RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



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III


“Laura... Master Ryoma seems quite deep in thought, but... Has he forgotten it’s past time for the dinner party?”
Sara whispered into her sister’s ear.
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR


"Understood. Ryoma Mikoshiba, I entrust command of an advance party of two thousand troops to you!"
"Quickly!"
Rising to his feet, Ryoma swiftly allocated defensive positions to Lione and the others.


"Grandfather! What were you thinking?!"
Sakuya finally let out her pent-up frustrations, lashing out at Genou.
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1
SPANNER IN THE WORKS

CHAPTER 2
OPENING HOSTILITIES

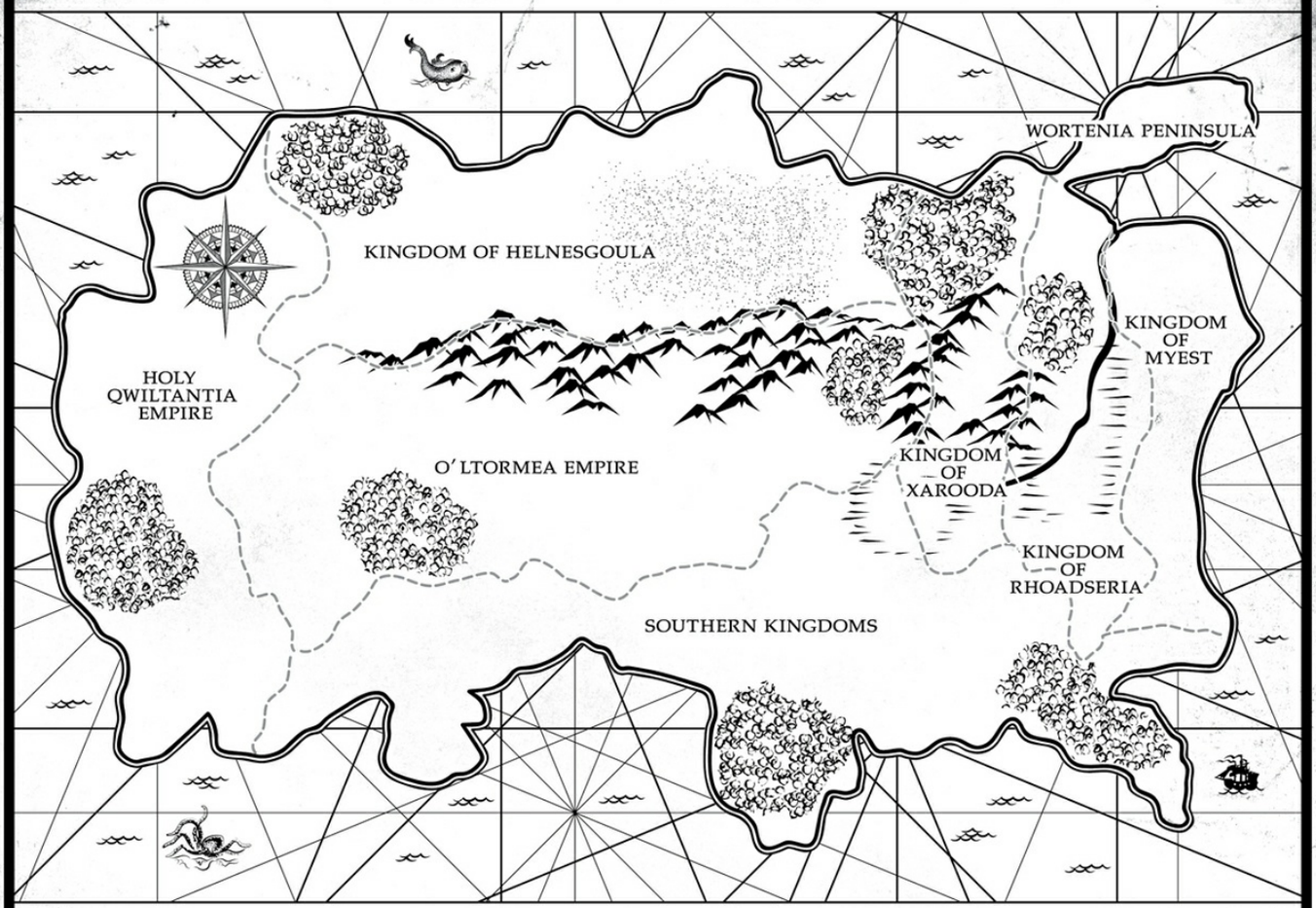
CHAPTER 3
THE ASSASSIN

CHAPTER 4
THOSE WHO STRUGGLE

EPILOGUE

AFTERWORD

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

Thrust by the young man's hands, the tip of the spear cut through the air upward towards the heavens. Labored breaths leaked from his lips. Beads of sweat streamed down his well-formed face, with his usually well-maintained, prided golden hair disheveled and clinging to his skin.

His appearance after a bout of training was quite unlike his usual demeanor, which drew the gazes of both young ladies and the wives of the noblemen whenever he appeared in Pireas's social gatherings.

Still, this young fellow was a warrior at heart. His natural inclination was to crush his opponent's windpipe and quench his cravings with their very lifeblood. His sociable, attractive appearance and cultivated, amicable attitude overflowing with rationality were simply products of the wisdom this young man had built up to live among others.

For a moment, the visage of a man's face flashed in his mind. That was likely since he'd accidentally passed him by in the corridor the other day.

Damn, the tip wavered...

To the eyes of an amateur, this last thrust he made followed exactly the same trajectory as the countless ones he'd performed before, but the young man could clearly feel he'd missed his intended mark. It was truly the faintest of slips possible, one of less than a few millimeters. Well within the margin of error for most people.

After all, this young man had been practicing his swings and thrusts from the moment the sun rose above the horizon until now, when it stood at its zenith, and not with a wooden spear for training, but a steel one made for true combat — one heavy enough for an average adult to handle.

The fact the young man carried it without any martial thaumaturgy stood as proof of the absurd strength he possessed, even in the standards of this world inhabited by monsters that far exceeded what humans were capable of.

And yet, his heart was governed by impatience and irritation. He may not

have let it show, but pitch-black darkness seethed in his heart like magma.

Calm down. Catch your breath. Maintain a will as clear as a mirror's surface.

The young man breathed deeply and banished the image of the man's face from his mind.

Anger, hatred, anxiety, and limitless bloodlust. Stifling those dark emotions, the boy thrust his spear once again. He operated his body with the perfection of movement acquired through endless repetition. A strike that edged into the realm of godspeed, made possible by shedding anything and everything that was unnecessary. A technique formed purely for fighting other human beings.

Faster. Ever faster. The lance technique that served his honored grandfather.

This family technique which stressed speed required constant, thorough training of the most basic of thrusts and sweeps. It looked nothing like the flashy techniques the masses taught in the streets. It was completely monotonous and dull.

Speaking truthfully, if he were to attempt to gather students and open a training hall at town, he likely would have failed greatly over this technique. But for how inconspicuous and plain it was, it was all the more lethal when mastered.

In fact, the boy wouldn't need more than one hand to count the number of knights currently living in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria who were capable of blocking his thrust. Indeed, Mikhail Vanash, lauded as the number one swordsman in the kingdom, was the first to come to mind, followed only by the likes of Princess Lupis's aide, Meltina Lecter.

Such was his agility. And normally, one would assume such a talented young knight would be appointed as company commander for the royal guard. Had the blood of some high-ranking knight family been running through his veins, he would probably have been put in command of a battalion or a brigade.

But sadly, he wasn't the child of such a noble family.

Well, one couldn't exactly say his family wasn't a noble one, either. He was the grandchild of a man who had served as the closest of aides to Helena Steiner, Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War and a dear friend to him since her

days as a rank and file soldier, who had remained by her side through thick and thin.

So, if one were to define a noble household as the descendants of a man who had made great accomplishments, this young man was unmistakably of noble roots. Starting with his grandfather, who'd begun life a commoner, his father and now this young man— Chris— this house had produced three generations of knights loyal to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

But if one were to define nobility as belonging to a privileged social caste, then Chris indeed couldn't be called a child of nobility.

Despite having been elevated to the rank of knight just recently, Chris Morgan was still merely a low-ranking knight. Perhaps if one of his blood relatives were still an influential knight in active duty, things would be different. But his father had passed away several years ago, and his much-lauded grandfather was bedridden, his career as a knight dead and buried.

Worse yet, the man standing as the leader of the knights of Rhoadseria, General Hodram Albrecht, still held a deep grudge for his grandfather's involvement with Helena Steiner.

Honestly speaking, Chris didn't hold that many reservations towards the man at first. Of course, his grandfather had warned him of General Albrecht's nature, and Chris knew of the enmity between the two. In his younger years, he couldn't deny harboring anger towards Albrecht.

But in the end, his anger was little more than the words of a man who had lost a power struggle, and Chris grew wiser with age. He was no judge, but he realized well enough from history that the winners tended to be looked upon coldly by those around them.

Chris didn't think his grandfather was lying, of course, but he did consider that his own side of the story may have been rife with exaggerations and dramatization. If nothing else, he was more capable of making a distinction than he had been as a child and knew better than to assume things.

But even if Chris made an effort not to be prejudiced, it all depended on the other side. And General Albrecht's grudge toward his grandfather ran deeper than Chris knew.

In fact, Chris had endured repeated harassment from General Albrecht and his aides ever since he was an apprentice, and up to the time of his knighting. Even then, his knighting was only approved several years after those who became apprentices at the same time as he had been given the go-ahead. And presently, he had been given no official appointment and was ordered to remain home on standby.

A useless man on the payroll. Those words bitterly surfaced in his mind. It was, without a doubt, malicious conduct. And Chris knew full well who ordered it.

“Tch, again...” Feeling another minute sway in his swing, an annoyed click of the tongue escaped Chris’s peach-colored lips.

The loyalty to Rhoadseria he’d been groomed to harbor. The ambition nestling in his heart, which cried for him to make his strength known in the world. His confidence in his own skills. And in opposition to them, his mighty will which kept those feelings in check, and his serene eyes that saw the reality of things.

Even as he carried these traits that made up the ideal warrior, the annoyance flaring up in him was proof of Chris’s humanity.

I have to keep mum and wait for the best chance right now... But for how long? And will that chance ever come?

A dark cloud brewed over the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Lupis and Radine. The two princesses’ struggle for the throne sparked discord that ripened as the nobles and knights spun their plots, and the critical moment was fast approaching. Rhoadseria was like a balloon inflated to its limit, and the smallest of sparks could make the fires of war burst forth.

But despite clearly seeing the coming catastrophe, Chris could do nothing. Neither for his motherland as it was about to be torn to bits by war, nor for his own ambition...

“Has something happened?” Sensing the presence behind him, Chris rose from his stance and addressed it.

Turning around, Chris’s blue eyes fell on an old, white-haired woman clad in a

black uniform.

“Master Chris, the Old Master wishes to speak to you.”

“Grandfather?”

“Yes. I’ve informed him you are in the middle of training, but he insisted that you meet with him as soon as possible.”

“All right. Let him know I’ll come as soon as I wash off.”

He may have been retired, but the master of this house was nonetheless his grandfather, so Chris couldn’t afford to make him wait. Still, meeting him disheveled and drenched with sweat wouldn’t do.

“No, the Old Master insists you must see him now.” But the old maid shook her head at this obvious, natural reasoning.

Chris scowled his sweaty face somewhat at the words of his grandfather’s trusted maid, who had served this house for many years.

“Well, that sounds serious... But I can’t go see him in this state, can I?”

His sweat drenched shirt clung to his skin, and he certainly didn’t look presentable. While he was focused on his training, he didn’t feel it, but the sensation of the sweat cooling against his skin was quite unpleasant. Before manners even came into the picture, Chris didn’t want to stand before his grandfather looking like this.

But this old maid hadn’t served the Morgan house so long for nothing.

“I’ve prepared fresh clothes for you. You can wipe your sweat off with this.”

With that said, she handed over an unwrinkled silk shirt and a towel.

“Awfully well-prepared, aren’t you?” Chris turned a probing glance at the maid after rubbing himself down with the towel, which had been dipped in cold water from the well and then wrung out.

She’d supported the Morgan house since he’d been little and had always fussed over manners and appearances. She’d scolded Chris many times in his childhood. There must have been a reason for her going to this length in order to have him meet his grandfather so urgently.

She’d sensed the question in his glance, and after looking around quickly to ensure no one was around, leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“Actually, earlier today...”

Hearing the old woman’s whispered words, Chris’s eyes gradually filled with an ominous light. Yes... Like the eyes of a carnivorous beast that had finally fixed its gaze on its prey.

Chapter 1: Spanner in the Works

The rhythmic blows of an axe against a tree reverberated. This was a deep forest near the capital, Pireas. A lumberjack living in a nearby farm village was working there.

“Oh... They’re coming again?” Hearing the sound of an approaching carriage’s wheels, the lumberjack paused, his hands still gripping the worn-out handle of his axe.

Wiping the beads of sweat from his face with a handkerchief dangling from his waist, he turned his face to the forest trail. It was cut wide enough to allow for a carriage to pass through. The road was paved, but it didn’t really lead to a city. The only thing at the end of this trail was the estate of an old, retired royal guard knight.

“Hmph. That doesn’t look like a typical wagon. Must be a guest at the estate.”

It wasn’t unheard of for a retail merchant to take a wrong turn with his wagon and find his way here, but since it was a horse-drawn carriage— albeit not a very luxurious one— that theory was unlikely.

It was just a side road that never saw much traffic to begin with. The only ones using it were the lumberjacks in the village and the old man’s guests.

That said, the estate didn’t see many guests even when its owner was an active knight, and since he’d retired from service, that number had been reduced to one visit once a year. The old man couldn’t quite be called eccentric, but the lumberjack smiled wryly as the man’s not all too sociable face resurfaced in his memories.

“Odd things do happen, I suppose... I do hope his condition didn’t take a turn for the worse.”

Up until a few years ago, he would make occasional excursions to the village where he would assist with slaying monsters, but recently, he’d stopped leaving his estate altogether. In exchange, apprentice knights training there would come to help instead, so it wasn’t like the village was in need of aid, but they’d

still known him for many years. If nothing else, they felt enough of a debt of gratitude to mourn if they were to hear he passed away.

“Maybe we should make a courtesy visit soon...”

Rumor in the village was that he had been infected with a fatal disease and was constantly bedridden. Leaving that concerned whisper, the lumberjack stared in the direction the carriage had gone in.

“I am honored to make your acquaintance,” Chris said and bowed before Helena respectfully, displaying a knight’s honor. “I am Chris, Frank Morgan’s grandson.”

There wasn’t a single flaw to his appearance, which stood as proof of his rigorous training as a knight. Looking at Chris as he bowed down, Helena regarded him with a gentle smile.

“This is the letter my grandfather left in my possession.”

The sender of this letter was one of Helena’s trusted subordinates from her days as an active general, much like this estate’s master, Baroque Warren, had been. His grandson came all this way to deliver that letter, and from Helena’s perspective, those men were akin to family.

“You needn’t stand on so much ceremony, dear. Everyone gathered here are as family. You may speak more softly. Be at ease.”

Her eyes had the gentle gaze of one kindly watching over a grandchild.

“Yes, ma’am,” Chris said, his voice like the gentle chime of a bell.

Chris raised his lowered head.

““Aaaah...””

Sighs of adoration leaked from around Helena. The young man’s beauty was such that both men and women couldn’t help but hold their breath in amazement. Golden curls, blue eyes that shined like ice and white, almost transparent soft skin.

Chris’s beauty was such that if he were a woman, others would view him as a godsend who would rouse the lust of anyone who would lay eyes on him. And Helena, as aged as she was, was no exception.

“I’ve heard the rumors, but your beauty is almost frightening... It almost feels like a waste that you’ve been born as a man.”

Chris regarded Helena’s remark, which was equal measure steeped with teasing and envy, with a bitter smile.

“And yet, I don’t remember many times this handsome face has brought about good experiences... But if you find it favorable, Lady Helena, I’m honored.”

The bitterness behind those words wasn’t lost on Helena. At a glance, Chris Morgan might be mistaken for a woman, but he was definitely a man and a Rhoadserian knight. It didn’t matter how much people praised his appearance, because to Chris, it was nothing more than a nuisance.

Though if Chris were a minstrel or actor, or perhaps even a male prostitute, his appearance would certainly have been his greatest weapon.

Chris’s mother was lauded as one of the most beautiful women in the world, even among their neighboring countries, and Chris drew heavily from her blood. That was by no means a negative thing.

But for a man living on the battlefield, that beauty could only be a nuisance. That beauty only made him all the more shunned. Exquisite things can buy the ire of others just as much as their admiration.

And the fact he was Frank Morgan’s grandson didn’t work in Chris’s favor, either. There was no doubt that leading people in the knights’ faction, namely General Albrecht, had their eye on him, and coupled with that beauty, he’d become far too conspicuous. It likely wasn’t a pleasant feeling for him in the slightest.

“Right... You’re right, that was no way to speak to a knight... That was uncouth of me. I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

Helena apologized earnestly. Retired or not, these weren’t words a country’s general would level to a whelp who was only twenty years old. Helena’s apology made Chris gulp, after which he parted his lips slowly.

“You’re just as Grandfather described...”

“Oh, and how did Frank speak of me?”

“He said you were a person worthy of me devoting my life to serving.”

Those words were deep, rife with significance and loaded with danger. He implied he would serve Helena over his rightful master, the king. Those words could be taken as such, and if a person with malicious intent were to hear them, Chris could easily be defamed for treason.

But Helena accepted Chris’s words with composure.

“Heheh... So Frank said that, did he.”

Those were the words of an aide from her active days. The fact he sent his own grandson was all the proof she needed to see those words were honest.

“Yes. When he received your letter the other day, he very much lamented the fact his body wasn’t well enough to come to your side.”

“There’s not much to be done about that. Frank being here would have been extremely encouraging, but... Not when he’s so ill.”

Helena closed her eyes sadly, recalling the image of Frank as he was in the olden days, when he was barely into his thirties.

The disease that had infected Frank Morgan was called the Carrion Disease; the same disease tormenting the master of this estate. It begins in the fingertips and spreads from there, gradually eating its way into the center of the body and decaying the flesh in its wake. It was a rare illness, and not a contagious one, but was feared for how expensive its treatments were.

A method of treatment had been established, but it required a nostrum imported from the central continent, and it was both extremely pricey and imported in small amounts. Unless one had connections with a prominent merchant, getting one’s hands on it was difficult.

Worse yet, the nostrum was only at its most effective during the early stages of the disease, so if anyone hoping to get it were to take their time, it may well become too late to treat it.

“I’m sorry... This is all my fault. I’ve caused you a great deal of grief.” Helena suddenly apologized.

