from Pherzaad, but what mattered most was that Gran felt pressured by the fact Wallace might be after them.

Now that he’d heard the truth of the matter from Lione, there was no way Wallace would spare Gran. And once Gran and his men would be made to feel that way, they’d be pressured to side with Lione. They couldn’t ignore the fact that their lives were in danger, and Gran alone lacked the power to face this threat.

The issue was how to curb their anger once they realized they’d been set up.

Can’t be too cautious around you, eh, boy. So far, everything’s gone the way you said it would... But it’s up to you to convince Gran.

Lione didn’t doubt Ryoma when it came to resourcefulness. But mercenaries

were big-headed and wouldn't trust a commander who wouldn't stand in the frontlines and wield a blade. No amount of money and scheming can earn true loyalty. And if he couldn't quell Gran's anger once he realized they'd been had, they would never take to the battlefield.

I've set everything up just the way you told me to. Now show me what you can do, boy...

With a nasty smirk on her face, Lione downed another drink.

"Arand! So the Crimson Lion convinced you into coming over too, did she?" Catching sight of an old friend in such an unexpected place, Gran raised his voice in a shout.

"Ooh, Gran... Heh, that Crimson Lion... So she lured you here, too." The forty-year-old Arand slapped his cleanly shaved head and contorted his flushed, intoxicated face. "I heard she's been hitting up all her old friends. I guess she's hellbent on sticking her neck into this civil war..."

Those words made Gran guess at Arand's feelings on the matter.

"Only natural, given their position..."

The two looked around. This was a maneuvering ground set up on the outskirts of Pireas. Knights in brilliant armor would normally be using this place to practice, but it was currently occupied by filthy people who looked more like ruffians and brigands, roughly four hundred in number.

Their armaments were, to put it kindly, distinctive. The uniform length of their swords and spears were one thing, but some of them carried sledgehammers, war axes, double-headed swords or metal canes. The same held for their choices of armor; leather and metal. Some of them wore a single-layer kimono made up of scales fixed together with chains.

Their gear had a great deal of variety, making it clear that there was no uniformity to speak of in this group. And the scars and nicks etched into their weapons spoke to the depth of their experience. They were a group of distinctive, unique people, unlike any ordinary soldiers.

"You really gotta hand it to the Crimson Lion."

Not just in terms of her connections, but also her skills.

“Well, half of it was her making use of Boltz’s connections...” Gran grumbled in agreement. “Still, it’s impressive how she gathered this number of mercenaries so quickly without going through the guild. And she didn’t call in just anyone. They’ve all got the reputations to back them up, and there’s a lot of people still on the fence... I guess they don’t call Lione the Crimson Lion for nothing.”

Arand scanned the place, shrugging in what looked like exasperation.

“Yeah... You hit the nail on the head, Gran.” He nodded deeply, confirming his friend’s assertion.

Gran was the same guild rank as Lione, but he wouldn’t have managed to call in this many troops, even if he did have the money to pay them better than market price. That woman, ten years younger than Gran though she was, possessed something that drew people to her side.

“You met the kid, right? What’s your take on him, Gran?”

Many a rough man looked up to Lione as a sisterly figure because of that quality she had, and Lione had acknowledged that young man: Ryoma Mikoshiba. The biggest reason for them gathering here was out of their great expectations toward this young, mature-looking lad they’d met just a few days prior.

“He’s sharp, just like the Crimson Lion says. To be honest, I thought about crushing his skull the first time we talked, but I won’t deny he has a way of drawing you in. Kid ain’t got a shred of charm to him, but he’s sharp. Besides, if we leave that bastard Wallace be, the sparks might end up flying our way too one of these days.”

The face of the boy he’d met a few days ago surfaced in Gran’s mind. He had plain, sociable features, but that was just on the surface. Ryoma Mikoshiba possessed a shrewdness one would never assume from his appearance. Gran knew this well enough from how he’d been tricked during his conversation with Lione. He fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

When Ryoma exposed the reason Lione called him out to the pub that day,

Gran was just about ready to murder him on the spot, but complaining about it now wouldn't change the past. The moment Lione called him over and he walked up to her, everything was already set in stone. Pretend as he might to be a seasoned veteran, no single mercenary could escape having an official of the guild that had its fingers nestled in every corner of the continent keeping their eye on them.