Chris shook his head, however. Chris was mature enough to understand what she was apologizing for, even without any context.

“No, this is all as Grandfather wished... He said quite adamantly that if he were to die, he’d curse General Albrecht to death in the afterlife. And you owe me no apology. A knight’s true value lies in war, after all.”

Chris spoke in a tone that imitated his grandfather’s. Just how much resolve was hidden behind his words?

They had failed to obtain the nostrum, but that wasn’t to say the Morgan household lacked the wealth needed to buy it. Just like Helena, Frank Morgan had worked his way up from being a commoner, rising to the position of a high-ranking knight. He was always a taciturn man who didn’t favor an extravagant lifestyle and was limited in how he could spend his wages.

Even if he was in financial trouble, he could ask his acquaintances for help. With Helena herself being a prime example, many of his past friends would gladly chip in and lend Frank money if he asked for it, and the same could be said of Baroque. Helena said they were all like family, and those words rang true. Bonds formed by fighting back to back on the battlefield were strong.

The same held true for his connections. Even retired, he could rely on the connections he made during his service. He hadn’t risen to the upper echelons of a country’s military for no reason, after all.

In which case, why were Frank Morgan and Baroque, the master of this estate, tormented by the Carrion Disease like this?

The answer was simple. Because the head of the knights’ faction, General Albrecht, and his aides loathed anyone who was close with Helena. General Albrecht placed great importance on one’s social status and family and found nothing more loathsome than commoners who worked their way up, like Helena and her peers.

He’d harassed them when they were active knights and persisted in doing so even after their retirement. Of course, Helena and the others did nothing to directly resist, but with the tip of the blade turned against families and friends, their hands were tied now that they were retired from active service.

The cause of all these troubles was General Albrecht's hatred. And to cut off the source of that hatred, Frank and Baroque essentially forfeited their own lives, all to present themselves as submissive and powerless...

"Grandfather has told me that with the passing of His Majesty, King Pharst the Second, the weight holding the knights' and nobles' factions will be lost, and their antagonism will intensify, splitting the kingdom in two... But it is for that reason exactly that our gathering under Princess Lupis will have meaning."

Hearing Chris's words, Helena's lips curled upwards. It was a smile that was like dark flames, the sort of grin she wouldn't normally show. A just cause. One couldn't unite the knights without it. And right now, that brocade banner flapped over Helena.

"Yes... The only question remaining is how fast we can turn the others over from General Albrecht's side. It's a race against the moment he realizes what's happening and begins acting accordingly."

Helena loathed General Albrecht but didn't doubt his skills as a politician.

Even as he was hated by everyone around him, he'd maintained his power struggle with the leader of the nobles' faction for years and stood at the top of one of the two factions the Kingdom of Rhoadseria was divided into.

"I hear the younger knights are quite dissatisfied with him. After all, even within the knights' faction, only those of pedigree receive his favor. Honestly speaking, many of the knights only obey him because of how long he's been in power. But once they hear you've returned to service under Princess Lupis, things will definitely swing in our favor. No, I will make sure they do!"

Chris concluded his words with a cold smile. Apparently, things already seemed favorable enough, because he made his declaration with quite a bit of strength behind it.

"Yes... Waiting for as long as we have was worth it." Helena nodded at Chris after heaving a deep sigh.

A reason to justify her personal vengeance. With the just cause of setting the Kingdom of Rhoadseria on its rightful track by supporting the first in line to the throne, Princess Lupis, the legitimacy of their cause was made more solid. The

chance had finally come for Helena and her peers, who had been persecuted and tyrannized by General Albrecht so greatly.

“Thank you, Chris. And all of you... I’ve kept you waiting a long time.”

Those words could only mean one thing. As Helena lowered her head, all present rose to their feet and thrust their fists towards the heavens.

“““All hail the Kingdom of Rhoadseria! Glory to the Ivory Goddess of War!”””

In this very moment, the knights rose to carve open the path to Rhoadseria’s future. But neither Helena nor any of her cohorts knew this would result in something they could never predict and draw them that much closer to open hostilities.

It was a certain brothel in the back alleys of the city of Epirus. Standing in front of the entrance were women with lascivious outfits that exposed their chests, which reached out to tug at the sleeves of passing-by men. It was a seductive world, filled with the indescribable fragrance born from the mixing of perfume and alcohol.

In one of this establishment’s luxurious rooms was Akitake Sudou, an undercover operative of the Empire of O’ltormea. This was a base of operations for O’ltormea’s eastern expansion, and a source of funds for the Organization.

“Hmm...” Sudou squinted, looking at a document handed to him by a subordinate. “This is something of an unexpected development.”



“So there’s a chance it might disrupt the Organization’s plans... What should we do, Mr. Sudou?”

“Let’s see, then...” Sudou nodded lightly at his subordinate’s question, placing the document on the table.

Leaning back into the sofa, Sudou stared into the air.

This is a problem. So Ryoma Mikoshiba would stick his neck into here... I didn’t think he’d be such a source of misfortune for the Organization.

To start with, he slew O’ltormea’s court thaumaturgist, Gaius. His murder triggered a sequence of disturbances. Sudou handwaved away in front of Saitou, but in truth, Gaius’s death came as quite a shock for the Organization.

The Organization went on to balance the accounts one way or the other, but it required making large scale amendments to their long running plans, and its members needed to work at a significantly faster pace to confirm everything and keep up with these changes to policy. Due to certain circumstances in play, the Organization had no plans of assassinating Ryoma Mikoshiba, but for a time, it had certainly intended to.

And then came this issue. Even Sudou had trouble coming up with a quick countermeasure.

Maybe this is fate at play here... Who would have imagined Pherzaad’s guildmaster would have taken part in such a pointless scheme? And he used one of those twins as bait...

The guild was the Organization’s public front. It was spread across the western continent and transcended national borders, forming a massive group. This was why the guild was required to be neutral and fair. If one were to draw a comparison to Sudou’s own Earth, it was like the United Nations.

But at the same time, Sudou was well aware that this was only pretense. Fairness, equality, neutrality. Those were easy concepts to put into words, but they were certainly not ones people committed to.

As a matter of fact, most guildmasters had dealings beneath the surface. That was an open secret of sorts, and this was only natural given that those

guildmasters had power equivalent to that of a noble. Corruption and bribery were ordinary occurrences.

And still, the timing here was simply too bad for us. To think he would end up coming to Rhoadseria...

For the Organization, the Empire of O'ltormea was a precious host to leech upon. The Organization's authority over the country allowed them to shape the direction of the war and profit from it safely.

O'ltormea is moving to invade Xarooda... And to do that, the political situation in Rhoadseria must remain unstable.

The western continent's east was comprised of Myest, Rhoadseria, and Xarooda respectively. Myest held the strongest trade prowess in the country, but even it alone couldn't match up to O'ltormea's national power. The same held true for Rhoadseria, with the bounties of the abundant river Thebes at its side, and Xarooda, with its surrounding mountains serving as a mighty, natural fortress. An alliance of two countries wouldn't do, either.

But the three countries uniting would change things.

Put another way, O'ltormea's invasion of the east hinges on the three countries standing divided.

It was because Sudou knew this that he came to Rhoadseria. From a geographical standpoint, Rhoadseria was sandwiched between Myest and Xarooda. If Myest were to send reinforcements to Xarooda, they would have to march through Rhoadserian soil.

If they weren't allowed to do that, they would have to go around through the south, but many of the southern countries had long standing border conflicts with both Myest and Rhoadseria, putting them in poor standing with those countries. They would never allow Myest and Rhoadseria to cross their territories.

And dispatching troops through the sea was effectively impossible. Certain circumstances had rendered the seas northeast of the western continent impassable by ship.

With the state of the western continent being as such, Sudou's objective in

coming to Rhoadseria from O'ltormea was clear.

And to top it all off, Helena Steiner... I've heard the rumors, but I never imagined Mr. Mikoshiba would bring her back after years of retirement.

Sudou spoke to himself in something of a grumble. He was one to spin plots himself, and so knew of Rhoadseria's influential figures and their relationships. He'd naturally looked into Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War, too. He had an inkling as to her antagonism with General Albrecht as well, but never imagined she'd return to active duty now.

General Albrecht's skills are one thing, but his popularity is as low as can be. He's kept his opponents under his thumb through fear of his power, but the situation will change drastically soon.

He was able to oppose to Duke Gelhart, and so General Albrecht's haughty, overbearing attitude didn't mean he was without his supporters. Many of the knights loathed the nobles for their impudence, and to them, obeying General Albrecht was a means of opposing them.

But the way things were headed now, that would soon change in a significant way.

A prideful, exclusive man who advocates pedigree against a national hero who rose from the masses. Judging by the displeasure and state of the country, it's clear who people would gravitate towards. Which means General Albrecht has only two roads available to him. He either sticks to the struggle knowing he's at a disadvantage, or he flees to another country and waits for a chance to resurface. His best chance would be to seek refuge in Tarja with a few loyal knights. But judging from his personality, he'd only choose to do so at the worst possible situation.

General Albrecht's wife was related to Tarja's royalty. The very act of comparing Tarja's territory to Rhoadseria's felt awfully foolish, but the southern countries had held their own in a bitter war against the knights before and boasted strength to be reckoned with from a military standpoint. If his intent was to bide his time for a comeback, fleeing now wasn't a bad choice.

But he would have to clear several conditions to allow for that. He'd need to be hopelessly backed against the wall, and given General Albrecht's personality,

it was hard to imagine him abandoning everything just because things weren't going his way.

That man is not just greedy, he's also prideful. If I don't make some kind of play now, he'd likely persist and prioritize keeping his faction intact at all costs. And if he does, Helena Steiner will devour his faction, leaving him unable to act.

Having realized this much, Sudou could see what path he'd have to take. The worst thing for O'ltormea right now would be if Rhoadseria were to resolve its civil war and consolidate its political affairs under a single, stable government. The Organization didn't desire for this to happen, either.

I don't have much of a choice. I'll have to deviate from my initial plan and extend a helping hand to General Albrecht.

Sudou rose from the sofa, with the same smile a child who had just found a new toy to play with might have on his lips.

All to drown this country in death and agony...

"Aww, man. To think this would happen... Shit, this throws a wrench into all my plans..."

Shutting himself in the room he'd been given the other day in the castle, Ryoma scratched his head as he looked up into the air. Rays of dusk sunlight streaming in bathed his face in a red glow. The chair he'd leaned his weight on creaked under the pressure.

"I didn't think that bastard Albrecht would give up so easily... I guess he wasn't as dumb as I thought. I underestimated him... No, the timing's too good. It's like someone's seeing through my movements... In that case, it's all the more..."

His words were equal measure exasperation and praise. He wasn't speaking to anyone in particular, however. The only other people in the room were Sara and Laura, clad in maid uniforms, but Ryoma wasn't speaking to them.

As was often the case, Ryoma was staring into thin air, submerged in his thoughts. His whispers were only his thoughts leaking out to the surface, effectively a soliloquy. Having spent months with him, the Malfist sisters understood this very well.

“Laura...” Sara whispered into her sister’s ear. “Master Ryoma seems quite deep in thought, but... Has he forgotten it’s past time for the dinner party?”

She spoke in the quietest voice possible, so as to not disturb her master.

“He’s likely forgotten... But we mustn’t disturb him right now... He will settle his thoughts eventually and call for us... We can simply tell him we declined the invitation in his name then.”

The sisters realized his absence from the dinner party was set in stone already. That went to show they realized what their master needed right now.

“Right, I see... Then I’ll go let them know he won’t make it tonight.”

“Yes, please do...” Laura nodded, turning her gaze to Ryoma, who was still staring into space. “I’ll stay by Master Ryoma’s side... Give Her Majesty his regards, please.”

Her words were full of intense will. It was arguable if Ryoma Mikoshiba even needed someone to watch over him. True, he wasn’t capable of thaumaturgy yet, but his massive body and the skills he possessed allowed him to easily dispatch experienced mercenaries.

But strong though he may have been, Ryoma was not an invincible hero legends may sing of. And so long as he was human, he would leave openings and make some oversights.

The Malfist twins knew this, and so they never left Ryoma’s side. The two of them would protect Ryoma with their own flesh if need be, because their hearts were gripped with selfless affection and undying loyalty for the man.

“Is there anything else?”

“Hmm, well... You should stop by the kitchen and prepare some dinner. I’m sure he’ll be quite famished when he comes to.”

“Yes, understood.” Sara nodded at her sister with a whisper and quietly slipped out of the room.

How long did it take? The red sun set over the horizon, and darkness reigned outside the window. Only the gentle starlight and the bonfires lit in the courtyard illuminated the room.

“Ugh... I’m starved...”

Ryoma’s mouth suddenly opened as he stared out into space.

“Wait, what time is it?”

“The bell just rang for ten at night.” Laura responded to his whisper.

He must have been very concentrated to have missed the sound of that massive bell.

“Oh. It’s already this late, huh...”

At that moment, Ryoma recalled in the back of his mind that Princess Lupis had invited him to a dinner party the other day.

“Aww, crap! I was supposed to be at Princess Lupis’s dinner party tonight!”

“We’ve already informed them you wouldn’t be going.”

Ryoma went pale at remembering the appointment, but Laura’s words made him sigh with relief.

“Right... Thanks.”

Even Ryoma, who didn’t care much for social status, knew that ditching a dinner party hosted by a member of the royal family wasn’t something one was allowed to casually do. The walls of class and social position were exceptionally thick in this world, and irreverence was reason enough to be sent to the gallows.

“Did she say something?”

“She said she realizes you are likely mulling over a solution to the issue with General Albrecht, and that your absence is understandable. However, she will be holding a meeting tomorrow morning, and she wants you to prepare a plan for handling the situation.”

Repeating Sara’s message without a hitch, Laura presented Ryoma with a cup of water.

“Oh, thank you...”

Gulping down the moderately cold water quenched Ryoma’s thirst.

“Tomorrow, huh... The Princess makes it sound so easy... Still, we can’t let General Albrecht do as he pleases.”

Princess Lupis was gracious enough to pardon his last-minute absence from a royal dinner party, but that was of course because of the report they’d received earlier that day.

But in a way, this was Princess Lupis trying to cover up her own mistakes. After all, one could easily claim what caused this issue to begin with was her own naiveté.

Ryoma’s stomach suddenly grumbled loudly in displeasure. Having contemplated everything silently until after sunset, Ryoma hadn’t eaten since lunch, and so his stomach was naturally rising up in mutiny against its stingy master.

“I’m starved. Is there anything I can sink my teeth into?”

“Yes, Sara borrowed the kitchen and prepared something, if it suits your fancy...”

“Right... Then, how about you two join me? You haven’t eaten either, have you? I’ve got something to talk to you about.”

Judging from experience, Ryoma knew the two wouldn’t eat before he did.

“We’ll have it ready in a moment.” Laura nodded happily at his words.

“Now then. We’re short on time, so let’s talk over dinner.”

The Malfist twins nodded at his suggestion, their gazes fixed on him. The two served as maids that waited on him, his bodyguards, and also his precious confidants. By sharing his thoughts with others, Ryoma deepened his own understanding, and it also served as a rehearsal for when he’d explain things to Princess Lupis and her entourage.

What’s more, the most important part was that he confirmed his vocabulary wasn’t incomprehensible to others. Being the children of a house of high-ranking knights, the Malfist twins’ education was considered the top of what one would find in this world.

But of course, that didn’t put them anywhere near the level of modern

Japan’s education. From Ryoma’s perspective, they were on the level of a child on the upper years of grade school, not even reaching the levels of a middle-schooler no matter how favorably he tried to phrase things.

But in this world of incessant warfare, their knowledge was considered extensive. After all, 90% of the population was illiterate to the point where they didn’t know how to write their own name. Reading books was a privilege out of the reach of anyone who wasn’t at least born to a family of knights.

Those low education standards came across in one’s understanding of math, as well. Most merchants and peddlers in town were at best capable of addition and subtraction. Anyone capable of multiplication and division was looked upon quite highly and favorably. Meanwhile, most farmers couldn’t count higher than the number of fingers on their hands.

But that was perhaps understandable. Most professions in this Earth were those of manual labor, and common sense dictated that anyone who had the leisure of time to study was to be sent out to work the fields and increase the year’s crops. Even children were considered precious laborers once they grew out of infancy.

With this world being the way it is, people often didn’t understand what Ryoma was saying. Many people aspired to become mercenaries, but many among them started out being poor commoners. Ryoma didn’t understand how it worked, but upon being summoned to this world, he could understand their language and others understood what he said. He’d even become able to read books in German and Chinese.

But even if he was able to hold an everyday conversation, whenever he tried to describe a concept that wasn’t familiar or didn’t exist in this world, people couldn’t understand him. Saying something like ‘let’s eat’ worked, since it wasn’t a concept or phrase that was exclusive to Japanese, but it did lose some of the meaning it had when he said it in its original language. It did, after all, have a nuance and cultural context that didn’t exist in other languages and societies.

Without the proper context and background, the meaning of words can become skewed. And given the difference in average knowledge between a

modern Japanese person and someone from this world, it would only make sense for there to be cases of miscommunication.

This was why Ryoma decided to go through everything first with the Malfist sisters. That way, if the twins didn't understand anything he said, he'd be able to recognize it, rephrase his words and explain things more plainly.

Still, it was also true that the effort put into trying to get others to understand him also deepened his own understanding. And Ryoma found his discussions with the twins, who soaked up all the information like a sponge, to be enjoyable changes of pace.

"You two know that General Albrecht joined forces with the nobles' faction, correct?"

The sisters nodded wordlessly in response to Ryoma's question. This was what bothered Ryoma enough to miss out on the dinner party. Normally, this was sensitive information only select people would know, but it was exactly this kind of precious information that had a way of leaking out most easily.

This piece of bad news had been brought to Ryoma's attention this morning, and by sundown it had become an open secret known to everyone in the castle.

Ryoma himself frowned upon classified information like this spreading out so easily, but since the individual sense of crisis of the people involved was so weak, there wasn't much he could do about it. In the end, Ryoma Mikoshiba was an outsider summoned to this world. He wouldn't be able to change this country's way of being that quickly. All he could do was prioritize tackling the problem before his eyes.

"Do you know the circumstances behind him doing that, then?"

This time, the sisters shook their heads in denial. All the twins picked up from the palace's lady attendants was the end result; General Albrecht had defected to the nobles' faction. How it happened was still being kept under wraps, it seemed.

"Right. Then... I'll have to start explaining from there."

Sending the wine and meat in his mouth to his stomach, Ryoma began gravely telling them what happened. General Albrecht left the capital Pireas with the

first knight order, under his command, under pretense of recovering the kingdom's public order. That was four days ago.