After meeting Lione, Gran used his own connections as a seasoned mercenary to gather information as well as he could. What he learned was that there was no record of Lione's group failing a request.

On the contrary— not only did they not fail any requests, there was no record of them taking on such a request from Pherzaad to begin with. He'd confirmed that from a person working in Pireas's guild who owed him a hefty amount of money. The other mercenaries here probably managed to come up with the same information, albeit through different channels.

"So you ended up coming to the same conclusion, eh, Gran?"

"Yeah. So long as Lione didn't make up the whole thing about the request."

"Which means..."

Arand cast a meaningful gaze at him, to which Gran nodded.

"Yeah. Sooner or later, that son of a bitch Wallace is gonna move to silence anyone who knows about this incident... Otherwise, news of Lione's group being traitors would be going through every branch."

"The fact he hasn't done that means he's still looking things over?"

"That's probably about right, yeah." Gran spat out his reply bitterly.

All requests accepted through the guild were usually recorded in detail, down to who accepted which request from whom, for how much, and where it happened. That was crucial information necessary for dividing adventurers and mercenaries into ranks. And while Gran couldn't normally look into other people's records, he was still able to, thanks to the clerk he had leverage over.

If he could find no such record, it would mean one of two things. Either Lione's group fooled everyone by claiming to take a request that didn't exist, or

someone with enough power to bend the guild's rules struck the request out of its records.

But Lione had no reason to fool Gran and the other mercenaries, and even if she did, she'd come up with a more believable alibi. Which left only one answer to the question. And there weren't many people capable of hiding the existence of a request taken through the guild.

There wasn't a trace of proof for that, but the most likely candidate was the guildmaster of Pherzaad's guild, Wallace Heinkel.

"So everything's going just how that kid predicted, eh?"

"Yeah. He's a cheeky snot, but I can see what the Crimson Lion saw in him."

"Guess the rest depends on whether the kid can take out Branzo... Did you tell the Crimson Lion about him, Gran?"

Arand's gaze fixed on the back of a man standing in the center of a group of people forming a circle. He was a large man, clad in leather armor that was reinforced in a few spots with metal plates. A black tattoo of a spider was etched into his exposed, log-like upper arm.

Lione, who was standing nearby, was fairly large for a woman, but in comparison to her, the difference was all too obvious.

"Yeah, I mentioned it while she was gathering information."

"The Black Spider... I don't know who hired him, but a bastard like him definitely makes for a good assassin. Think it was Wallace?"

Arand must have hated Branzo a great deal, because he spat at the ground while glaring at the ominous black tattoo on his arm.

Branzo the Black Spider. A man infamous among mercenaries as a man who would take on any job so long as it would pay him well.

"No, it definitely wasn't Wallace. Pherzaad's a long way off, so even a guildmaster would have trouble handling things directly... But he'll probably make his move sooner or later."

"So it was someone in Rhoadseria..."

“Yeah, probably.” Gran answered, nodding as he twirled his beard. “The most suspicious bunch are the nobles’ faction mooks opposing the princess.”

“I guess it’s better than not knowing when they might get attacked, but facing an assassin head-on isn’t what I’d call normal either. And I don’t see some amateur kid with no experience on the battlefield beating Branzo... He might be a disgusting piece of shit, but the Black Spider has enough skill to back up that name... Why did you suggest this, Gran?”

“You’re asking me that *now*?” Gran shook his head at Arand’s accusing tone.

“I don’t mean that. Yeah, if he defeats Branzo, he’ll be turning everyone’s heads. No one would be calling him a greenhorned brat anymore if he proved his strength like that. But...”

Arand trailed off.

“Right... He knew that from the get-go, and the fact he went with my idea is proof he thinks he has a chance.”

“You think he can win?”

“Who knows? Can’t tell without seeing the fight play out.” Gran shrugged, showing an amused smile.

Ryoma Mikoshiba was in his tent, lying over a woolen blanket, quietly reading a book. The book was brown, discolored from exposure to sunlight, and had the moldy smell distinctive of old books, which made the lengthy history the book had survived clear to the eye.