Ryoma wasn't informed of that. If he was, Ryoma would likely have used any means at his disposal to sabotage Albrecht's movements. Meltina told him later, informing him of how the general made a forceful suggestion to Princess Lupis.

Recovering the country's public order. It was just an excuse to mobilize the army, but the suggestion in and of itself was extremely valid.

After all, following the nobles' faction's backing of Princess Radine, the political rivalry grew all the more intense, which naturally led to a worsening in Rhoadseria's public safety.

Attacks from bandits had become more frequent by the day, and the civilians were raising their voices in protest more and more. The cause for that was clear: both factions had recalled their knights and guards, which were usually in charge of maintaining the public order, from their stations. Both sides picked up the scent of the coming conflict and scrambled to gather forces in order to gain an advantage, but the end result was disastrous.

The capital and other large provincial cities were seen by both the knights' and nobles' factions as strategically important and were garrisoned with troops, and so the deterioration of public order wasn't as noticeable there. But on the other hand, villages and cities which didn't have that sort of tactical value were left without any knights and guards, and thus their public order waned rapidly.

In a way, that was unavoidable. Neither Princess Lupis nor Duke Gelhart had an endless supply of troops. If they were to get the upper hand on the opponent under limited conditions, abandoning areas with low strategic value was a necessary hand to play.

Ryoma, of course, didn't think this was ideal in the slightest. If anything, considering what was to come, he thought it was a terrible decision. Even if they were to win the war with the nobles' faction, it was clear to him Princess Lupis's rule would take a painful blow from this.

But on the other hand, if they didn't win the war now, there wouldn't be much point in discussing Princess Lupis's rule. It bothered Ryoma, but the

reality of the matter was that there wasn't much to be done.

And General Albrecht made clever use of that to his advantage.

"A kingdom only exists so long as its people do!"

With that single sentence, he shook Princess Lupis's heart, which was troubled by her subjects being in danger from the poor public order.

And Ryoma himself agreed that those words were true. A country exists only by virtue of its people, and a ruler is judged by their ability to defend their subjects' lives. Those words alone had unshakeable reason backing them.

But would such an ambitious man, who had up until now stuck to his privileged position and looked down on the commoners, suddenly awaken to compassion toward the common man?

The answer was a resounding "No."

The possibility wasn't entirely nil, of course, but it was certainly close to zero. Had Ryoma or Helena been present there, they never would have taken Albrecht's words at face value. If nothing else, they would have strictly forbidden General Albrecht from taking command the way he did.

But Princess Lupis didn't know that. No, perhaps she did, deep down; inexperienced as she was, she wasn't a fool. But the end result was that Princess Lupis submitted to General Albrecht's claim, likely out of genuine concern for Rhoadseria's people.

That was a splendid trait for a ruler to have. But in an ironic twist of fate, that kind wish pushed the throne a few steps away from Princess Lupis's hands.

"So in the end, she was duped by General Albrecht..."

"That about sums it up, yeah."

The Malfist sisters silently shook their heads at his words. They had truly been rendered speechless. Albrecht may have been an ally to her, but he was likely to be an enemy later on. To so easily swallow such a suspicious excuse from that man made Princess Lupis's judgment seem all too thoughtless.

To begin with, there was no reason for a general to personally attend to the public order of provincial towns. If Lione were to hear of it, she'd likely be

yelling out a few hundred curses over the matter.

“So that’s what happened...” Having heard the details, Laura looked up at Ryoma with probing eyes. “However...”

“What’s wrong? Is something bothering you?”

Deftly picking up on the look in her eyes, Ryoma prompted her to go on with satisfaction. Most people would home in on General Albrecht’s double-crossing. And that was of course an important detail, but not many would notice the other doubt hidden behind that at this point.

Of all the people serving as Rhoadseria’s brain right now, only a few, namely Helena Steiner and Count Bergstone, would realize. With that considered, the fact the Malfist sisters picked up on it was significant.

“Yes. I was just wondering if what bothered you was General Albrecht’s defection to the nobles’ faction, or...”

She cast a questioning look in his direction.

“What about you, Sara?” Ignoring Laura’s query, Ryoma turned to Sara.

“I believe you suspect General Albrecht’s actions may have been prompted by some third party’s machinations?”

Ryoma nodded in satisfaction at her answer. Yes, it was this suspicion precisely that had kept Ryoma concerned for over half a day.

Ryoma had no doubt in his mind that putting Helena Steiner to use was the right decision. However, he now realized that for the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, the Ivory Goddess of War was the equivalent of potent medicine. As powerfully effective as it was, consuming it in the wrong fashion could make it as lethal as poison.

And Ryoma now saw that he had erred in his handling of the medicine named Helena Steiner.

It was true that her return to service yielded immediate, satisfying results. In that regard, she was everything Ryoma hoped she would be. She swiftly contacted knights that once served with her and turned the younger knights over to Princess Lupis’s side in one fell swoop.

Helena had a good grasp and understanding of the grudge and dissatisfaction that the knights felt toward General Albrecht, and in just half a month, half of the knights' faction had turned over to Helena's favor.

There was a great deal of anger towards General Albrecht, which had built up over many years of his control. Helena's return to active service allowed those knights to find an outlet for their frustrations, who flocked to gather under her banner. More and more were joining by the day.

Eventually, the only ones who would remain by General Albrecht's side would be the order of 2,500 knights he captained, manned by his proteges, and a handful of other knights he had scattered across the other orders. It was a decline one would never believe possible for a man burning with ambition, who until just recently had served as the head of one of Rhoadseria's leading factions with a standing army of six orders of knights, making up 15,000 men.

But General Albrecht wasn't the only one to be confused by this sudden change. He was likely shocked to see his faction being eaten into so quickly on account of Helena Steiner's sudden return to action, but Ryoma was just as surprised.

Ryoma only planned to remove General Albrecht after they'd taken care of the nobles' faction. But with his faction being devoured like that, General Albrecht wouldn't sit idly by and continue to support Princess Lupis. Knowing his personality, the man would without a doubt try to turn things around.

They should have put General Albrecht down by force before he made any suspicious movements. Just as Ryoma intended proposing to change Princess Lupis's current plans, this whole affair unfolded.

"Right, it's a bit too unnatural... General Hodram Albrecht is being backed into a corner, that much is for sure. He'd want reinforcements... This much I still follow. But what I don't understand is why Duke Gelhart would accept that, and I can't imagine that nasty general bowing to his political opponent."

Their first meeting in the audience chamber surfaced in Ryoma's mind. He could remember his eyes, full of lust and ambition, and the cold gaze he directed at Ryoma the first time he saw him, which seemed to positively scream, 'you lowly peasant!'

He was haughty, bigoted and merciless against his foes. And most of all, his pride was overwhelming. And it was fact that his relations with Duke Gelhart were terrible from years of opposition on the political field.

It wasn't uncommon for the army to be in opposition to the government, but even regardless of that, the two harbored dangerous animosity towards one another.

So between their existing relationship and General Albrecht's personality, it was hard to imagine him easily electing to side with Duke Gelhart, even if he was aware of how threatened his position as general was. This was why Ryoma willingly ignored the possibility of General Albrecht joining forces with the nobles' faction up until now.

"True... But isn't it possible Duke Gelhart was the one who proposed their joining forces this time?" Sara asked, understanding what Ryoma's doubts on the matter were. This was actually the crux of the answer Ryoma had spent so long thinking over.

"Yeah, that's about right. Frankly speaking, I can't see it happening any other way. But the question then becomes, who was it that convinced Duke Gelhart to do that?"

If there was no chance of General Albrecht swallowing his pride and asking to join forces with Duke Gelhart, it stood to reason that it was the nobles' faction which stepped forward and proposed it.

They were, after all, the side that held power through political means. They were adept at those kinds of dodgy dealings, but since both sides here had conflicting interests, it would take time for them to smooth over those differences, and it was an issue where they couldn't quite put aside their biases.

In which case, for them to cooperate, they needed someone graced with high intelligence, patience and transcendent negotiation skills. This wasn't a feat some greedy noble would be capable of. If the nobles' faction had had someone like this on their side, Duke Gelhart would not have gone to the trouble of backing Princess Radine as a banner. He would have just integrated Princess Lupis, who was the first in line to the throne as it were, into the nobles' faction.

Which meant this series of movements by Duke Gelhart was orchestrated by

the wisdom of some other third party. By someone who didn't want to see Rhoadseria stabilized...

"I see... But in that case... Is this some ploy by the neighboring countries?"

"Yeah..." Ryoma nodded slowly. "That's what worries me the most. I hope I'm just overthinking things, but..."

He didn't have any evidence to support the theory. This was nothing more than his intuition whispering in his ear. However, despite Helena once marching Rhoadseria's armies in its defense, the two countries had fallen into opposition over taxation as of late. The relations couldn't be called strained to the point of snapping, but one couldn't afford to be too optimistic.

Likewise, Rhoadseria's relationship with the Kingdom of Myest wasn't particularly bad, but one couldn't call it good, either. The three eastern countries once stood in a united front to repel the Empire of O'ltormea, but that wasn't to say the relations between the three were all that friendly.

And Rhoadseria's relation with the southern countries was even worse than the ones it had with Xarooda and Myest. Any country could make an attempt on Rhoadseria's land at any moment and Ryoma wouldn't be surprised.

"In the end, we just don't have any information on the other countries..." Ryoma unintentionally let his frustrations let slip from his lips. "Not in this country, anyway..."

Ryoma couldn't quite judge whether this was a problem unique to this country or to this world as a whole, but he was far too lacking in information regarding the other countries' movements. Ryoma could only come up with two ways of gaining intel on other countries on the fly.

One was to pay people who travel across the countries frequently, such as mercenaries and merchants, for information. But any information he'd get from them may not be as recent and up to date as it should be, and it might not be the sort of information he needed to begin with. After all, those people's job wasn't to ferry information.

The other was for Ryoma to hire people who would gather information directly for him. In other words, to form an intelligence network. But that would

require large amounts of time and funds, and most important of all, depended on him finding reliable people.

Information was precious, and mistaking false information for true could be a lethal mistake. That sort of organization only becomes truly meaningful after years of work have been put into it, and it wasn't something that could be established and put into use at a moment's notice.

The Malfist sisters properly understood the reasons for Ryoma's frustration. Having acted alongside Ryoma for months, they'd experienced full well the importance of preparation and information.

But they also knew Ryoma's wish wasn't one that would be easily granted. Those of the privileged class in this world didn't understand the importance of information. And those that did wouldn't leak information to a foreigner of dubious origins like Ryoma.

In the end, if he wanted information, he'd have to hire people to do it, but in this situation, establishing an intelligence agency felt like a daydream. In the end he'd have to acknowledge the most ideal solution wasn't a plausible one and make do with the cold reality dealt to him.

"Master Ryoma... I don't think letting what we don't know torment us would get us anywhere. Shouldn't we strike down General Albrecht and Duke Gelhart before the surrounding countries can bare their fangs against us?"

Ryoma had no choice but to nod at Laura's suggestion. He couldn't find another solution.

"Duke Gelhart has around 60,000 troops. That includes the troops under his direct control and the maximum number of commoners he can mobilize. Add to that Albrecht's order of 2,500 knights and supplement it with mercenaries, and he's got somewhere between 65,000 to 70,000 men. Meanwhile, we've got 12,500 knights, and with the neutral nobles we took in thanks to Count Bergstone, we've got another 20,000 men or so. Adding in the mercenaries, we get to around 35,000. In terms of sheer numbers, we're at an overwhelming disadvantage..."

Ryoma could smile bitterly at Sara's summary.

“The nobles’ faction is mostly made up of high-ranking nobility at the rank of count and above. They have territories to conscript a lot of men from. And since we can’t draft people from the territories belonging directly to the royal family, it’s almost natural the nobles’ faction has us beat there.”

Ryoma heaved a heavy, wry sigh. Princess Lupis didn’t see conscripting the commoners favorably, but another major issue was that most of the ministers and bureaucrats handling the practical business of the country were part of the nobles’ faction. They employed all sorts of obstructive maneuvers in matters of fundraising and supply lines, which reduced the efficiency of those fields down to a crawl.

The situation looked poor. But Laura shook her head at Ryoma’s words.

“But we already knew in advance. And even if we’re lacking in numbers, we match them in terms of fighting power.”

Knights can use thaumaturgy, and while there was some individual difference in how far one had deepened their powers, all of them should be capable of reinforcing their bodies. What’s more, knights were all individually trained, so if one were to compare knights to commoners, the difference in fighting power became significantly different.

“I suppose... In the end, even with General Albrecht on the enemy’s side, the situation hasn’t changed much compared to before.”

“That sounds right to me... Except, while we shouldn’t be too occupied with this invisible enemy, we also shouldn’t completely ignore them, in my opinion.”

Laura’s words showed she understood the situation perfectly. The most frightening way this could end was if they failed to deal with General Albrecht and Duke Gelhart before another country launched its invasion. There was no proof it would happen, but they certainly couldn’t disregard that possibility, since Princess Lupis lacked the strength to repel an invasion right now.

“In that case, wrapping this up quickly would be the best course of action... Hiring more mercenaries was the right idea.”

After beating Branzo the Black Spider, Ryoma gathered seventy to eighty mercenaries, but by now they’d hired four times that number.

Hiring that many was a waste from a financial perspective, but thanks to that, they had more leeway in terms of the decisions they could make.

I wasn't sure what we'd do with so many mercenaries at first, but you can never be too sure, eh...

Ryoma's eyes glared into the air. All to decide the battle to come...

The morning after the bad news had been brought to the castle. An imposing group was walking down one of the palace corridors, which had a red carpet laid over it. Their bodies were covered in iron armor, making them the very image of warriors in a time of strife.

The one leading them was Helena Steiner, who had recently returned to her office as general. The ones surrounding her were trusted people, such as her comrades from days past, or otherwise their children and grandchildren.

The one walking closest alongside Helena was Chris Morgan, his golden hair flowing in his wake.

"My apologies, Lady Helena. I never expected General Albrecht to make his move so quickly... I've made a grave error in judgment," Chris whispered words of apology toward Helena as they hurried to the meeting room, his brow furrowed anxiously.

His voice was full of regret and shame, his words laced with bitterness. After all, Chris's actions were, without a doubt, what had led to this situation.

He may have been acting on Helena's orders, but there was little doubt that Chris's maneuvering had roused General Albrecht's sense of crisis. It would have been wiser in hindsight to keep a closer eye on General Albrecht's movements and keep their plans from disturbing the water's surface for as long as possible.

But Chris never could have predicted just how greatly the oppressed knights would be drawn to Helena once she made her appearance. He understood and regretted this all too well now.

Chris had stayed up until dawn gathering information on the situation and keeping the knights in check as they were frantically running about in an attempt to pick up information on General Albrecht's flight from the capital. As

proof of that, his eyes were swollen and red with heavy bags around them.

“It was definitely beyond our predictions, but you shouldn’t worry over it,” Helena spoke sympathetically to Chris without turning to look at him. “None of us knew General Albrecht might join forces with the nobles’ faction after they’d been rivals for so long. I failed to read the situation as much as you have. And besides, this situation isn’t all that bad for us... No, if anything, we might be better off this way.”

The situation was no laughing matter, and despite that, there wasn’t so much as a hint of wavering in her voice. The amused tone of her words echoed in Chris’s ears. As if to say everything was going as planned...

“However...” Chris said ambiguously.

Even if Helena told him not to pay it any mind, he couldn’t. Not as long as he believed this was the direct result of his actions.

Many knights loyal to the kingdom, like Chris, had suffered under General Albrecht’s tyranny for years out of the belief that the day would come when they drive him out and return Rhoadseria to its rightful state.

And they had just lost that precious opportunity. Many knights clearly despaired at the news. But Helena’s outlook on it was quite the opposite.

“This is a wonderful chance to sweep this country clean... Don’t you think?”

Realizing what she meant by that, Chris furrowed his well-shaped brows.

“We’ll be opening hostilities, then? But...”

It was because he realized what she meant that his voice was thick with anxiety. He knew it wouldn’t go that smoothly.

To begin with, both General Albrecht and Duke Gelhart were standing in the way of Princess Lupis reigning over Rhoadseria and rebuilding the kingdom. In that regard, fighting them both was unavoidable. But on the other hand, there was a great difference between dealing with them individually and together.

Chris’s maneuvering had brought most of the knights over to Helena’s side, but there was no telling how they would fare against the nobles’ faction, which boasted the largest army in the country, with General Albrecht and his first

order of knights assisting them.

“If Princess Lupis were to allow us to conscript the people in her direct territories, we may be able to overwhelm them with numbers. But considering what is to come, involving the citizens in quelling the civil war would be a poor decision. And the public order is another issue. Maybe if the situation was tilted even more against us it would be a different story... but as things stand, mobilizing them would be a poor hand to play.”

Helena responded to Chris’s doubts with a smirk. In terms of numbers, Duke Gelhart and the nobles under him could mobilize somewhere between two to five times greater a number of knights incapable of thaumaturgy than those which were capable of it. Knights had some individual differences in terms of their proficiency and talent, but on average they were twice as strong as a normal person.

Splitting the opposition as they had done brought five orders of knights to Princess Lupis’s side, which numbered 12,500 members, all twice as strong, putting them at nearly 30,000 men in terms of effective fighting power.

If one were to compare both of the camps’ forces, the ratio would put Princess Lupis at a disadvantage of 4 to 6, or 3 to 7. But it wasn’t so hopeless a gap that it couldn’t be covered. With that much of a difference in forces, it was still perfectly possible for them to win if their forces were aptly commanded.

If things were worse, perhaps Princess Lupis would have been forced to change her stance, but being the kind soul that she was, she refused to force her people to participate in the fighting under these circumstances.

“The rest depends on that boy’s judgment...” The whisper escaped Helena’s lips softly.

“That boy, you say...?”

Realizing who Helena was speaking of, Chris narrowed his eyes.

He’d already heard the rumors surrounding that man. He was some wandering adventurer who came out of nowhere, and one of the ringleaders of the conflict to come.

Everything started with his appearance.

To think Lady Helena trusts him this much...

Hearing those words that mingled trust and affection from Helena Steiner, the woman worshipped and given utmost faith as a goddess of war by the people of Rhoadseria, Chris felt a black emotion, not unlike envy, burning within his heart.

Thankfully, he had the self-restraint to stop that emotion from rising to the surface. Years of oppression under General Albrecht and his faction gave him ample experience at hiding his emotions. And so, Chris held his tongue and followed Helena.

Heheh... Cute boy, you are. Ambitious and full of confidence, but you have the reason to restrain both of those traits. And judging from how you performed this time, you pass in terms of cleverness as well. A talented knight from a commoner's upbringing... I can't imagine anyone Albrecht would loathe more than you.