“Master Ryoma... It’s almost time.”

Laura’s sweet whisper tickled his ear, pulling Ryoma out of his reading and back to reality.

“Ah, so it is...”

Ryoma raised his body from Laura’s thighs, which served as his pillow, and gave a long stretch. The sound of his bones creaking filled the room.

The book in Ryoma’s hands wasn’t one produced through the usual methods by this time, but a much older sort of book, made by having the pages sewn together with string. Perhaps calling it a tome rather than a book would be

more apt. It wasn't written with normal ink, but rather with black octopus ink, and was certainly not something made in this Earth.

The Questions and Replies between Emperor Taizong of Tang and Li Weigong

It was counted as one of the Seven Military Classics of China, alongside the *Wuzi*. This book, penned during the Tang Dynasty, described the interactive dialogue between a tactician and general who were among the greatest in Chinese history. This particular book was one of the easier reads among the seven classics.

That said, even back in Ryoma's world, there weren't many who could read this tome. It may have been block printed, but it wasn't written in standard characters. Plus, it was in Chinese. Anyone who didn't major in Classical Chinese Lit in their higher learning wouldn't be able to read it.

And this was another Earth at that— it wasn't even Ryoma's world. Naturally enough, it simply sat gathering dust for years in the store of a merchant who handled old books until Ryoma found it.

"Sorry about using you as a pillow." Ryoma rose to his feet, putting a bookmark in the point where he'd stopped.

"It's fine. If my lap suits you, you may use it whenever you wish."

Ryoma brushed his fingers gently through Laura's silver locks in gratitude.

"You were quite absorbed in your reading... But are you sure you shouldn't have moved your body a bit more?" Sara, who also stood nearby, asked with concern, as she handed him a glass of water.

Ryoma had read many books translated into Japanese, but reading a book in Chinese was a first for him. He owed it to this world.

I guess it's the same logic as me being able to read this world's language... I could probably do some pretty interesting stuff if I make use of this... But I guess I should finish this little job first.

Some special measure regarding language had likely been applied to him when he was summoned to this world. And while it was certainly an interesting

matter to think about, Ryoma chose to focus on the battle ahead.

“Yeah, no problem.”

Ryoma gulped down the water which Sara had chilled with thaumaturgy. With his head having been filled with the text he’d been reading, the cool water served as a refreshing reprieve. Handing the empty glass back to Sara, Ryoma closed his eyes and rotated his shoulders.

Nothing felt out of the ordinary. Ryoma’s grandfather had beat into him the importance of always conducting himself like he was on the battlefield, and so Ryoma had no need to choose the place and time of a battle. Not being able to block surprise attacks and foul play was a much worse fate. Ryoma had been educated this way from a young age, and it was a way of thinking that sports would never cultivate.

Since he was always ready for true combat, not being able to defend himself without warming up first simply wasn’t an option. An enemy that ambushed you wouldn’t simply stand by and give you a minute to do a few squats, after all...

“The preparations should be ready by now, thanks to Lione. All that’s left is to show off to all those people...”

Fundamentally speaking, people were no different from animals; the weak bowed before the strong. But Ryoma knew perfectly well from past experience that when it came to humans, showing off your strength in a bad way could invoke the opposite effect.

The important part was the question of how the people around him perceived the target he was fighting. So long as he minded that, Ryoma would achieve the result he wanted.

It doesn’t matter if this is another world, or if I’m up against a human. It’s nothing I haven’t been through before.

Ryoma had gained information on Branzo through Lione. From his personality to his way of thinking, his perception of good and evil, and even his fighting style... The winner was already decided. And few things were as satisfying as beating down the arrogant.

Ryoma’s lips curled up as a childhood memory surfaced in his thoughts. Unlike in Japan, he would have no need to hold back this time.

I’m getting chills... Is this fear? Or am I actually starting to enjoy killing...?

Rather than a shudder of excitement, what filled Ryoma’s heart was a satisfying, sweet delight. Before he even knew it, Ryoma had grown accustomed to life on this Earth. He just hadn’t become aware of it yet.

“But...”

“I’ll be fine.” Ryoma placed a hand on Sara’s shoulder, as she stood beside him with an anxious expression. “I’ll get it done quickly. Honestly, I could really use the exercise right now, so it couldn’t have come at a better time. Oh, but hold on to this for me, okay?”

Ryoma handed her the book in his hands, not a trace of anxiety or wavering in his eyes. Only an iron will could be seen in him.

“”Good luck.””

The beautiful twins bowed their heads at Ryoma’s words, spoken in the same tone as ever, following his large, reliable back as he left.

“Well, you took your time showing up.” Branzo spat out ominously as Ryoma stood up in front of him with a calm smile. “Showing up with two women serving you, eh? Someone’s got ’er made.”

Indeed, after waiting under the blazing sun, Branzo would want to make a sarcastic remark or two. Lione, who stood nearby, shook her head with a wry smile. He’d apparently been taking out his anger on her until Ryoma showed up.

“We still have some time left... Don’t we?” But Ryoma faced Branzo’s angry gaze calmly, turning to look at Laura, who stood behind him.

“Yes. We’ve agreed to meet at midday, and there’s still some time.”

As if to confirm her words, the bell signaling noon rang from behind the walls.

“Right, bang on noon-time. Let’s get started, shall we? I’m sure we both have places to be and our own matters to attend to.” Ryoma took off his overcoat and handed it over to Laura, who waited on him.

Sure enough, Ryoma wasn't late to arrive, so he had no need to apologize, but Branzo could only see him as a brat who didn't know his place. He looked harmless enough and spoke politely, but everything about the way he acted irritated Branzo.

"I see what everyone meant now." Branzo whispered as he looked at Ryoma's toned form. "You're pretty well built for a brat, and you got the balls to back it up. I can see why you'd overestimate your own strength."

Ryoma's well-defined abs would probably be as hard as a metal plate if he were to flex them. His chest was wide, and his hands were as thick as logs, with fat coating his steel-like muscles. Truly, the body of a warrior. Enough to elicit sighs of admiration from the surrounding mercenaries.

But Branzo, on the other hand, was sure of his superiority. From every perspective, be it height, weight or physique, Ryoma wasn't his equal. One's power was the sum of their muscle strength, and one's physique dictated the upper limit of that power. And in all those regards, Ryoma was lacking compared to Branzo.

"Well, physique and muscles aren't everything." Ryoma sneered meaningfully.

Ryoma insinuated that Branzo was an idiot who was only good for his muscular prowess, and the mocking light in his eyes made it clear he wasn't afraid of his opponent in the slightest.

Ryoma's indomitable attitude further sharpened the glare of Branzo's emotionless, reptile-like eyes. His towering height of two hundred and twenty-five centimeters, along with his muscles, gave off the menacing aura an armored giant might produce.

His glare alone could reduce women and children to tears. But Ryoma simply gave a slight bow of his head and turned his back to him without a word.

"You've definitely got balls, I'll give you that. You don't seem like a greenhorn, at the very least... Fine. I figured I'd grant you a painless death, out of respect for a fellow mercenary... But fuck that. With that kind of attitude, I'll snap your limbs off like a bug."

Whispering those words huskily, Branzo cast a murderous look at Lione.

“Crimson Lion... You know the deal. No interference.”

“Bit late in the game to bring that up, slick. It’s you we’re talkin’ about. And it’s not like ya haven’t taken your own measures, aye?”

He replied to her question with a smirk that made it clear she was right.

“Of course not. I’m not dumb enough to take someone at their word without any guarantee.”

“That’s pretty cold of ya.” Lione said, seemingly offended. “If ya don’t trust me that much, why’d ya even show up for this?”

“Heh, even I can’t lay my hands on someone hiding in the castle. And I’m busy enough. My job’s just to kill one greenhorn kid, and I don’t want to waste any more time.”

It seemed Lione believed his words. Branzo’s skill wasn’t bad at all, but he had a massive body that wasn’t suited for sneaking into a castle and assassinating a target. That meant he’d have to wait for his prey to scamper out of its hole eventually, but that would take time. She didn’t know how much this job would fetch him, but it made sense; given his personality, he’d go along with this offer if it ended things quickly.