Helena smiled as she looked at Chris. It was only natural for people to harbor ambition and jealousy. But anyone who made a visible display of it was unfit to march alongside the goddess of war.

Having discerned Chris's quality, Helena gave a pleased smile as she hastened her gait. And eventually, she stopped her stride.

Now, let us see what comes next.

The image of how things should move going forward was already drawn to perfect detail in Helena's mind. This much was natural for a country's general.

But then again, this was not a test with predetermined correct answers. Every choice had its pros and cons, and there was no ideal path to take.

Show me if you're the genuine article... Ryoma Mikoshiba...

It was precisely because there were no correct answers that people's true worth and abilities came to the forefront. As she stopped in front of the heavy oak door to the conference room, guarded by armored soldiers, Helena's lips curled up into a smile.

"Fool! Are you listening to yourself? How can you even suggest that?!"

Meltina’s shout echoed through the conference room as she slammed a clenched fist into the round table.



“Lady Meltina, please, wait for him to finish...”

“Would you kindly be quiet, Count Bergstone?!”

Count Bergstone, who shared a seat on this round table, tried to cut into her words, but a stabbing glance from Meltina made him quiet down immediately.

Far from Jupiter, far from his thunder, as they say. But right now, Meltina was less of a god and more of a demon. Quelling a woman’s anger can be difficult enough, but when considering how sour relations were between the knights and the nobles, it was only natural Count Bergstone quickly chose to throw in the towel.

With her neatly combed black hair growing disheveled, Meltina glared at the boy, whose face betrayed his true age, sitting before her with a complacent smile.

And now you finally display your true nature... You bloody amateur!

The sight of his confident smile made Meltina want to pelt him with all the insults she had built up. She only held her tongue because she didn’t want to speak like that in the presence of Princess Lupis.

“Oh, do calm down now...” A man’s husky voice filled the conference room.

Sitting next to Princess Lupis with his arms crossed, Mikhail, who had listened to the discussion silently until now, turned his eyes to the two of them.

“Do you really intend to lend an ear to this man’s nonsense at such a critical time?!” Meltina shouted aggressively.

From a tactical point of view, the plan Ryoma Mikoshiba suggested could not be called effective. No, from Meltina’s perspective, who had been educated in a high-class family of knights and was an aide to Princess Lupis, it looked like nothing but the reckless idea of a feckless amateur.

Mikhail, too, despite raising a hand to silence Meltina, turned a sharp glare in Ryoma’s direction, which made it clear he didn’t stop her out of good will towards the boy.

“I am willing to hear you out, but let it be known I have the same stance as Meltina,” Mikhail told Ryoma, his brows furrowed in scrutiny. “If I recall... our

plan until now hinged on drawing the enemy in and holding a defensive line. While our incorporation of the knights' faction went better than expected, I still don't see why this would lead to us changing our policy at this point. Surely you haven't forgotten it? If you have a good reason, we will hear it out here and now."

Abiding by the dignity of those older than him, he didn't make his displeasure known by raising his voice like Meltina did, but his voice was frigid and angry.

His anger was justified, in a way. There were quite a few topographical issues with moving soldiers between Pireas and Duke Gelhart's stronghold, Heraklion. But even with Mikhail's anger directed at him, Ryoma's attitude remained unchanged.

"Not to worry. I have a few ideas regarding how to do so." His tone didn't waver in the slightest, and Mikhail could not help but click his tongue in response.

The stir moving across everyone present was likely from shock at Ryoma's unexpected confidence. The only one who remained unfazed by it, sticking to a composed silence, was Helena.

"Are you quite sure you understand? Getting through the Herkshua forest is one thing, but how do you intend to cross the river Thebes...? Didn't you propose the defensive line because there was no means to get past it?"

Mikhail's words made a murmur of assent rise from those around him. The capital and Heraklion were separated by two significant obstacles, the Herkshua forest and the river Thebes.

The former was a large woodland home to many dangerous monsters, with a meandering road crossing through it. All the same, it was a road that wasn't particularly hard to come across. It was far from town, and thus not paved with stone, but it was wide enough to allow carriages to pass through. It also had barrier pillars set up at regular intervals to ward off the monsters, allowing for merchants and travelers to cross safely.

But that only applied to ordinary people. When viewed from the perspective of mobilizing an army, the Herkshua forest was a terribly problematic obstacle to clear. It wasn't impassible, of course, but with how narrow the ranks would

have to be, their marching speed would be quite slow, and the dense trees would obstruct visibility, making it easier for the enemy to lay an ambush.

If they were moving just a few units it would be more feasible, but the terrain didn't accommodate for mobilizing a large army.

And even if they did get through the Herkshua forest, they would need a means of getting across the giant river Thebes.

"You're concerned about crossing the river, right, Sir Mikhail?"

Mikhail nodded silently at Ryoma's words. This river, which originated from the Woar mountain range located along the kingdom's border with Xarooda, conjoined with branches from all around and dampened the earth as it flowed from the southwest of the country to the northeast. Rhoadseria owed its great agricultural produce to this river's abundant waters.

The river truly did give Rhoadseria its blessings, but when it came to moving an army, it became a major hindrance. It was 500 meters wide— not a distance this world's architectural techniques could hope to bridge. It was rather deep as well, so wading through wasn't an option.

Of course, there were several wharfs along each side of the river, but while crossing the Thebes wasn't an issue during peacetime, ferrying an army across it was a different story altogether.

The biggest problem was that there was no ferry large enough to carry hundreds of people at once. Trade freighters or a navy's warships may have been capable of it, but no ferry meant for crossing rivers was that large. The largest one available could only transport twenty to thirty armed soldiers.

And furthermore, just ferrying soldiers wasn't enough. Transporting supplies was another consideration. Spare weapons and armor, rations for the soldiers, fodder for the horses, as well as medical supplies for treating injured soldiers. Attempting to account for everything made it clear just how endless of a task it could be...

And there was no going to war without all of those supplies, so they would have to carry those consumables with them as they crossed.

Mikhail's doubts aren't mistaken... Crossing the river is a major problem. And

so long as it remains unsolved, sending out the soldiers would be impossible...

Helena brought a cup of tea to her lips. Since they'd need to ferry everyone across the river at once, there was only one solution left: gather ships from the surrounding villages, load as many soldiers onto them as possible, and make several round trips across the river to move everyone.

But as many tactical texts outlined, that tactic was a terribly dangerous one. Splitting one's forces makes each individual group easier to eliminate.

He's not wrong to understand that. But he's a bit too hard-headed. Though I suppose it stems from his lack of experience...

He was better than Meltina, who still made her displeasure blatantly clear by glaring daggers at Ryoma, but Mikhail couldn't be called too bright, either. That wasn't to say he was dumb. He was born to a high-ranking family of knights and given the appropriate education since his infancy.

But that was all he had. Knowing how to play by the book was important, but if one was to win a war, acting outside of established tactics at times was necessary.

"I see. Quite shrewd of you, Sir Ryoma... You see well into the opponent's mental state and circumstances. But this chance won't last long."

Helena's words made everyone present in the room stir in surprise. Seeing their reaction, Helena heaved a small sigh.

I suppose that's how the chips fall...

Very few people read the state of affairs between battles, and only those blessed by the gods with the prudence to do so were given the right to sip from the goblet of triumph.

"What are you implying? Sir Ryoma, Helena, what are you talking about?"

"Now would be the easiest time to attack the enemy's territory, Your Highness."

Ryoma answered Princess Lupis's question the moment she asked it, but that did little to clear her doubts. She still wasn't clear on why exactly now would be the best time to attack.

Ryoma began explaining things as simply as possible, so as to make his thoughts clear to the clueless members of the conference.

“I originally proposed we lure the enemy toward the capital, since I thought attacking the enemy ourselves would be too difficult. But the situation has changed.”

Since the perilous crossing would leave their forces open for attack from the enemy, both Duke Gelhart and Princess Lupis were left staring each other down from opposite sides of the river, neither of them crossing into the other’s territories. Considering the difficulty of the march and securing a line of supply, luring the enemy closer to one’s base and intercepting them there would be that much simpler.

But the war situation took a swing in an unexpected direction with General Albrecht’s surprising choice, and while it only birthed a very slight possibility, it was a chance that could lead to them ending the war in one fell swoop.

“I don’t think General Albrecht joining forces with Duke Gelhart is a problem at all. If anything, I believe they both made a huge blunder by doing so.”

As Ryoma’s voice echoed through the conference room, everyone stood completely still. It was proof people placed absolute faith in what he had to say. Though, truth be told, only a few people, among them Helena and Chris, truly realized the meaning behind Ryoma’s words.

“I don’t quite understand... The enemy’s forces are bolstered. In what way is that a blunder?”

Princess Lupis and Meltina nodded deeply at Mikhail’s question. True enough, if one were to simply examine the situation on the surface level, his opinion would seem valid. The enemy’s forces growing would normally be seen as a great negative.

Indeed, normally...

“How is it not? It’s certainly troubling that they have more soldiers now, but that would pose problems of its own for them. Mikhail, knowing General Albrecht, do you think he’d accept Duke Gelhart’s orders, no matter how badly cornered he is?”

That question finally made the light of understanding light up in Mikhail's face.

"It goes without saying, doesn't it? If General Albrecht was the kind of man who would simply obey other people without a fuss, we wouldn't be in this situation. At first, he would no doubt grapple with Duke Gelhart over the right to lead..."

A small sigh escaped Mikhail's lips.

Both aspired to take control of Rhoadseria and were likely to go into a power struggle over it. They also both had haughty, intolerable personalities. They were unlikely to be willing to walk side by side peacefully.

"Well, neither of them is stupid. Eventually they'd come to a compromise... But if we were to strike now..."

There was no need to finish that sentence. The most important part of running a war is the right to command. One can gather the largest army imaginable, but without a resolved general to command it, victory wouldn't come. History has proven that more than enough.

In simpler terms, you could liken it to changing positions within a company. If a section manager and the head of a department were to give conflicting orders, which order would the workers follow? In most cases, they'd obey the head of department, since he'd be higher up the chain.

But what if it were the company president and the head of a department? The president would be given priority. Almost anyone would be likely to agree with that. Unless some unusual circumstances are at play, the higher-ranked individual will have their orders prioritized.

But what if a company had two presidents? They would both be the boss, and if they were to give conflicting orders, those below them wouldn't know what to do, as they couldn't discern which order they should abide by.

The situation now was comparable to that. If Duke Gelhart was enough of a man to grant General Albrecht command over his troops out of respect for his superiority as a military commander, or if the General was gallant enough to realize just how small his forces were and would obey the Duke and his superior

numbers, Ryoma would by no means be optimistic over this situation.

But Duke Gelhart and General Albrecht were lowly human beings. Haughty and intolerant. And since Ryoma knew this well ahead of time, he concluded that now would be an opportune moment to attack.

“So that’s what you mean... I see.” Princess Lupis’s eyes lit up with understanding.

Once explained, his reason was perfectly understandable. Princess Lupis had been associated with both men for many years, and Ryoma’s explanation clicked with many of her recollections of the two. The other people present also seemed to agree. But there were still doubts remaining.

“I see what you are getting at now. Your assumptions are likely correct, Sir Ryoma,” Count Bergstone said. “But even if we set out now, would we get there in time?”

True, Duke Gelhart and General Albrecht were both arrogant and impatient, but they’d both held the positions of the strongest people in this country for years. They were no fools. This opening to attack only existed for this moment, as they’d only just joined forces. If the two were to discuss things and reach an understanding, that opening would disappear.

“May I ask something?” For the first time since the conference opened, Chris, who had been sitting silently in the seat beside Ryoma’s, parted his lips to speak.

“And who might you be?”

“My apologies. I am Chris Morgan, an aide to Lady Helena,” Chris replied to Count Bergstone’s question, bowing his head. “There’s something bothering me, so I thought I should ask.”

“I see, so you’re the one...”

Several other people nodded at Count Bergstone’s words.

He sat at Helena’s side as if it was obvious for him to be there, so no one dared ask, but everyone was quite curious as to who he was.

But Chris paid no mind to everyone’s attitude, turning to gaze at Ryoma with

the documents he brought with him in hand.

“I believe your analysis of the situation is accurate, Sir Mikoshiba. But still, it is all too sudden. We’ve come to make preparations for the defensive line, in accordance with our original schedule. Even if we call in the troops now, organizing the ranks and preparing provisions and supplies would take us four to five days. Considering the troops’ speed, we’d only reach the river Thebes in twelve to fourteen days. Do you believe the enemy will remain in discord until then?”

Chris’s eyes shone with a provocative light.

“Are you saying we have no time?”

Chris nodded quietly at Count Bergstone’s question.

Chris’s words were accurate. A chance means nothing if one cannot grasp it in time. Their original plan was to intercept the nobles’ army in the vicinity of the capital, and large amounts of provisions were stocked up in the capital’s storehouses for that purpose.

The same held true for the troops’ formations. Sending troops out to Heraklion would mean all their preparations were for naught, and that would require them to reorganize their formations from scratch.

Of course, there were some aspects they could reuse, but it would still take quite some time to reorganize everything. Ryoma was well aware of this, though.

“True, moving all our forces right now is impossible, and if we try to force it, it’ll be pointless, since we won’t cross the Thebes before the General and the Duke reach an agreement. But if we take just a small number of soldiers... A cavalry unit of around two thousand knights and mercenaries, we have a good chance of arriving on time.”

Chris’s estimated number of days was based on the assumption that the forces would be knights and soldiers traveling on foot—the slowest possible march speed. But if they were to have only those capable of thaumaturgy riding on horseback, they’d be able to move much faster and arrive without requiring that much rest or using any spells. They would arrive much faster than

anticipated.

“But... Even if you do cross the Thebes with two thousand soldiers, what would that achieve?” Meltina raised the final problematic point in place of Chris, who fell silent. “The enemy has over sixty thousand men on their side. No matter how many tricks you pull, I don’t see you winning with those odds.”

It was certainly possible for two thousand cavaliers to cross the river Thebes in a few days’ time, but once they did, they’d be firmly in Duke Gelhart’s territory. Meltina’s words were true, even while teeming as they were with spite, but Ryoma understood that even better than she did.

“I considered that too, of course. Two thousand would be no match for a force of sixty thousand. But if the rest of the military begins their preparations soon after the cavalry leave the capital, it would take them ten days to cross the Thebes. Even if we take our time preparing, it would take two weeks. And I have confidence that with two thousand men, we’ll be able to hold a position until that time.”

Ryoma’s words were brimming with confidence, and his attitude made everyone present fall silent.

Is he mad?

It was only natural that Chris would cast a suspicious glance at him. He’d just suggested using two thousand troops to hold back a force thirty times that size. This wasn’t a suggestion one could easily agree with. But they couldn’t deny it altogether, either. Helena watching over Ryoma’s confident, unwavering smile with a grin of her own forbade them from doing so.

“Do you have a plan?” Princess Lupis’s words broke the silence, to which Ryoma nodded.

Ryoma didn’t believe he’d be able to hold back the enemy in a head-on battle, either, but he didn’t want to see this chance pass them by. If they let the opportunity slip, General Albrecht and Duke Gelhart could yet form an alliance against them. And once they did, the Thebes would become a virtually impassable obstacle for them, making the conflict drag on much longer. They would have to strike now, even if it might be a touch reckless.

The gazes of everyone around the table naturally focused on Princess Lupis. All the arguments had been exhausted, and all that remained was her verdict.

Can we really win if we attack them now? Doubts surfaced and disappeared in Princess Lupis's heart. *Is it really possible to hold back a force of over sixty thousand with a mere two thousand?*

The princess pondered Ryoma's words, knowing full well her judgment would sway the fate of the country. With that pressure bearing down on her, Helena broke her long silence to give her the push she needed.

"I believe we should go with his plan. Twiddling our thumbs right now would not make our situation any better. And like he said, the way things are now, I believe we ought to go on the offensive."

With Helena, who had survived countless lethal battlefields, giving her advice, Princess Lupis reached a decision.

"Understood. Ryoma Mikoshiba, I entrust command of an advance party of two thousand troops to you. Defend it to the death until the main force arrives!"

This moment would go down in history as the moment of the start of the first act of the Battle of Heraklion.

With Princess Lupis's decision, the dispatch of troops was decided upon, and the conference was concluded, but Ryoma, Lione and Boltz gathered in one of the castle's rooms.

"I swear, boy, the balls on ya..." Lione cracked a smile when Ryoma finished his report. "Ya didn't have to tread on thin ice like that."

She wasn't truly criticizing him, though, but rather speaking like an older sister who had to clean up after her mischievous young brother's blunders.

"Missing the chance would just make the war go on that much longer, though..." Smirking, Lione took a swig from a bottle of liquor.

"Your suspicions are pretty concerning as well, and it's probably for the best if we finish this war as fast as possible, lad." Boltz was chewing on some beef jerky they had as a snack to go with the alcohol.

Lione and Boltz, with their rich array of experience, understood the flow of the war Ryoma talked about all too well.

“But lad... How are you going to ward off sixty thousand troops?” Boltz gently asked the biggest question.

Boltz held great respect for Ryoma, but it wasn’t out of blind faith. It didn’t take a mathematician to understand that two thousand troops stood no chance before sixty thousand.

If Ryoma Mikoshiba wasn’t the one helming this operation, Boltz would have gathered his men and hightailed it by now. If the young man had some stratagem that would make the impossible possible, he wanted to hear it.

“Well, it also depends on how well you handle things. I’m gonna have to ask you two to attend to certain matters, and our victory depends on how you perform.”

With that said, Ryoma already knew their prospects for victory.

There’s no telling how the variables turn up, after all... We have to hurry up and get our preparations in order...

How much they could prepare ahead of time would go on to decide whether this ended in victory or defeat for them. And this didn’t just apply to war. Even things as mundane as studies or sports required preparation. An adequately prepared individual has the leeway to make more choices.

Though conversely, being prepared didn’t necessarily mean one would get their desired outcome. Preparations were meaningless if one missed the chance to put them into use.

“Oh! You mean that?” Boltz raised his voice in surprise at Ryoma’s remark. “I mean, it is impressive, but... Do you really think we could block them off with just that?”

“What’re ya shivering like a fawn for? The boy had ya train for it, so you’ll be fine.”

Boltz went pale at the idea, but Lione replied with a calm voice.

“Our newest hires are ready too, right?”

“Yeah, all good. They were pretty shocked at first, but I beat the order of things into ’em! Ya can rest easy on that front.”

Ryoma’s orders were rather unusual for this world’s mercenaries, but Lione followed through on her role.

“In that case, I think we’ll be fine, Boltz.”

Hearing Ryoma’s words, a relieved smile spread over Boltz’s face.

“Well, we placed our bets on ya, boy. All we can do now is pray yer not a dud.”