“I getcha... Gran’s idea musta been a godsend for ya, eh...”

“More or less... But shit, what a dumb kid. To think he’d come over to me just to get himself killed.”

Lione eyed Branzo coldly as he grinned indomitably.

“Are you both ready?”

Ryoma and Branzo both nodded silently at Lione’s question.

The distance between the two warriors eyeing each other down was roughly ten meters.

I’ll teach this little sod to run his mouth at me...

Branzo lowered his waist and glared at Ryoma. The fact he didn’t even ask him to remove the leather armor he wore over his massive body just annoyed

him further.

That didn't mean he intended to take off his own armor, though. It annoyed him to no end, but he wouldn't cast aside an advantage.

Look at this joker. He intends to fight me while standing still...? What an inexperienced amateur. Poor idiot doesn't even know how to fight, and he still challenged me.

Branzo mocked Ryoma, who stood still with his arms dangling down. He could only see Ryoma as a pitiable lamb. In this world where there were few restrictions on carrying weapons, people hardly ever fought bare-handed. There was little policing, and even within towns the public order was low. On top of that, there were the powerful life forms called monsters roaming about. In this world, conflict was an everyday occurrence, and even the commoners carried a dagger for self-defense.

In other words, there were few opportunities to fight bare-handed. There was no legislation or regulation when it came to carrying weapons, so that was probably obvious. And within this world, the battlefield was where one fought empty-handed the most.

Of course, no fool would head into the battlefield unarmed, but apart from a very small percentage, any weapon would eventually be worn out, no matter how expensive and well-made it was. Bladed weapons get nicked and chipped as they cut through their foe, and the blood spilled gradually dulls the blade.

And furthermore, in the midst of melee combat, it wasn't uncommon for one's weapons to get deflected and knocked out of their hands. At times like this, one's last resort was one's trained body. Branzo himself snuffed out quite a few lives on the battlefield with his own bare hands.

"All right, then. Begin!" Lione's voice echoed through the maneuvering grounds.

At that moment, Branzo sprinted forward as if sliding across the earth, covering the distance between the two in a moment.

Wail like the cretin you are. This is for slighting me.

With a cruel smile on his lips, his body of nearly two-hundred kilograms

traveled with the speed of a lightweight boxer. This phenomenon was physically impossible. He'd clearly reinforced his body with martial thaumaturgy.

But Ryoma didn't so much as furrow a brow. His heart remained frozen solid with unwavering determination.

"Die, you shitty little brat!"

Shouting with murder and hatred in his voice, Branzo swung his right fist, intending to smash it into Ryoma's face with a punch that could pulverize solid rock.

The surrounding mercenaries held their breaths. If the punch were to land, Ryoma's face would be crushed like a pomegranate.

But what happened next exceeded their expectations.

Ryoma perfectly perceived the fist's trajectory. True, martial thaumaturgy reinforced one to go beyond their normal limits, but it did nothing to change the fundamental structure of the human body. The enemy's joints couldn't move any further than they usually could, and the natural weak points of one's body didn't disappear.

Thaumaturgy could act to reinforce one's physical abilities, but so long as the opponent had the timing down, it was perfectly possible to avoid the blow.

Moving in accordance to the movement of Branzo's shoulder, Ryoma moved his left leg forward, maneuvering his body to his opponent's flank. Wind pressure equivalent to that of a 1-ton truck passing him by whipped around him as he moved.

The strength of that punch was overwhelming, indeed. But just like a speeding car couldn't brake at a moment's notice, the stronger his brandished fist was, the harder it would be for Branzo to maintain his posture if his attack was avoided.

Now!

Ryoma grabbed Branzo's right wrist as he staggered from the miss, pulling it toward his chest, and then moved his own body right, locking the joints of the wrist while pulling his body down backwards.

It was the same timing he had knocked his grandfather down countless times with— a timing his grandfather had beat into him repeatedly. It was a technique he'd only ever used in his daily training sessions, but it worked perfectly on an opponent like Branzo.

From Ryoma's perspective, he was just an amateur who constantly boasted of his strength. True, he was a veteran mercenary with the experience of killing many a foe with his bare hands and the skill to achieve it.

But this wasn't the battlefield. It was a one-on-one match where you wouldn't need to mind your surroundings the same way you would in the chaotic field of battle, so the fighting style in this situation by either side would naturally differ.

"What?!"

"Impossible, he's so huge...!"

It was a maneuver similar to a *sumiotoshi* in judo, though no one present here could know that. From their perspective, what Ryoma had just pulled off was effectively magic.

And it made even more sense that Ryoma chose to employ a throwing technique over a blow.

The mercenaries watching over the battle raised their voices in shock. Branzo's massive form rotated through the air, and the back of his head crashed against the ground as he was slammed down. Normally, during training Ryoma would simply pull by the arm and lift the opponent over his head, but real combat called for a different measure.

The blow to his head from the merciless throw against the ground left Branzo's consciousness foggy, with his eyes lightless and unfocused. His trained body and weight of nearly 200 kilograms kept his neck bones from snapping, but no amount of training would protect the brain from such a blow. Branzo lay sprawled on the ground.

It's over.

Ryoma walked over without a word, swooping down on Branzo's neck mercilessly to deliver the finishing blow. Ryoma felt an odd sensation under his foot. It didn't matter how powerful Branzo's body was; Ryoma's low kick,

supported by a weight of over one hundred kilograms, pressed down on his neck, one of the human body's weak points.

With not just his windpipe but his cervical vertebrae stomped out, his body spasmed once before sinking into eternal stillness.

Silence fell over the maneuvering grounds. No one spoke a word. The exchange took a mere moment. Barely ten or so seconds had passed since Lione gave them the signal to start.

Eventually, after confirming that Branzo was dead, Ryoma quietly raised his right hand skyward.

"""""Ooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"""""

Having seen Ryoma's victory, the mercenaries raised their voices in a cheer that sounded more like a battle cry.



I guess everything went according to yer script... Lione smiled bitterly, watching Ryoma respond to the mercenaries' cheering with a smile.

He'd stomped out a presence they universally feared and loathed right in front of everyone's eyes. It was a cunning ploy, employed across all places and time periods, but few methods were as effective at buying other people's trust. And on top of that, the prey sacrificed here was someone sent to claim his life. Gran's suggestion was the epitome of killing two birds with one stone.

The only doubt was whether Ryoma could win, but that fear was deftly proven to be unfounded.

Yer one scary kid. Didn't think ya were hiding fangs this sharp...

She'd been briefed on what would happen, but Lione never imagined such an overwhelming victory. And it was only natural she wouldn't. Ryoma would lose to Branzo had they met on a battlefield, as a matter of fact. Only Ryoma could accept this turn of events as if it was the obvious conclusion.

"They ain't doing anything for the time being... But I guess after seeing that, they'd have no choice but to turn around real quiet and run away with their tails between their legs..."

Lione whispered, looking around anxiously at the cheering crowd.

Even Lione, popular as she was among the mercenaries, didn't believe a promise without any guarantees. Even if Ryoma and Lione had no intention of foul play, Branzo could have well tried to pull something. He may have been confident he would win against Ryoma, but any imbecile who didn't account for such risks couldn't make it as a mercenary.

In all likelihood, some of the mercenaries present were connected to Branzo, and the ringleader who hired him to kill Ryoma...

"Now no one will see him as a greenhorn amateur. All according to the plan."

Lione's lips contorted silently at the words spoken behind her back.

She sensitively picked up on the meaning behind Gran's words. But she simply answered without turning around.

"I s'ppose. All that's left is to hear yer guys' answer."

“An answer, eh... Ain’t that just a formality at this point?” Gran shrugged in jest, and everyone around him laughed out loud.

None of the people here would be capable of single-handedly besting Branzo the Black Spider in battle. Ryoma Mikoshiba’s abilities were evident to all.

But Lione’s lips took on a nasty smirk.

“Still, I’m gonna need t’hear ya say it loud and clear.”

It seemed she still held a grudge over him doubting her judgment back at the pub.

“Fine, fine.” Gran shook his head and said with a sigh. “We were wrong. Your judgment was sound...”