Lione’s tone was relaxed, but her eyes were dead serious. After all, she was a person who led and held responsibility over people, however few, as a brigade leader.

“I can promise you that much,” Ryoma could answer with a shrug.

He was simply a man, not a god or hero of any kind, so he couldn’t say he’d win without a doubt...

Once Lione and Boltz left his room, Ryoma received a report from the Malfist sisters.

“Master Ryoma, the arrangements you requested are complete.”

“Thanks,” he nodded gently at Laura’s words.

The expenses were quite high, but their lives were on the line. He didn’t know if he would actually make use of this, but it was better to have an ace up his sleeve if possible.

“And as for your other instruction... We found them.”

Ryoma’s lips curled up at Laura’s words.

“Were they mixed into the mercenaries?”

“Just like you said they’d be, in a newly hired mercenary group.”

“That’d make sense... Make sure to keep your eyes on them, all right?”

“Yes, we’re keeping a careful watch on them. Me, Sara and one of Lione’s men are working in shifts to that end.”

“Do we know who sent them?”

Sara shook her head wordlessly.

“I see... Well, that’s fine. Let them run free for the moment. We’ll have a use for them sooner or later.”

“Shouldn’t we dispose of them as soon as we can, Master Ryoma?”

“No, better to have as many cards as possible in our deck. Besides, if we disposed of them now, whoever sent them would just dispatch someone else.”

Killing spies is an exhausting task in that regard. Just like rats and vermin, the only way to take care of them definitively is to strike at the source.

“As you wish.” Laura bowed her head silently.

The next day, the cavaliers’ horses roared as they rode out of Pireas, their animal instincts picking up on the scent of approaching war. Even without regard for the fact they were bred as war horses, they vigorously kicked against the ground as their heads shook.

“Let’s go!” Sharing Laura’s horse, Ryoma raised his voice, and the surrounding mercenaries set out at once.

“““We depart! Begin the march!”””

“““Oooooooooh! Glory to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria! To victory!”””

With countless fists swinging into the air, they filled their harnesses with prana, activating their endowed thaumaturgy. Their objective—Duke Gelhart’s dominion, Heraklion.

Chapter 2: Opening Hostilities

Several days later, Ryoma and his group found themselves on the southwestern banks of the river Thebes.

“All right, from now on you’re to listen to the mercenaries’ instructions and construct defensive installations here. Our survival here hinges on how well you build them. Do it to the best of your abilities!”

The sun shone at the center of the heavens, and the sky was free of clouds, as if displaying a guarantee of Ryoma’s success.

Ryoma’s advance party crossed the Thebes quickly thanks to their swift march and was now to form a bridgehead that would allow the main force to cross and regroup with them.

Before Ryoma’s eyes were the two thousand knights Princess Lupis had lent him, as well as the two hundred or so mercenaries led by Lione. They had to secure the bridgehead so that when the Princess’s main force of twenty thousand arrived, they would safely cross the river. And, of course, to keep themselves safe until they did.

“Everything’s gone according to plan so far, but the enemy has to have noticed our movements and should be preparing to intercept us. We don’t have much time. But we do have justice on our side!”

Ryoma took a moment to make that resounding statement and inspected the reactions of the soldiers, and after reading the atmosphere parted his lips again with perfect timing.

It is said one could get drunk off the atmosphere, and that enthusiasm is contagious in a crowd. So long as one knew how to use that point to their advantage, manipulating the hearts of men was simple.

“We will not lose to the despicable, traitorous General Albrecht, or Duke Gelhart, the man behind this war! I want you to lend me your strength for the future of this country! And upon emerging victorious, Princess Lupis will surely reward your efforts!”

“““Oooooooh! Victory will be ours! Glory to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria!”””

Ryoma’s address was answered with cheering and battle cries. Even the most secure of fortresses would crumble if the soldiers’ morale was low. This was a fact proven time and time again in Ryoma’s world and applied no differently even in this other world.

Phew, we’re tired after that long march but morale is still high... No problems for now, from the look of things. The rest depends on my command and how far we can prepare...

With his speech concluded, Ryoma watched as each unit moved to their appointed positions, when a man blocked his path.

“Sir Mikoshiba. Do you mind if I take five hundred knights and go on a reconnaissance run?”

This man, clad in full body armor, was Mikhail Vanash.

“No, I don’t mind. However, I know this may sound repetitive on my part, but stick to reconnaissance and nothing else. If you encounter an enemy, do not fight them and retreat immediately.”

Quelling the suspicion rising up in his heart, Ryoma answered Mikhail with a smile. While it may seem like there was no meaning in it if they didn’t encounter the enemy, the point of reconnaissance was to gather information. There was no need to pick fights with the enemy. The problem was that the man before him wasn’t capable of making that distinction.

“I am well aware. As a knight, I can’t say I much appreciate turning my back to the enemy, but... this is part of the plan.”

Mikhail answered with an expression that felt honestly frustrated. He couldn’t ignore Ryoma’s orders since he’d been given the right to command by Princess Lupis, so it seemed he was being tolerant from lack of choice.

“It’s exactly because I don’t want to take any losses if you do get discovered that I’m asking an elite like you to do it, Mikhail. I’m not exaggerating when I say the outcome of this operation rests on your shoulders.”

This was a role someone as reckless as Mikhail was most unsuited for, but

unfortunately there was no one else Ryoma could dispatch for it. Lione and Boltz were putting all their efforts into constructing the defensive installations, while Laura and Sara were caught up with other work.

Reconnaissance was an important task, but in terms of priorities, Lione's and Laura's jobs were more critical, so Ryoma had no choice but to let Mikhail handle it.

"Understood. We are off, then!"

Replying loudly, Mikhail turned on his heels. Ryoma could only gaze at Mikhail's back as he retreated with regret. And while there was no one else available for the task, and this choice of personnel was beyond his control, this decision would be one Ryoma would go on to deeply regret later down the line.

"Ready?! Do it just like we practiced! Stay calm and focus!"

""""Spirits governing the earth! Heed our calls and abide by our wills!""""

Following Boltz's call, the mercenaries began chanting as one.

""""Earth Sink!""""

This was a type of low-level verbal thaumaturgy that belonged to the spirit category. Upon finishing their chanting, the mercenaries slammed their hands against the earth, and the ground one meter in front of the caster sank in and collapsed at once.

"Right! Good work. The first row of casters, take a fifteen-minute break and then return to dig further. Those in the second row, help even out the sectors that are out of place! Everyone else, we're done here for the moment, so go help the folks in the north side!"

Under Boltz's command, the mercenaries scattered to their own individual stations.

"So, how's the work coming along?"

Ryoma called out to Boltz, who was in charge of the construction work, from behind just as the sun started dipping toward the west. It had only been three hours since they started working, but a moat twenty meters in width and five meters in depth was already coming into shape. Considering they were digging

a moat with an overall length of 500 meters, their work was unnaturally quick.

“Oh, lad...!” Boltz responded and looked forward. “Well, I’d say everything’s going according to schedule.Still... I’m surprised you came up with a method like this. I’ve been a merc for years, but I never heard of anyone using thaumaturgy like this. Gotta wonder what’s going on in that head of yours...”

Boltz shrugged, sighing in a mix of exasperation and admiration all the while. His words were no exaggeration, however. In this world, thaumaturgy was seen as a weapon for killing one’s foes. A tool for winning wars, treated the same as a spear or any other implement.

“It’s not that big of a deal.”

Ryoma shrugged off Boltz’s praise, but his idea could very well come to revolutionize both the economic and military structure of this world. Thaumaturgy was only ever seen as a way of directly attacking one’s foe, but it had other uses as well. Especially when it came to construction, it could increase efficiency to an overwhelming extent.

Earth Sink was a spell that formed a trap hole with a diameter and depth of five meters in front of its caster. It didn’t do anything as fancy as pelting stones or unleashing flame and thunder from one’s hands. All it was capable of was opening a hole in the ground.

And true, should an enemy drop into it, it could cause some damage, but in the end, it was just a pit. Its most common application was forming a hole beneath an enemy, but most people didn’t bother to use it in the first place.

A diameter of five meters may have sounded like a wide range, but in combat it wasn’t of much use. When enemies remained in one place things were different, but it was difficult to predict how a target would move and cast the spell appropriately. And while five meters wasn’t a shallow height for a pit, it wasn’t deep enough to decisively kill either. It was like falling from the third story of a building. One might die if they fell into the wrong place, but it wasn’t an appropriate way of killing a person.

Unless one didn’t have any other choice, there were plenty of other spells of the earth type, and in a general sense as well, which were more lethal and easier to aim, and so no one was foolish enough to use such an inconvenient

spell in an extreme situation such as battle. A spell without a use; that was the general consensus regarding the Earth Sink spell.

But when viewed from a different angle, the spell's advantages became clear. Being able to dig a hole that was five meters in diameter and depth within moments allowed them to dig an empty moat in a short period of time. Compared to the great effort and time it would take to dig one using shovels and manpower, it became clear just how efficient of a solution this was.

"No, you simply don't understand your own worth, lad!"

In this world, thaumaturgy's worth was decided by how much firepower it had. The power to penetrate the enemy's defenses was seen as absolute. And indeed, compared to spells used in direct combat, Earth Sink would seem useless. But once one thought beyond directly defeating a foe, Earth Sink revealed entirely different possibilities.

And when one considered that it was Ryoma who thought of and realized that possibility, Boltz's praise seemed quite natural.

"You think?" But Ryoma tilted his head at Boltz's words.

For a person of the modern world like Ryoma, the idea didn't seem all that special. If anything, he couldn't help but wonder how no one thought of this before.

"But of course!"

Well, I suppose it doesn't hurt to have them think that way...

By now, Ryoma's only way through life was to prove his strength and earn his soldiers' respect. But this wasn't a matter of wisdom or lack thereof, just a pure difference in available information. Still, if they willingly walked into that misunderstanding, it was just a plus for Ryoma.

"It all depends on the information Mikhail brings back from his reconnaissance run, but we might not have much time. Sorry, Boltz, but I'm gonna need you to finish this fast."

"No problem! Leave it to..."

Boltz's words trailed off as he bowed his head.

“You there! If you don’t measure the distance properly before casting the spell, it’s pointless. You hear? We want to adjust the holes so they connect. If you slack off, I’ll have your head...! Sorry, lad. I need to get back.”

Even as he spoke to Ryoma, he kept a close eye on the ongoing work. He was truly an experienced one. Feeling satisfied at his reliable subordinate, Ryoma changed the topic. There was another purpose besides inspecting the moat’s construction that brought Ryoma here.

“By the way, how’re things with Sara?”

“Miss Sara...? Oh, she’s over there. She’s stuck to her like glue, just like you ordered.”

Ryoma noticed a flutter of golden hair in the direction Boltz pointed to.

“Which means the black haired girl next to her is the one?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Ryoma’s gaze fell on the black-haired girl working alongside Sara.

“She hasn’t done anything odd yet, probably because Miss Sara’s keeping a close eye on her. We also make sure to keep her in our sights every now and then, so you’ve nothing to worry about, lad!”

“Thanks. We’d be in trouble if she sneaks up on us.” Even as he spoke with a smile, his eyes gleamed with a cold light.

“Yes, we’re all well aware!”

“If things get out of hand, don’t hesitate to dispose of her.”

Boltz’s expression filled with surprise at Ryoma’s statement. Making good use of this girl was a fairly central part of the operation. She was an irreplaceable tool for smoking out the hidden mastermind behind this incident. And despite that, Ryoma ordered him to dispose of her if things became hopeless. Boltz couldn’t hold back his surprise.

But upon seeing Boltz’s expression, Ryoma smiled.

“I’m letting her run free for now so we can use her, but there’s always a chance even that could be a trap. If things go south, you can take her out based

on your judgment.”

The scariest conclusion possible was to have your plan to use someone turned against you. Of course, nothing ventured, nothing gained, as the saying goes, but even that was only true to a certain degree. Sometimes, one must realize they’re at a loss and know when to give up.

“Understood. You can leave everything to us!”

With that, Boltz bowed his head to Ryoma and returned to command over the work.

“Guess I’ll go check on Lione next...” Ryoma whispered to himself and left in search of Lione.

“Preparations are going well so far...! We just gotta wait for Boltz’s group to finish!” Lione recognized Ryoma approaching her soon enough and called out, waving her hand.

Ryoma regarded her voice with a wry smile and a light wave back.

“I see work on the fences is going along well.”

“Aye, the trees from the forest over there gave us all the lumber we needed to work with.” She turned her glance to the small mountain of fences stacked behind her.

The chopped trees were already carved into a uniform size and put together using ropes. They were ready to be set up as soon as Boltz’s group finished digging the moat.

“And the raft?”

“We’ll be working on that next. We’re chopping trees for it right now.”

Men were coming back from the forest in groups, carrying chopped trees back to camp, likely using thaumaturgy to reinforce their bodies as per Ryoma’s instructions. This allowed them to carry back lumber they normally wouldn’t be able to lift on their own.

“Make sure it’s durable enough to support the cavaliers, though.”

“Don’t ya worry! I know. One of my men has experience in carpentry, so I’m

gonna put him in charge of it.”

Ryoma nodded in satisfaction, and then lowered his voice to a whisper.

“All that’s left is picking the right people... How’s that going on your end?”

“That’s going smoothly, too,” Lione said, closing one eye. “It’s the crux of the operation, after all. I’ll make sure to pick the best lookin’ men I can find.”

“That’s great, then. I’ll leave it to you.” Ryoma nodded deeply and turned around, going back to his tent.

There was still plenty they had to do to guarantee their survival...

While Ryoma and the others were scrambling to establish their defensive position, Mikhail Vanash stood on high ground some five kilometers away from the riverbank.

The speed of their march was slow, though them being on a reconnaissance run meant that was inevitable, as they had to prioritize locating the enemy.

“Hmm... No sight of the enemy so far?”

“Yes! Not one as of yet,” one of Mikhail’s aides answered his question.

“So things are going according to that man’s plans for the time being...” Mikhail clicked his tongue lightly.

Wide plains spread out below his eyes. These were the grain-producing regions, and in the distance, they could make out the distant shape of the fortress city Heraklion. This position allowed them to see any troops Heraklion dispatched even from a distance.

Making sure there were no enemy troops nearby, Mikhail sat down on a sizable rock.

So this preliminary battle will decide the outcome of the war, will it...? But that man’s face... Was he looking down on me?

Ryoma’s regretful expression clung to Mikhail’s mind’s eye. It had been several months since the two first met, and while they were on favorable terms on the surface, Mikhail’s heart was beset by discontent and bitterness toward the boy.

That was because Princess Lupis turned her trust not to a long-time aide like him, but to an unknown vagabond mercenary like Ryoma...

To begin with, just what does he think of us knights...?! We fight, we are warriors! And yet he orders us to do manual labor as if we were commoners!

In the face of his intense knightly pride, Ryoma's current operation was intolerable. Having knights use their martial thaumaturgy for construction work? True, it was efficient, and that was something Mikhail wasn't opposed to acknowledging.

But even so, using knights' thaumaturgy to chop trees and dig moats? Unacceptable!

In fact, many of Rhoadseria's knights were displeased with the situation. No, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say nearly all of them were upset with it. But they still obeyed Ryoma's orders because he was given the right to command by Princess Lupis. That was an overwhelming fact that gave him power they couldn't overturn.

This is so... insipid...

Something dark and vile bubbled up from within Mikhail, a mixture of envy and hatred. His greatest misfortune was that he was wise enough to understand the effects of Ryoma's ideas and policies and could see that Princess Lupis's trust was turning in his direction, but at the same time wasn't upright enough to accept that reality. His knightly pride filled him with intense jealousy for Ryoma.

His loyalty to the princess was unwavering, only matched by Meltina, who stood by her side as an aide. But the one being of true use to her right now wasn't the faithful Mikhail, but some commoner whose name she didn't even know a few months ago.

If it were another knight of Rhoadseria, perhaps he would have retained his honor still. But things weren't so, and Mikhail knew he couldn't imitate Ryoma Mikoshiba's qualities. And so, he envied him, and was unable to forgive him. Mikhail's heart succumbed to darkness precisely because he knew he had no legitimacy.

“Sir Mikhail! There’s a cloud of dust being kicked up ahead. It’s likely the enemy’s reconnaissance party!”

As Mikhail was deep in thought, a subordinate’s cry echoed in his ear.

“What?! The enemy?”

“Yes, milord. We couldn’t confirm their numbers, but they seem to be few in number!”

“You call that a report?! Go forth and confirm how many of them are out there!”

At Mikhail’s angry rebuking, his subordinate returned to scope out the enemy.

A small force of enemy troops...? We must confirm the enemy numbers and then report to Sir Mikoshiba...

At that point, Mikhail was still collected enough to realize the importance of his task. What mattered was to detect the enemy and keep losses to a minimum. Ryoma specifically stressed the importance of not losing any of their men, as they currently only had a mere two thousand troops on their side. What mattered wasn’t whittling down the enemy’s numbers but maintaining their own.

But that realization was blown away when his subordinate returned, bringing news.

“Sir Mikhail, we’ve confirmed that the enemy force numbers roughly one hundred men!”

“A hundred! You’re sure of that?”

His subordinate nodded, and Mikhail sank into thought, twirling his mustache all the while.

If it’s only one hundred, that’s only fifth the number I have with me... If we assume there are no other forces in sight, it probably really is the enemy’s reconnaissance unit... They likely panicked and sent them out upon hearing the Thebes had been crossed... The fools.

Mikhail smiled with confidence and out of scorn for the enemy commander. Disposing of the enemy forces was an easy enough accomplishment to obtain,

and this easy prey had simply sprung up before his eyes.

“Sir Mikhail! Please give the order to return to camp at once!” the aide waiting on Mikhail advised.

His suggestion wasn’t incorrect, but it would bring Mikhail no gain. That thought lingered in Mikhail’s mind.

They’re a mere reconnaissance unit, and we have five hundred knights. The fight is fixed in our favor. But if we can whittle down the enemy here, however little of a loss it might be, it would be a great accomplishment. And besides...

Countless reasons to fight came to mind. At this point, the only thing on his mind was to gain achievements to his name. Battle was his only means of gaining merit, and he understood that fact painfully well.

I won’t let him take me for a fool...!

Spurred by those feelings, Mikhail swiftly rose from the stone he was sitting on, his expression filled with the bloodlust of a soldier about to set out to battle.

“No, we’ll intercept them here. All hands prepare for battle. We’ll crush a force of that size into powder within moments!”

Mikhail’s heart grew elated at the feel of the battlefield wind, and that elation mingled with his ambition to drive his judgment into madness.

He had forgotten his own mission...

“Do you understand?! There’s no need to hold back! We will stomp out the enemy with a single blow and show these traitors the power of Rhoadseria’s knights!”