That was the final proof Ryoma had successfully won over Gran and the other mercenaries.

“So? What do we do now?”

Lione, who had appeared next to Ryoma at some point, whispered those words into his ear.

“We win the war, of course. And make Lupis the ruler of this country. I’ll have to work everyone here in all sorts of ways to get that done.”

Ryoma’s answer put a sharp glimmer into Lione’s eyes. She’d picked up on the meaning behind his words.

“All sorts of ways... I see. So that’s what you collected this many people for.”

“Something like that, yeah. There are still a few points where I’m not quite sure how to make use of everyone, but I don’t intend to make anyone come out of this with a loss. No matter which way the chips fall... You get me?”

As Ryoma met the mercenaries’ excited cheering, a cold smile played over his lips.

Epilogue

As the evening sun began to sink into the western skies, one old man with his white hair tied behind his head stood in his residential lawn and continued his daily training, wooden sword in hand.

But his swings were anything but ordinary. His sharp gaze perceived some invisible enemy, and each of his swings was charged with true murderous intent as they cut through the air. His stance was far beyond that of a man who had physically honed himself through martial arts as a hobby. And he wasn't practicing this out of self-defense, either.

This training was for the sole purpose of killing one's enemy.

"Grandpa..."

Hearing that voice call for him from behind, Kouichiro Mikoshiba stopped his swinging. His upper arm was thicker than one would imagine such an old man's arm could be, and while his height was ordinary enough at 175 centimeters, his shoulders were wide and his chest was thick; most likely the fruits of training every day with a wooden sword.

"Asuka... So it's that time already, is it?" Propping his wooden sword against the veranda, Kouichiro wiped the sweat off his face with a smile.

His navy-blue kendo gi was moist and stained with large amounts of sweat, even turning white from concentrations of salt in some points.

"Yeah, dinner's almost ready..."

"Right... Thanks again, as always. Give my regards to your mother for me."

Removing her favorite pink apron, which had a caricature of a cat printed at its end, Asuka nodded at Kouichiro's words and then asked him a question hesitantly.

"Say, Grandpa... Have you thought about what I asked the other day?"

Kouichiro scratched his cheek awkwardly at her question.

"About me moving in with you? I appreciate the offer, lass, but I'll have to

decline.”

“But why?! Mom said you’re always welcome... And besides, even Grandma’s...”

Kouichiro met Asuka’s exclamation with an inexplicably wry smile. He knew they didn’t make that offer out of desire for his fortune, which couldn’t be said for some of the other hyenas in the family. With his son and his wife gone, the only ones who truly supported him as he painstakingly raised his biological grandson, Ryoma, were his sister and her daughter’s family.

But it was because he knew their offer was sincere that Kouichiro couldn’t agree to Asuka’s proposal.

“I’m sorry...”

He had one clear reason to not live with them, but it wasn’t one he could share with this kind girl. If he did, she and her family could very well end up being caught up in a whirlwind of catastrophe. Kouichiro had to reject her offer precisely because he held her so dear.

“Grandpa, I’m... I’m scared.” Asuka whispered in fright, drooping her head with a shadow hanging over her normally unyielding expression.

“Scared of what?” Kouichiro asked Asuka gently, though he had already partially known the answer to his own question.

“That you might disappear all of a sudden, just like Ryoma did...”

It had been nearly six months since Ryoma Mikoshiba vanished without a trace from his high school. A sudden disappearance in broad daylight, in a perfectly normal public school. But still, the police could do nothing, since no correlation to an incident of any kind could be found.

There was little chance he could have been abducted by someone from outside the school in the middling timeframe of a lunch break within the closed premises of the school, especially considering he was a hulking young man standing over 190 centimeters tall and weighing over 100 kilograms. It was perhaps natural, then, that upon receiving news of his disappearance, the police concluded that even if there was a chance he might have perpetrated a crime, it was unlikely that he had been a victim of one.

Every year, many people go missing for any number of reasons. The circumstances are many, ranging from stress over bullying and interpersonal relationships to financial problems, but 100,000 people every year are merely reported to the police as having “gone missing.” In the eyes of the police, so long as a case can’t be correlated to some kind of incident, they have to assume the missing person simply ran away, and would honestly prefer to wash their hands of the case.