At Mikhail’s order, the force of five hundred prepared for battle, forming lines across the high ground. At the sound of his encouragement, a wave of adrenaline ran through the knights. The same also held true for Mikhail, even while having given the order himself.

The enemy’s numbers were roughly one hundred, and while in terms of fighting power they’d be in a great advantage, since this was a direct violation of Ryoma’s orders, Mikhail couldn’t afford to lose here. No one alive would

cover up for a person who violated a superior's orders and had only defeat to show for it.

To top it off, he'd recently failed in a big way, and while Princess Lupis smoothed it over somewhat, if he failed yet again, even Princess Lupis wouldn't be able to help him.

I have to win. I won't... I won't lose to him!

The only thing on Mikhail's mind was victory. And a heart thirsting for victory was one that was blind to the truth.

"Chaaaaaaarge!"

""""Ooooooooh!"""" A battle cry rose up, rumbling the earth.

As Mikhail's blade swung in the direction of the enemy's scouts, five hundred knights kicked up a cloud of dust as they charged at their foes with a cry.



“That fool, Mikhail! I knew he wouldn’t be able to restrain himself. I thought acting as an aide to the princess might wisen him up a bit, but he’s no less thoughtless than he was when we were young.”

As the rumbling of the horses’ galloping rolled down from the high ground, Kael recognized the banner of the Rhoadserian royal knights being held up high, and beside it, the banner of the Vanash noble house.

It was a nostalgic sight. As knights of Rhoadseria, Kael and Mikhail lived in the same barracks and competed in the art of war against one another. Time after time, the two fought together for their lives under the same banner.

When exactly did their paths separate, then? Kael never blended in with the others, but to him, Mikhail was his rival for glory in the field of swordplay, and at the same time one of his very few friends.

This time, it’s my turn to win, Mikhail. Today, that debt will be repaid.

The great martial arts tournament sponsored by the palace was to decide the greatest swordsman in Rhoadseria. On its first round, the two clashed in furious battle. And having won, Mikhail gained that title and was appointed to the honorable position of Princess Lupis’s aide. Meanwhile, Kael was defeated and was subjected to scorn and mockery.

It may have been a match, and their skills were about equal, but their paths had parted in a large way. And those two roads, which had incorrigibly split on that day, would intersect on this one.

“Are the preparations complete?”

Kael’s aide nodded at his commander’s question.

“Good. Then let us do battle!”

With a cold smile, Kael drew the sword sheathed at his waist and spurred his horse toward the enemy.

“What?! Say that again!” An angry shout shook the encampment.

Ryoma couldn’t believe the report the knight lying before him had said. Or rather, he didn’t want to believe it.

“Y-Yes... Sir... Mikhail’s scouting... p-party... was wiped... out...”

Blood was dripping from the lacerations riddling the man’s body, forming a small puddle at Ryoma’s feet. The Malfist sisters tried to heal them with their spells, but anyone could see that all they could do was prolong his life by a scant few minutes.

Despite being injured to an extent that would no doubt have killed most men, this knight kept the flame of his life lit with nothing but sheer determination and intense force of will. The light in his eyes was proof of that.

“Mikhail... What about him? Is he dead?”

Realizing how wrong he was for shouting at a man who’d prolonged what little remaining life he had left to make this report, Ryoma forced himself to calm down and maintain his composure to the best of his ability. The soldier lying before him was already a dead man. It was only a matter of time before his soul would depart his body.

But despite that, he used the last flickering embers of his life to convey something. And as a fellow man, Ryoma wanted to respect his will and accept the information he brought to the best of his ability. That was the final and greatest respect he could show to this knight, who was about to embark on his final journey to the afterlife.

“Sir Mikhail was... attacked while chasing K... K-Kael in the direction... of the enemy forces...”

“Kael?” This was the first Ryoma heard of that name, and he repeated it suspiciously.

“Yes... A-At first, Sir Mikhail ordered us... calmly, but when he saw the... t-traitor Kael Iruna... was the enemy forces’ commander, he... Aaah...”

Upon hearing his words, several of the surrounding knights cursed audibly. It seemed they knew of this Kael Iruna, but Ryoma didn’t have the time to interrogate them about this right now.

“I see... So Mikhail mobilized his army to defeat that traitor?”

The sprawled-out knight answered Ryoma’s question with a nod that seemed

to take all his strength to perform.

I'm pretty sure Mikhail was calm until he found that Kael person was in command. Then he somehow learned he was a traitor... Judging from Mikhail's personality, I can imagine him not being able to restrain himself...

Ryoma could easily imagine what happened. He wasn't beyond understanding Mikhail's impatience, either. That was exactly why he hesitated to put him in charge of the reconnaissance unit. But at the same time, he also understood Mikhail's abilities to an extent. Even if he was anxious to gain merits, he would know when to retreat.

This was why he had trouble believing Mikhail's unit didn't retreat until it was on the verge of being wiped out. But with a traitor right before his eyes, Ryoma could imagine him losing his temper. Knights hated nothing more than traitors, after all.

"So, how close has the enemy gotten? How many troops do they have?"

Ryoma shut his countless thoughts and feelings away and focused on what was most important at the moment. The crucial question was when the enemy would be upon them, and how strong their forces were. They were at a numerical disadvantage as it was, and with the scouts being wiped out, their situation was even worse.

If they were raided now, with the soldiers rattled by Mikhail's defeat, even their defensive position with the moat and fences they prepared wouldn't stop them from being wiped out.

"They're about five... thousand... though we don't know how many forces they have at their... rear. Their advance party will arrive... here... in fifteen minutes..."

As he heard the soldier speak between gasps, Ryoma went pale.

"Lione, Boltz!"

Ryoma instantly barked out their names with an uncharacteristic lack of politeness.

""Yes!"" Lione and Boltz stepped out in front of him.

“Take four hundred men each and secure the north and south. Laura and I will take the remaining six hundred and hold the center. Sara! You command the rest, and once you’re done preparing, standby at the back! Also, send a scouting party out to sniff out the enemy’s current position! Quickly!”

Rising to his feet, Ryoma swiftly allocated defensive positions to Lione and the others.

They all had their positions and manpower assigned to them ahead of time, so they abided by his orders without a hitch. Or rather, they hadn’t the leisure to object to Ryoma’s resolute command. Everyone around assented to his orders and disappeared outside his tent.

“S-Sir... Mikoshiba...”

As Ryoma was about to leave the tent himself, the dying soldier spoke to his back with the last of his strength.

“What? Is there anything else?”

“I-I am... sorry... We didn’t obey your... orders...”

Hearing the knight’s words, Ryoma gave a small nod to Laura and Sara, and the two left the tent as he kneeled down next to the soldier. There was little time until the enemy arrived, but these were the final words of a knight who risked his life to deliver this information to them. Ryoma silently listened.

“It’s fine. I understand.” Ryoma nodded deeply.

The man before him had only abided by Mikhail’s orders. Ryoma couldn’t condemn him, as he was in his death throes. Ryoma picked up the knight’s bloodied body and cradled it closer. If he hadn’t, he couldn’t make out his diminishing voice.

“Sir... Miko... shiba. Please... bring... Princess Lupis... to the throne...”

And with that, the knight’s body went limp.

There was probably much more the knight wanted to say, but the flicker of his life was about to go out just after giving that apology. And so, with the last of his power, he managed to entrust that final request. His single, greatest wish...

“You idiot...”

Upon hearing the wish of this knight whose name he never knew, words that could be either compassion or mocking escaped Ryoma's lips. But that sentiment was soon blotted out at the cry of the scouts Ryoma sent out.

"Sir Mikoshiba! The enemy's in sight, one kilometer away! They're roughly 8000 in number!"

Three thousand more than the last report.

Damn. They regrouped with reinforcements from Heraklion!

Ryoma tried to suppress the frustration that built up in him. If the commander was to appear shaken with his forces being in such a state of inferiority, it would spread to the soldiers under his command. And they would not be able to win that way.

"Understood. Tell Lione and Boltz to move as planned. I'll command the center!"

The soldier took off to inform Lione of Ryoma's order.

Bring Princess Lupis to the throne, eh...

Ryoma drove the dead knight's words from his mind. Being mindful of that right now would cost him his life. What mattered on the battlefield was the desire and stern will to live. That, and nothing else.

We have to live through this first... The rest comes after that!

Ryoma closed his eyes silently and drew the sword from its sheath. All to grasp his future...

"What in the blasted hell is going on?! How did they prepare defenses this solid in such a short period of time?!"

The sun was just about to dip below the western skies. Considering that fighting would become difficult after nightfall, this was the last point in time they'd be able to stage an attack for the day. Normally, marching on the main force after they took out the reconnaissance party of five hundred would be the acceptable tactic. There was no need to falter.

But when he saw the enemy formation under the setting sun, Kael hesitated to give the order to attack.

How could this be? I can't complete Duke Gelhart's orders like this...

"But Sir Kael, it would be ignoring His Excellency's orders..."

His aide's impertinent advice annoyed Kael. Hearing someone else voice his own thoughts angered him.

"I don't need you to tell me that, fool!"

The aide shrunk back in fear at Kael's angry rebuke.

Idiot! Can't you see their defenses?!

Before them stretched out a dry moat exceeding twenty meters in width. According to the report his scouts returned with earlier, their encampment was built along the banks of the Thebes in a crescent shape. The moat likely spanned the entire length of that perimeter.

Worse yet, it was a fairly deep moat. From Kael's perspective, it wasn't a position that they would be easily capable of breaking through.

But... It's only been half a day since they crossed the river. What trickery did they use to do this?

Kael bit his thumbnail in annoyance. This world didn't have heavy machinery, and so construction had to be done manually. In other words, no matter what, they would have to gather men to do it.

I don't recall hearing anything about them gathering peasants from the nearby villages...

The thought surfaced in his mind, but Kael denied it. Even if they did gather people from the surrounding villages, there was no way Duke Gelhart wouldn't know of it.

Did they bring people from the capital? No, that couldn't be either. That would slow down their marching speed... Then what is it? According to the spy, the advance party is a mere two thousand men. Even assuming they all worked, they couldn't have done all that this quickly...

There were wooden fences set up along the edges of the moat, and those would take time to produce, too.

Kuh! Should I have left Mikhail be and attacked this place first? No... I hate to praise the man, but Mikhail's skill is a threat. I was right to crush him when I could.

Mikhail Vanash's skill as a knight was transcendent. He wasn't capable of uniting the knights or weaving sly plots, but in exchange, one could count the number of people in Rhoadseria capable of matching his strength as a lone combatant on one hand.

Especially on the field, Mikhail's ability to break through was extraordinary. More than once, a small unit with him in the lead broke through enemy ranks and overturned the tide of battle. There was no mistaking that he was a piece better off removed from the board if possible.

But Kael's plot was off the mark, and the outlook of the battle was unfavorable. These preparations didn't seem possible for a force that only arrived half a day ago, with its defensive facilities holding Kael in check.

Blast! Just how long do you intend to get in my way?!

The image of Mikhail's bearded face surfaced in Kael's mind. He realized that he was venting his anger on someone unrelated, but with that firm formation before his eyes, he couldn't help but regret choosing to be preoccupied with Mikhail.

"Sir Kael... What should we do?" one of his aides fearfully asked Kael, who had fallen silent.

"We've no choice but to attack..." Kael said heavily.

In truth, Kael had no other choice. He only took to the frontlines right now because he'd learned from the scouts that the enemy's numbers were so slim, and before he left, his master, Duke Gelhart, strictly ordered him to wipe them out. Reporting back by telling that the enemy had set up their defensive facilities and they weren't able to dent them simply wouldn't work as an excuse.

According to our information, the enemy only has a bit over two thousand men. And Mikhail's unit was roughly five hundred men. With them eliminated, the enemy only has roughly 1,500 to 1,800 troops... By comparison, I have 8,000

men. We outnumber them four or five times over. If we brute force our way through, we could beat them... Fine, then. We'll show them their hastily dug moat won't do a thing to stop us!

Kael was gradually regaining his composure. They may have built up their defenses surprisingly well, but he still had strength in overwhelming numbers.

I can't afford to lose...! No... I'll win!

While he was once one of the royal guards serving Princess Lupis, Kael turned to Duke Gelhart's side both out of his rivalry with Mikhail and his own desire to advance and succeed. At this point, he had no other paths of retreat. If he was to survive in the nobles' faction, he needed to gain some merit to his name.

However, Kael didn't realize. He didn't know just how terribly similar his state of mind was to Mikhail, whom he had just defeated...

"Sir Kael! Preparations are complete!"

Kael nodded grandly at his aide's report. Drawing his sword from its sheath, he signaled at the enemy camp and shouted.

"Chaaaaarge!"

""""Oooooooh!""" Abiding by his hand gesture, all his forces raised their banners in preparation to rush the enemy.

Eight thousand knights raised a battle cry and rushed into the dry moat. But they were unaware that nothing awaited them but a death trap...

And so, here and now, the curtain rose over a battle for Rhoadseria's future.

"Draw your bows! Don't falter, no matter what!"

Under Lione's angry shouting, the knights drew the strings of the bows and arrows they'd been given with all their might.

"Don't think too hard about aiming, just keep shooting. The enemy's five times our number. Pretty sure you'll hit something even if ya shoot with yer eyes closed!"

An avalanche of enemies rushed toward the southern gate, which Lione had been in charge of guarding, the ground rumbling from their steps. The

animalistic battle cries erupting from their lungs hit Lione's body like a shockwave.

I can't get enough of this thrill... I might be gettin' wet out here.

Lione licked her own dry lips as she drew her own bow. Before long, the first line of enemies started pouring into the dry moat.

Guess they're saving the professionals for later... Just like the boy said.

There were no lines or formations; they were simply charging forward blindly. Lione's lips curled into a mocking smile.

Most of the enemy soldiers were commoners conscripted from Duke Gelhart and the other nobles' territories. Needless to say, they weren't trained, and their gear amounted to spears and leather armor given to them by Duke Gelhart.

Conscription in this world was quite the grueling matter. A single order from their governor could send them into danger, and despite that, they weren't paid for their service at all. That was because conscription was seen as a form of tax. In that regard, it was similar to the conscription system that had long been abolished in modern-day Japan.

Of course, conscripts who had gained merits and achievements did get rewarded, but very few people turned out to be blessed with such fortune on the battlefield. Most were simply desperate to stay alive.

But that wasn't to say even those people were without any kind of relief. The rules were that they got to keep anything they pillaged from the enemy. Any foe they killed netted them their swords, spears and armor, as well as any money they may have carried on their person.

In case of an invasion to another country, there were even greater spoils to receive. There were women to rape, and houses to burn down and plunder for their goods. Men would become labor slaves, while women would become sex slaves.

With their own lives as bargaining chips, they could make great profit. This was why commoners in this world went to war, despite loathing the nobles and fearing conflict. All to stomp on those weaker than them and alleviate the

hardships of their lives even a little...

“Remember, everything you take from the enemy is yours! I guarantee it on Duke Gelhart’s name! Come on, keep going!”

The words of the noble in charge of the southern gate’s breakthrough elicited war cries from the soldiers around him.

A knight’s gear was expensive. Their armor and swords were custom made, and their war horses were specifically broken in and worth a good amount. It was perhaps obvious that knights who thrived on the battlefield placed all their pride on their gear. And so, in the eyes of these soldiers, knights were like walking lumps of money.

Of course, it was exceedingly hard for mere commoners to kill knights that had gained thaumaturgy. There were some individual differences in how much they’d acquired and their skill at the craft, but overall, knights wielding thaumaturgy were easily twice as strong as a normal human. They were effectively savage beasts in human form.

However, even if beating them one on one was impossible, all one had to do was overwhelm them with superior numbers. Like a flock of ants biting an elephant to death, they could be surrounded and killed.

“““Oooooh!””” Riled up by the battle cries from the rear, the frontlines strode forward.

Ryoma’s side looked like a mountain of treasure to them, and they were confident they had the might of great numbers on their side. And so, they stepped into the empty moat without a hint of hesitation, their confidence that they would overwhelm the enemy no matter what dulling their sense of fear.

Three... two... one... Now!

Gauging the distance between them with her eyes, Lione clearly saw the enemy soldiers and their modest gear.

“First row, fireeeeeeee!”

At Lione’s shout, the knights fired the arrows they had placed on their bows. The sound of the air being cut was audible as the arrows rained down on the

enemy’s leading party.



“‘Gah!”’

“Shit, arrows!”

The sound of soldiers cursing as they were wounded by arrows shook the air, and the following moment, the sound of those screams reminded the soldiers of the terror of the battlefield.

“What are you doing?! Keep going!” the enemy commander called out from the rear. “The enemies are few in number. Don’t you want their valuables?! Go on, charge!”

He’d likely noticed their charging speed had slowed, and so he tried to rouse them using the whip called greed.

“Second row! Fireeee!”

And with perfect timing, a second barrage of arrows rained down on them. The attack that came down on them as soon as they tried to regroup drove the soldiers’ hearts to further confusion.

“Kuh, why are you flinching?! We outnumber them, and they can’t have an endless supply of arrows! They can’t stand up to our numbers. Go on, attack! I’ll see to it that whoever reaches the fence first gets a special reward! Now fear not and keep going!”

The noble’s intention was clear—he wanted to take advantage of their greater numbers by making the battle a melee fight. Even if it cost the lives of four commoners, killing a single knight would still put the balance in his favor.

Ryoma’s forces, on the other hand, intended to whittle down the enemy by keeping their distance. Having gained an advantageous position, there was no meaning in going into melee combat and losing troops needlessly.

The nobles’ side wished to turn it into a melee battle, while Ryoma’s side wished to maintain a safe distance.

But no matter how advantageous of a position they may have had, blocking the violence of superior numbers was difficult. The nobles’ soldiers cut through the shower of arrows unflinchingly, stepping over the corpses of their comrades, at times even using them as shields from the falling projectiles.

Three meters, two meters, one meter... They advanced on and on, withstanding the barrages of arrows. And finally, the death march ended.

“I made it! I’m the first to get to the fence!”

One peasant soldier reached the fence. The noble, who was usually unbearably cheap, offered a surprising prize for that. A monetary reward that would undoubtedly ease their lives ravaged by high taxes.

No, perhaps his bravery in battle would be honored and he would be made an official. Becoming a knight may have been out of reach, but being appointed an attendant to one was a great step up in life for a commoner.

And that was why he had to make a show of himself here, showing that he was the first to make it.

But it would cost him the ultimate price. The price of his own life...

“Third row, forward!” At Lione’s instruction, the archers withdrew, and heavily armored knights with long spears in hand stepped forward in their place.

“Thrust forward!”

At Lione’s order, they thrust their spears forward through the gaps in the fence, aiming at the commoner soldiers’ faces, earning the man who had shouted, “I’m the first to get to the fence!” a spear’s point to his left eye.

“Gyaaaaah?!” An animalistic screech escaped his throat.

“Pull back!”

The thrust spears retreated back into the fence...

“Thrust forward!”

...Only for them to be thrust back through the gaps, claiming the lives of the foolish commoners.

“Damn it all! My brother, Loiyd! How dare you kill my brother?! I’ll kill you all!”

“My eye! My eyeee!”

“Yiiii! I can’t take no more of this...! I’ve had enough. I’m not dying like this!”

Screams and wails filled the battlefield. Some rushed forward, while others tried to flee from the spears. The two groups, which didn't have anything as sophisticated a formation to begin with, bumped into and tripped over each other.

And Lione wasn't kind enough to not take advantage of this chaos.

There it is. The moment we take the initiative by the damn horns!

She sniffed it out with a sense of smell particular to those who had run through countless battlefields.

"First row, second row, at the ready! Fireeee!"

Lione had the spearmen draw back for the moment, sending the archers forward again for another volley.

"Ya'll hear me?! Shoot and shoot, and keep shootin' like there's no tomorrow! No need to be stingy, either! We've got more arrows than we know what to do with!"

With Lione's encouragement pushing them forward, the knights continued ruthlessly raining down arrows on the commoners.

"Kuh! This is going nowhere..." The noble spat bitterly. "I suppose we have no other option."

"Runner! Inform Sir Kael that the resistance on the southern side is fierce and we require reinforcements!"

The noble tried and failed to burst through the southern gate in one go, so he appealed to Kael for an order to draw back and regroup.

Even he, lacking as he was in experience on the field, could see that trying to brute force his way in would be pointless. His body shivered with anger and dissatisfaction.

"You good-for-nothing fools! We're four times their number! Why are you having so much trouble?!"

At that moment, the commander's baton gripped in his hands snapped in two with a high-pitched shriek.

“Reinforcements? What are you saying?!” Kael turned red, shouting at the kneeling runner’s words. “We have all the advantages here! Why would you need reinforcements?!”

“B-But... Resistance at the southern gate is intense, and at this rate, we won’t be able to break through...” No matter how much he was shouted at, the runner didn’t back down.

Regardless of whether it was out of self-preservation or true loyalty, he remained faithful to his duty. But this was precisely why his words only angered Kael more.

“Do you take me for a fool?!” Kael swung a fist at the runner’s face out of anger, shouting at his lowered head. “You must be, you bastard! I have a duty to Duke Gelhart to abide by!”

Kael would never act this way normally. His distinctive characteristic was making calm calls of judgment, and having watched the tyranny of nobles and superior officers from the sidelines, Kael always loathed it. But with his back against the wall, Kael lacked the presence of mind to reflect on his actions.

Ignoring the looks of censure and confusion fixed on him from the surrounding soldiers, Kael retreated to plan his next step.

He’d received a messenger not just from the south, but also from the unit attacking the north, requesting permission to retreat and receive reinforcements. But Kael, who was in charge of attacking the center, wasn’t capable of breaking through Ryoma’s defenses either. He was in no position to send reinforcements. If anything, he’d have preferred to call the other forces back to reinforce his position.

“I have no reinforcements to send your way! Break through with the forces you’ve been given...! To begin with, how is a force four times their size struggling to break through their lines? Use up all the commoners for all I care. Break through their lines and rush into their position!”

In truth, Kael’s words were nothing more than him venting his anger, but the runner nodded, knowing that needlessly arguing back would reward him with nothing but a slashing to death. The palpable madness Kael gave off was simply that intense.

The runner dashed off on his horse as Kael pelted him with vilifications in his heart.

Good for nothings! You're trying to drag me down, the lot of you!

The moat and fence he thought was only there for show proved to be more stalwart defenses than he anticipated. Despite his defeat of Mikhail's five hundred knights, the enemy's morale remained unreasonably high, which was yet another thing he hadn't expected.

Why?! How can they hold on to their defense so stubbornly...?! Why won't they crumble already?!

Kael was resolved to win this battle at all costs. It was only because Duke Gelhart acknowledged his skill as a commander that he accepted his defection from the princess's faction, and so defeat was simply not an option.

No, not just that. He could not even make it seem this was in any way a struggle for him. If he was to have a hard time beating them under such an overwhelming advantage, everyone in the nobles' faction would doubt his capabilities. And if he were branded as useless even once, there would be no getting rid of that label. Even Duke Gelhart, who acknowledged his skills, would turn his back on him.

And that would be a death sentence for Kael, who had turned his back on Princess Lupis. Kael couldn't acknowledge he was struggling at the moment.

Shit! Shit! Everyone, absolutely everyone, is looking down on me!

He wanted to believe everyone was slacking off in order to drag him through the mud.

"I'm taking to the front! We're heading for the central gate!"

As Kael declared so, having steeled his resolve, his aide turned pale. If Kael, the supreme commander, was taking to the front, it meant all the knights they had kept in the rear were to march to the frontlines as well. This time, Kael's forces were divided between two thousand knights and six thousand commoner conscripts they had gathered from the surrounding villages.

However, those knights weren't a force that could be frivolously wasted. They

were a trump card Duke Gelhart had gathered in secret over many years to oppose the knights' faction. The duke may have hated General Albrecht, but that wasn't to say he didn't value the knights' abilities.

A knight order consisting entirely of people capable of thaumaturgy was a force to be reckoned with in this world. Duke Gelhart knew this well enough, since he himself was capable of thaumaturgy. And this was why he secretly formed his own knight order, a privilege usually reserved only for the king.

It was made up of experienced mercenaries and exiled knights. In exchange for large sums of money in recompense, those sorts of people were willing to join his order.

Their numbers were nearly six thousand; a number far too excessive if one were to claim they were only hired for self-defense. Kael had been given two thousand of them and understood the meaning of that all too well.

"Wait, milord! Isn't it too soon?"

Kael turned to face his pale lieutenant. Their initial plan was to have the commoners break through the gates, and then send the knights in to finish the enemy in one fell swoop.

"Shut up! I was a fool for thinking the commoners could break through the blockade. But the enemy is exhausted from holding them in check. If we attack now, they wouldn't be able to push back my knights! Or do you have a better plan?"

But Kael brushed away his aide's counsel, claiming now was their chance.

The aide fell silent at those words. He, too, knew the position he was in well enough. The same held true for his associates, who were looking over how things unfolded from around them.

Their job was to assist Kael, and so any failure he made was likewise their failure. And Duke Gelhart wasn't kind enough to leave useless men around. They'd be lucky if their punishment would only be demotion. Depending on how badly they lost, they may even be sentenced to death.

"Understood," the aide said, at the end of his many conflicting emotions. "By your will, milord... But in that case, shouldn't we order the units to the south

and north to advance as well? If we pressure them in three spots, a moat and fence of that size shouldn't be a problem."

The aide's words were met with murmurs of agreement from his associates.

"Hmph, very well. Give the order at once."

Only an hour remained until sunset. Since they weren't prepared for night combat, once the sun set, the area would be enveloped in complete darkness. But if they were to break through and rush the enemy position, the fire they would set to them would give them all the light they'd need.

"We'll finish this before the sun sets! Crush them in one go!"

With that calculation in mind, Kael ordered his entire army to attack. The first day of battle between the nobles' faction and princess's faction was turning into an all-out war from which neither side could afford to back down.

Which would win? It was obvious to all that whichever side took this battle would have the situation swing greatly in their favor.

"Sir Mikoshiba, there is movement from the enemy lines!" A knight rushed over to Ryoma's side, who was commanding the rear forces.

"Hmm...? I doubt they're pulling their forces back... The enemy commander's planning to push their way in and take us out, right?"

Ryoma's eyes swiftly saw through the enemy's movements. In this regard, a battle was no different than a scuffle. Victory lay in whether one could adapt themselves to how the enemy chose to act.

"The enemy looks like they're really bustling around their main force... They must be aiming to break through the central gate."

"Yeah, they must want to finish the fight today. I'm not sure why they're in such a hurry..."

Ryoma didn't know Kael personally, and of course didn't know Duke Gelhart dispatched him personally to attack them. But he could somehow discern the panic in his tactics.

It might be easier than trying to cross the moat on all three gates, but an army wouldn't be able to get across without any preparations. Is he stupid enough to

not realize that?

Ryoma shook off those thoughts. He couldn't be like Meltina and Mikhail.

No, wait. He's probably underestimating our defenses, thinking our resolve might break if he overwhelms us with numbers. That's why he's being so forceful... But why not retreat his forces? What he should be doing is going back to square one for a fresh start.

At the very least, if Ryoma were the enemy commander, he'd retreat to make preparations before challenging the enemy again. As short as people's lives may have been in this world, not having enough farmers would harm tax collection. As thick as the walls of social standing may be, no one would waste the lives of their men so recklessly. There had to have been a reason.

What's making him panic? Is he worried our reinforcements might arrive? No... They know it would take time to march here. So that means...

Piecing together the scattered bits of information he had led him to just one conclusion.

"Hey! Can anyone around here tell me about Kael?!"

"Yes, milord!" A knight who was nearby responded to Ryoma's question. "I know him all too well!"

"What kind of person is he?"

The knight answered Ryoma's question with hateful vilification. He perhaps deserved it for his betrayal of Princess Lupis, but Ryoma could only furrow his brow.

Everything he's saying is biased... Does he even understand what I'm asking?

Ryoma was asking for information based on objective facts, not their personal feelings for the man. He was free to hate Kael, and given how he turned his back on Princess Lupis and went to Duke Gelhart's side, this hatred was a natural reaction, but there was no winning the battle if they couldn't estimate the enemy's prowess fairly.

This person is strong because they're admirable. That person is weak because they're contemptible. Are they clever or not? Are they handsome or not?

People had a way of estimating other people's abilities based on their preferences.

But people's abilities had no correlation with other people's feelings towards them. Of course, people would always harbor some degree of bias, but the question was whether one made the effort to not let that cloud their fair perception of things.

Put simply, whether they were prone to discrimination.

Unfortunately, Rhoadseria's knights were found wanting when it came to making that distinction. They were like immature children in that regard.

Ignoring half of the deluge of insults the knight was unleashing, Ryoma tried to sketch an image of Kael in his mind's eye.

Arrogant, gutless, coward, liar... He really hates the guy, huh... Still, even though I have to take what he says with a grain of salt, Kael looks to be something of an idiosyncratic person... Which means...

Hearing all the hatred Kael somehow managed to earn to his name, Ryoma smiled bitterly as he tilted his head. The image Ryoma pieced together was a dignified, intellectual type who had absolute confidence in himself; not the type to rely on a simple approach of brute force.

Which left only two options. Ryoma let his gaze wander over the knight, who was still hurling insults at Kael.

Either their evaluation of him is completely off the mark, or something happened to make a person like that lose their cool...

What would he do, were he in Kael's position? He didn't know the circumstances behind it, but Kael Iruna betrayed the mistress he had served for years. The question was, what did he seek to achieve in doing that?

At that moment, a thought flashed in Ryoma's mind.

I get it. It's not that he won't fall back... He can't afford to fall back...

Ryoma accurately grasped at Kael's predicament. Now that he'd betrayed Princess Lupis, his position within the nobles' faction was fragile, and he was currently racking his brain for a way to defend himself with one hand and

elevate his position within the faction with the other.

That's good, then... If that's what the enemy's up to, there's no need to hesitate to use our countermeasure...

People acting recklessly out of a greedy desire to gain merit to their name was common enough, and Kael's chances at victory seemed promising.

And indeed, if they didn't have the ace in the hole of using verbal thaumaturgy to build their defenses and were raided halfway through solidifying their position, they would no doubt have been wiped out.

Kael doesn't have the option of pulling back. If he does that, he'll be mocked for the rest of his life. And he knows that better than anyone. So he has to win this battle no matter what, even if it means building up a mountain of corpses in the process.

After concluding there was no further trick behind Kael's tactics, Ryoma decided to play the other ace he had up his sleeve.

"Runners! The enemy should press down on us from all three directions soon. We'll be using our ace earlier than usual. Give Sara the signal to move north. I'll go cover for Laura!"

"Yes, milord!"

At Ryoma's beckoning, several runners on horseback took off to let the others know of his orders.

"Increase your rate of fire! There's no need to waste time aiming. The enemy's forces are vast!" Laura cried out as intense fighting took place at her position along the central gate.

The enemy was swarming them like a veritable flock of locusts, with madness being their driving force. Enduring the hail of arrows, a group of commoner soldiers reached the gate again.

"No good! Spearmen unit, move forward...! Thrust!" Laura repeated the order for what felt like the thousandth time.

"Lady Laura! The enemies are too many! At this rate..." A knight standing at her side raised his voice in complaint.

The charge of the endless rows of enemy soldiers was applying a great deal of stress on the defending knights.

“Silence! We are in no way at a disadvantage! Master Ryoma ordered us to defend this gate, did he not?!”

Laura’s words were true; everything was going according to Ryoma’s plan so far. The dry moat and fence had slowed down the enemy’s marching speed to a crawl, allowing them to whittle their numbers down. He strictly forbade the knights from melee combat, instead stressing their cooperation as a unit, and lowering their casualty rate by having them cover for each other.

The knights hated it, but Laura saw Ryoma’s tactics in very high regard. They were essentially evenly matched with their enemy, and one couldn’t quite say they were at a disadvantage.

But even at Laura’s rebuking, the knight’s face remained gloomy.

“But at this rate... Can we really hold out until Her Majesty’s reinforcements arrive?”

His question was certainly valid. They were isolated in enemy territory, where the enemy was capable of reinforcing their numbers, while Ryoma’s encampment had no line of supply. Worse yet, the enemy were repeating reckless, suicidal runs with no regard for their losses. Their zeal was only growing more intense. Their ability to push the enemy back right now didn’t mean they’d be able to do it for a prolonged period of time.

And human beings have a tendency to feel far more anxious about the possible future than the present before them. It was only natural the knights would start harboring doubts.

This is bad... We must do something...

Laura wasn’t unfazed by this either. But she knew that if her spirit were to break here, all would be lost. She desperately thought back to the words her father had told her once, when she was little.

Remember this, Laura. Those who stand on top of other people must never make their weakness known. Even when you’re afraid and wish to run away, you must never let it rise to the surface and remain composed. It is that quality

which is required of those who command others.

What mattered most on the field of battle was one's strength of will. If she let this knight's weak-spirited words stand, they would spread like a virus and cause the unit's morale to plummet.

But sooner than Laura could speak, a helping hand extended to assist her.

"Don't worry, everyone! The enemy will be wiped out soon enough. Just hang on until then!"

"Master Ryoma!" Laura raised her voice in surprise at the voice that echoed suddenly through the battlefield. "What are you doing here...? What about command of the stronghold? And what do you mean, the enemy will be wiped out...?"

Ryoma regarded Laura's barrage of questions with small nods of the head.

"The enemy's main force is moving... They likely intend to finish this off with one push."

"So... This is why the enemy's been applying so much more pressure..." Laura nodded.

"Yeah, I figured, which is why I came to the frontlines myself."

Ryoma's gaze wandered about the area. Nothing seemed to be off for the time being, but he didn't fail to catch sight of the doubt in the eyes of the knights looking back at him.

Looks like they're really on edge...

Like cups of water filled to the brim, where the slightest motion could make the liquid overflow.

"But is this all right...? I mean... What of Lione and the others?"

Ryoma placed a hand on Laura's head as her anxious glance clung to him, patting her gently.

"Don't worry. I gave them their orders. The rest depends on when we give Sara the signal."

At Ryoma's words, Laura's eyes widened.

“Are you quite sure we should be using it now...?”

That ace was prepared to stall the enemy when they sent out their main force. There were two major points Ryoma’s side had to be wary of, given their inferiority in numbers. The first was to minimize their losses at all costs, and the other was to crush the enemy’s morale.

The moat and fence had already sufficiently accomplished the first objective. But what of the second? Bluntly put, they only barely maintained the most minimal line in that regard. And that was, perhaps, only natural. In terms of morale, the defending side was under greater stress compared to the attackers, as the latter had the clear advantage.

And there was another problem— the soldiers he was leading. Most of Ryoma’s soldiers this time were knights Princess Lupis lent him the right of command over. Their trust in a wanderer like Ryoma was low to begin with. They were lacking in the most important part of holding a defensive line—faith in their commander. Hence why their morale was low.

They were obeying Ryoma since there had been no losses so far, but their patience wouldn’t last if the enemy were to break through one of the gates. And so, Ryoma needed to present tangible achievements to buy the knights’ loyalty.

Achievements in the form of the enemy’s corpses...

“Yeah, we’ll have to do it earlier than planned, but it’s our best bet... Besides, killing off as many as we can while we have the chance to do so will make things easier later down the line... And hey, we still have other cards to play. It’ll be all right.”

There was a ghastly smile on Ryoma’s lips. It was a sneer, directed at the foolish enemy commander and his pitiful soldiers.

“What are you fools doing?! Haven’t you broken through the gate yet?!” Kael shouted, annoyed with the enemy’s persistent defense.

His precious two thousand knights had taken to the frontlines, and Kael had expected that the fence would be taken down and they’d be rushing into the enemy’s base by now. But Ryoma’s defenses still stood strong.

“Ugh, enough! I’ll take direct command!”

Having run out of patience, he rode his horse into the moat to inspire his troops, willingly walking into dangerous ground.

A slight tremble ran across the battlefield. The slightest of disturbances, the smallest of changes most people wouldn’t even notice.

But Ryoma wasn’t one to let it slip by without paying it any heed.

“Now! Give Sara the signal!” Ryoma instructed the mercenary waiting behind him.

A flaming arrow flew through the sky. It served as the beacon heralding the carnage to come.

“It’s the signal from Sir Mikoshiba!” One of the mercenaries serving under Sara pointed at the trailing red light soaring through the heavens.

“Is everything ready? Do we have enough water?”

“All looks to be in order!”

A horseshoe-shaped dam had been built along the Thebes’ banks, stopping part of the river’s flow. And true to the river’s bountiful reputation, despite it only having been a few hours since the dam was erected, it had accumulated enough water to fill up the trench.

“We’ve more than enough to fill the moat!”

“Good! Then do it!”

“““Yes, ma’am!”””

At Sara’s instructions, the mercenaries began chanting.

“““Spirits governing the earth! Heed our calls and abide by our wills!”””

“You understand, yes? We’re collapsing the ground between the river and the moat! Make sure to measure the distance carefully!”

Sara swung a sword toward the point she asked.

“““Earth Sink!”””

The mercenaries smashed their hands into the ground all at once, and the

next moment, the ground shook with a thunderous roar.

The Thebes' dammed water found an exit and flowed towards the moat, surging with savagery, as if finally unleashing some pent-up wrath...