Of course, if this was about a young boy or girl, they’d have treated the situation differently, but since the missing person in question was a buff high-schooler, the possibility of abduction was remote; as such, the matter was given low priority.

“I’m sorry...” Kouichiro repeated his reply once more.

Seeing Asuka, a girl whom he saw as his own granddaughter, had reduced him to muttering nothing more than words of apology.

And that was because Kouichiro knew where Ryoma Mikoshiba had disappeared to.

But if he were to say so aloud, no one would believe him... Claiming he was summoned to another world would change nothing. After all, a method of crossing on one’s own from this world— that is, Rearth— to the other world— that is, Earth— was unknown. Claiming it was an alien abduction would sound more credible than that.

A gentle smile surfaced on Kouichiro’s lips. The grandson he’d lovingly raised, trained in anachronistic techniques and fostered the heart of a warrior in... He’d always prayed the day he would need those skills to defend himself and survive would never come, but now, they would surely come to serve him.

This is all my fault... Forgive me, Ryoma. Not just your mother and father, but even you, their child, must bear that price.

Even while he understood that he was the source of this tragedy, Kouichiro had no choice but to hold his silence...

Afterword

I doubt there would be any newcomers at this point, but welcome to all those who have picked up *Record of Wortenia War* for the first time. And to the readers who have been with it since Volume 1, welcome back. This is Hori Ryota, the author.

For those of you who like to read the afterword first before going into the book, I'd like to discuss the contents of this volume and why I decided to write this kind of story. To start with, the second volume's primary concept and biggest theme is factional dispute.

Not just in human society, but in the animal world as well, multiple individuals flock together to form a group, and factions are ultimately created. This is true of all places and times— it is a phenomenon that takes place in any and all types of organizations.

Perhaps the simplest example would be a school. For instance, once you graduate from a school, you would be called an alumnus of that school. But of course, even alumni who share a common alma mater are divided into further cliques based on what year they graduated in, and those are further divided into specific classes or different clubs.

When taken to the most logical extreme, one's circle of friends and acquaintances can be seen as a clique all its own. Nowadays, factions are a major concern when it comes to politics, and some politicians openly present themselves as non-partisan.

Such things occur because of the many disadvantages associated with dividing others into factions and cliques, but other points of view will cite the advantages these organizations present. While democracy and its focus on the rule of the majority makes this idea particularly obvious, it's worth noting that even in absolute monarchies and feudal systems, it holds a great degree of sway.

When taking a close examination of history, one can find that in most cases, even in systems where a king holds absolute power, it's questionable how much

power he actually has all on his own.

And so, the story of Volume 2 and the Rhoadserian civil war was intended to highlight this irrefutable law of the human world.

Now, while politics are an important matter to discuss, the more crucial part to discuss is that Volume 2 marks the introduction of the “war record” elements to the story, such as war, strategy and scheming. Still, our protagonist is still mostly plotting things behind the scenes, so you’ll have to wait a little more for those exciting combat scenes you’re looking forward to, dear readers. But I’d be grateful if you stay patient and consider this to be part of the nature of this work. As those of you who have read the web novel will know, Volume 3 is where the war record elements start to pick up.

Now, time to address what you’ve been expecting the most— information about the upcoming Volume 3.

Incidentally, as I’m writing this afterword, Volume 2 is set to be released in late December. Volume 1 came out in September, so it takes roughly three months to release a single volume. With this calculation, I intend to release four volumes a year.

Of course, keeping the current pace depends on everyone involved in the making of the series, so things are a bit hard to predict, but I don’t intend to have you wait too long to see what comes next. I personally hope to be able to maintain the pace of putting out four volumes a year.

Naturally, this all depends on you enjoying the series... The responses of the readers are undoubtedly the scariest part of being an author.

But thinking about those sorts of things too much can get depressing, so let’s end things here.

Finally, I’d like to express my sincerest thanks to everyone who helped get this book published, and to all the readers who picked it up. I hope to see you again in the next volume of *Record of Wortenia War*.

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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 2

by Ryota Hori

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Edited by Nathan Redmond

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