The first to notice was a commoner attacking the northern side. He was a hunter in profession, and his eyesight and hearing were sharp owing to his daily work.

"Hey!" he spoke to the comrade next to him, despite being in the middle of battle. "Can you hear that?"

The man couldn't shake the bad premonition that overtook him.

"Idiot, we don't have time to talk! You'll get us both killed!" the person, who came from the same village as the hunter, snapped back at him.

Perhaps owing to that connection, he answered him, albeit with a hint of vilification. On the other side of the fence, the knights under Boltz's command continued showering them with arrows. The hunter must have been quite the reckless one to start talking in this situation.

"Are you sure you didn't hear something?!"

"What in the blasted hell are you saying?! Out of all the times to get distracted, you pick now?!"

His assertion was correct. Anyone who looks away from the battlefield before them was doomed to die. But the man couldn't shake off that premonition.

"No, I have a bad feeling about this..."

The man turned his gaze to the direction of that tremor, and then he saw it. A wall of water rushing through the moat, in their direction.

"W-Wateeeeeeeer!" The man screamed.

The wall of water bore down on them, and his scream was a natural one. The tumult of the battlefield died down instantly. No one raised their voice, because the soldiers could all hear the rushing of the water.

And that was because to them, it was the sound of reckoning's trumpet being blown from the heavens above.



Chapter 3: The Assassin

The filled moat's waters were littered with floating corpses. The sun had already set, and their surroundings were lit by torches.

"Looks like quite a lot of people drowned..." Ryoma whispered, looking at the corpses floating in the moat.

There was no wavering in his voice. His strategy was successful, and as a direct result, thousands had died. No one would blame Ryoma for becoming a bit sentimental, but his expression was no different than usual.

Whether he truly felt nothing over this, or if he was suppressing his emotions, considering he was a normal high-school student until just a few months ago, made it clear that Ryoma Mikoshiba's mental fortitude was extraordinary.

"Yes, just as you predicted, there were very few people that knew how to swim," Laura, who stood behind them, answered.

Water wasn't such a scary thing in modern Japan. With some exceptions, most people learned how to swim in school, and very few lacked that skill.

But this world was different. With the exception of those who worked in professions relating to water, like fishermen, sailors and ferrymen, the common person in this world didn't know how to swim. But that made sense in its own way. Even children had to help out in farm work. Having to work for one's living every day left no time to play. Once one became an adult, what scant amount of free time they once had would be gone.

Among the mercenaries and knights in Ryoma's service right now, less than fifty people knew how to swim. And having learned of that fact, Ryoma couldn't pass up the chance to take advantage of it.

"Not being able to remove their raiments was another reason..."

Laura nodded wordlessly at Ryoma's assertion.

They could let go of their weapons, but it wasn't easy to take off the leather armor they had on, and so their gear weighed them down, impeding their actions.

“How many are dead?”

“As you’ve ordered, we took no prisoners. They’re all dead, so... this is only an estimate, but just below six thousand.”

The enemy’s total numbers were eight thousand, so that meant six thousand out of that number all drowned to death. Most of them were near the fence, so they couldn’t retreat in time. Kael still had two thousand soldiers left, but continuing the fighting immediately wasn’t quite possible.

“The force attacking from the north was wiped out, and they likely pulled back some of their forces in the center and the south, since they still had some leeway... Oh, and we’ve managed to greatly cut down the number of heavily armored knights.”

Ryoma nodded at Laura’s report. Knights that had learned thaumaturgy and clad themselves in heavy armor were exceedingly powerful in melee combat. Normally, they would have to risk quite a bit of loss to slay knights, but their flooding attack took the majority of them out of the equation, which was a major achievement in and of itself.

“This should make things considerably easier,” Ryoma said with a cold smile.

When he thought to make a bridgehead on the banks of the Thebes, he considered using its abundant waters to cut down the enemy’s numbers. Mikhail’s arbitrary act of insubordination was a major incident, of course, but they were successful in this plan nonetheless.

“All that remains is to await the arrival of Princess Lupis’s reinforcements...”

“Yeah, I know... But they won’t be able to move for a day or two. Still, we’ll need to keep some lookouts, but you can relay that the forces are to rest for now.”

Nodding at Ryoma’s instructions, Laura then walked away.

“So... What’s left to do now...?” Those words escaped Ryoma’s lips, now that he was left alone.

Ryoma knew the importance of making detailed plans, but he had no intention of adhering to them too persistently. His style was more to play it by

ear.

I ended up using my ace in the hole ahead of time. Well, it was hard to see our achievements over the defensive line, and not killing the enemy off when we can might end up making things harder down the line...

Ryoma wondered if it would have been wiser to keep that ace unused, but discarded that idea after a moment. Forming a mountain of corpses with his flood tactic greatly elevated his forces' morale, putting the effectiveness of his command in tangible form. Cutting down the enemy's numbers was a great achievement, too. Ryoma could confidently say his tactic yielded significant gains.

It's all good, then. This makes that tactic easier to pull off, too... The only question now is how the enemy's main force will react. It'd be best for us if they stayed put until Princess Lupis arrives, but... Next time the enemy shows up, they'll be ready for us.

The pressing question was just how long it would take them to make those preparations.

It would take them a day to get information out of the survivors, and two to three days to prepare for attack. This means we've bought ourselves at least three to four days... And Princess Lupis's reinforcements will only arrive seven to nine days from now...

A smile played over Ryoma's lips. Everything was going according to the scenario he'd planned so far.

The more time the enemy spends on preparations, the more it places us at an advantage. And if they panic and try to charge us, we still have plenty of hands we can play. We'll likely manage to handle Duke Gelhart's side... And all that's left after that...

It all hinged on whether Ryoma's prediction of the situation was correct. But no one could know that before it was all truly over.

Duke Gelhart's castle stood in the center of the citadel city, Heraklion.

"I'm surprised you have the gall to show your face before me, cur..." Duke Gelhart said coldly, gazing down on Kael's bowed head. "I suppose I should

praise you for your audacity, if nothing else.”

The time was late at night, when Duke Gelhart would usually be asleep. Today was different, though. This was no night Duke Gelhart could sleep through. Kael left that noon in high spirits, leading a force of eight thousand men, only to return in defeat with less than two thousand remaining.

“My deepest, sincerest apologies, milord,” Kael kowtowed his head even lower.

It was the one thing he had no choice but to do.

“Three to four thousand of the commoner soldiers conscripted from the nearby villages... And nearly all of the knights I lent you. All wiped out... A truly remarkable defeat.”

An aide handed Duke Gelhart a document, and he read the casualty report with a grimace. People had a way of acting most calmly and rationally when gripped with anger. Duke Furio Gelhart, if nothing else, was one such person. Kael bowed his head silently once again.

“I care not about the common rabble, but don’t believe you can claim that you don’t know the value of the knights I lent you,” Duke Gelhart’s voice grew stronger.

In fact, he’d spent many years gathering up his treasured knight order. And so, having lost a third of them to a defeat by the enemy’s ploys, Duke Gelhart couldn’t help but be overtaken with anger.

Especially since the one helming them was Kael, whom he had taken in after he turned his back on the princess’s faction specifically for his talent as a commander. The more he had initially valued his talents, the greater his disappointment was at his failure.

“Yes...! My deepest apologies, milord...!” Kael kept his hands down, blurting out apologies like a parrot.

The situation probably called for him to say something a bit more articulate than just abject apologies, but the atmosphere didn’t allow for it. Poor excuses would just make Duke Gelhart more likely to turn his back on him, and Kael didn’t have the leisure to make excuses.

“Still... I’m surprised you’re alive. The reports say you took to the frontlines...” Duke Gelhart whispered, his eyes on the document in his hand.

“My horse swam away with me on its back... We were fortunate enough to get caught up in a muddy stream...”

“Oh, aren’t you lucky. And to think I suspected you shamelessly abandoned your men and fled. Just like how you betrayed Princess Lupis...” Duke Gelhart said, stressing the scathing irony of it all.

Still, Kael desperately withstood Duke Gelhart’s insults. He had no other choice. Indeed, Kael’s survival was nothing but sheer luck. He was on his way to the frontlines and was halfway through the moat when the flooding happened.

Kael had knights on all sides and couldn’t move to get away. Clad in metal armor, Kael would have shared the fate of the other knights and drowned to death.

But what prevented that from happening was Kael’s beloved horse. Kael throwing away what he could remove from his armor contributed to his survival, too.

Was it coincidence or a stroke of good luck? His horse struggled to swim away even as it was caught in the muddy stream, and somehow managed to return to the other bank with Kael on its back...

“Well, so be it. I’ll deal with you later.”

Kael sighed with relief at those words. Given Duke Gelhart’s personality, it wouldn’t be surprising if he was sentenced to death. No, if anything, it was almost odd that he didn’t have him executed. Kael’s failure was that great.

“But don’t get the wrong idea into your head. I won’t have you killed, but that’s not to say I forgive you, either.”

Duke Gelhart’s words froze Kael in place and sent a chill down his spine.

“That will be all. You may leave for today. Go and rest.” Duke Gelhart shooed him away with a wave of the hand.

“I-I shall take my leave, then.” Kael left the room quickly, practically fleeing, with his head still hung.

“Hmph. Incompetent cretin!” Condemnation slithered from Duke Gelhart’s mouth a few moments after Kael left.

The words themselves were brief, but the malice they contained was intense.

“Are you quite sure it was wise to leave him be?”

“You mean to say, I should have disposed of Kael immediately?”

Duke Gelhart’s aide nodded in response to his words.

“Imbecile. Do you think that fool’s life can make up for these losses?!”

Duke Gelhart had already given up on Kael. He didn’t let him go out of clemency, or to offer him a chance to regain his honor. It was to give him a fitting place to die, one that would at least somewhat fill the gaping hole his current failure had left, and it was for that reason alone that his execution was stayed.

“The commoner soldiers matter not to me. But losing such a great portion of my knight order... That damned idiot!”

There are no absolutes in war. No matter how superior one’s position may be, a loss is a loss. But despite understanding this, the flames of anger in Duke Gelhart’s heart could not be extinguished.

Sending his aides away, Duke Gelhart sunk into his office’s long chair and heaved a long sigh, starting to calm down.

This came at a bad time... Now that General Albrecht’s joined forces with me, I can’t allow myself to take any more blows he could take advantage of...

He was in the middle of negotiations with General Albrecht over which of them would hold the right of command, and any result that would make the general put his ability over commanding the war into question considerably weighed down Duke Gelhart’s position.

General Albrecht had served as Rhoadseria’s general for many years, commanding over its military affairs. Duke Gelhart, on the other hand, was in charge of internal affairs.

In any other situation, relinquishing military command to the experienced expert would be the natural course of action. But if he did that, General

Albrecht would steal everything away from him.

His ambition is obvious. If I carelessly give him the initiative, he'll come for my life. That's the type of man he is... Blast! If only he was a bit less ambitious, I could give him the right to command without any concern...

From Duke Gelhart's perspective, General Albrecht's skills were precious. This was why he accepted him now, when he was on the wane. But upon meeting him now, the duke found he had remained every bit as greedy and ambitious as before.

No, when he still served the knights' faction with Princess Lupis as his banner, he still made some effort to hide his intentions. But now there was no more need for that, and the man was simply exuding greed, much like a starved wolf.

I can't rely on Sudou's counsel here... Perhaps believing his words and accepting Albrecht was a mistake on my part?

The face of a single man surfaced in Duke Gelhart's mind. He, who always acted in Princess Radine's shadow, was also the one who advised Duke Gelhart to accept General Albrecht to his side. And, it was also him who had introduced Princess Radine to Duke Gelhart in the first place.

His facial features were plain, like that of a man one might find on any corner. His physique was of medium build. His only notable feature was his eyes and hair, which were as black as sheer darkness.

Since he was always at Princess Radine's side, few people, including Duke Gelhart, had ever met the man.

No... I'll make use of Albrecht, like Sudou advised. He's a precious source of fighting power... Given the knights I just lost in this war, he's all the more valuable... The only issue is that greed of his...

Strictly speaking, Duke Gelhart wasn't entirely opposed to giving General Albrecht command over the military. He knew that gaining control over the entire country, including internal affairs, military affairs and diplomacy, was easier said than done. Duke Gelhart wanted control over everything, but rationally analyzed the situation.

But I don't have much time... If Princess Lupis arrives with her main force, the

war will swing in their favor at once.

The commoners were weak, but at the same time, they held great strength. They obeyed his call to arms both because he was their governor, and because they knew they could overwhelm Princess Lupis's forces with sheer numbers.

But if they could not wipe out the force of two thousand at the bridgehead, what would happen when Princess Lupis's main force arrived? The commoners would come to doubt Duke Gelhart's strength. With this taken into account, Kael's failure was so crippling that the word "defeat" didn't even begin to describe it.

Is this a fatal blow? No, not yet... I can still turn this around. Duke Gelhart shook his head, as if to shake off his weakness. *I can attend to Kael's punishment later... But the enemy commander is extremely sharp... If I take him out, can I still win?*

Though he could disparage him now, Duke Gelhart did accept Kael out of faith in his talents. Both his skill as a swordsman and as a commander matched those of Mikhail. But a few strokes of bad luck and his pedigree not being quite as respectable as it could be, lowered other people's opinion of him.

But, from Duke Gelhart's perspective, he was far more of a useful pawn than Mikhail was. And removing any commander sly enough to defeat him would put Duke Gelhart's side at an advantage.

Duke Gelhart's lips curled up in a vicious smile. The assassin was a disposable pawn one way or the other, and the enemy was elated from their victory, which would mean their security would be light.

Now's the time...

Duke Gelhart rang a bell, summoning an aide from the adjacent room.

"Order the spy we've sent into enemy lines to assassinate their commander! And make haste!"

"Yes, milord! At once!" The aide immediately left his office.

"Now, just how will the cards fall...?" Duke Gelhart's voice reverberated through his office.

His ambition and greed hadn’t wavered in the slightest...

The first dawn since Ryoma and his forces set up the bridgehead rose.

“Just like I expected, they didn’t raid us during the night...”

“Yes, it seems they weren’t able to reorganize their forces in such a short time.”

“I think it’s fair to assume the enemy’s scrambling to gather their forces right now... I guess using that ace was worth it after all.”

“It’s likely they’ll have to squander a few days away to regroup,” Laura nodded.

“Then we’d better prepare for what comes next, now that we have the time...”

“You mean what you said earlier?” Laura’s eyes lit up at Ryoma’s words. “I think the timing is ideal for it. The enemy is quite shaken after your flooding tactic.”

“They would be. It’ll take time until it produces tangible results, so it’d be best to set it up in advance... And the rest depends on Lione, I suppose...”

“Yes. I have been informed that the required preparations are all in place...”

“All right. Then after breakfast, call everyone for a meeting...”

Ryoma’s stomach had been yowling in complaint for some time now.

“I’ve already prepared breakfast.”

Normally, there would be someone in charge of cooking, and so there was no need for the Malfist sisters to prepare Ryoma’s meals, but the two never relinquished taking care of him to anyone else. That was an unwritten rule, from back when they lived in the palace.

“Let’s eat it while it’s hot, then,” Ryoma said, and made way for his tent.

Thus began the morning of their second day on the battlefield.

“Well, I ain’t got no complaints about it myself.”

“Me neither. If we prepare ahead of time, we can put it to use whenever we

need to.”

Concluding their breakfast, Lione, Boltz and the Malfist sisters were all seated in Ryoma’s tent. The plates lined along the table sat empty, their contents having already been consumed.

“Could I have you pick ten people, then? I’d like to have them sent out by midday...”

“You got it, boy.” Lione and Boltz nodded at his words, after which Lione downed her glass in one go and slammed it on the table. “We’ll handle it.”

“All right, that’s taken care of... Sara, how much did you figure out about her?”

Ryoma steered the conversation toward another pressing topic.

“Yes, about that girl...”

Immediately grasping who he was getting at from his question, Sara nodded gingerly.

“Her name is Sakuya. There’s no doubt that she’s been in constant contact with someone when we were in the capital, but I don’t know exactly who with...”

“Aww, so all you figured out was her name?” Lione sighed.

“My apologies. Master Ryoma did order me not to do anything reckless...”



Sara didn’t seem the slightest bit pleased with her accomplishments either, and regarded Lione’s displeasure with an apologetic bow of the head.

She may have confirmed this Sakuya individual was a spy, but she couldn’t figure out anything else. But in opposition to everyone else’s pessimism, Ryoma’s smile was more peaceful than usual.

“I see... Well, just keep an eye on her for now, I suppose.”

Everyone’s gazes focused on Ryoma at the sound of those words.

“Are you sure, lad? We could get a confession out of her...”

Lione grimaced at Boltz’s whispered suggestion. She knew just what he meant. His many years as a mercenary meant he wasn’t above torture. He wasn’t the type to derive some kind of sick pleasure from doing so, but he could be cold-hearted when the situation called for it.

“Well, this isn’t a burning issue. If we just carelessly try to make a move against her, they’ll just send someone else, and that would put us right back at square one... Right? Besides, I get the feeling she’ll be making her move soon...”

The four nodded silently at the meaning hidden behind Ryoma’s words.

Getting rid of the corpses was important work that had to be done swiftly. Corpses left unattended could cause an outbreak of plague. And between the soldiers, moving about busily, was one girl.

“Miss Sara, where are those soldiers going?”

Sakuya, who had gone about disposing of a corpse lying nearby, stopped when she noticed a group crossing the flooded moat on a raft.

“Oh, those are merchants from the nearby town.” Sara answered briskly. “They’re heading back from negotiations.”

“Merchants...?”

“Yes. What of it? Is there anything suspicious about them?”

Sakuya couldn’t say anything in response to Sara’s inquiry.

“No... Nothing...” Sakuya said and returned her glance to the corpse lying down before her.

What is the meaning of this? Merchants? In the middle of a battlefield...? No, I've never seen them arrive to begin with... Did they cross the moat in secret? No... If they did, they'd be leaving in secret, too.

Sakuya restrained the agitation rising up in her. Only natural, as it had now been over a month since she'd infiltrated this band of mercenaries. But she hadn't collected much information during that time.

Could there have been... some kind of movement?!

Her conclusion was hardly a long shot. And as a matter of fact, the group crossing the moat was indeed given an important role to play, but Sakuya would only come to learn that a bit later on.

Well, it is what it is. I can figure that out later. But why won't this girl leave my side...? Is she keeping her eye on me?

The thought crossed her mind while she gazed at Sara's golden locks as she worked next to her. Since she had been working beside her often as of late, the two likely appeared as friends to everyone else. But if Sakuya was one to fall for such gullible thoughts as that, she wouldn't make for much of a spy.

Still, Sakuya discarded that doubt. There were few women among the mercenaries, and there was nothing unnatural about Sara spending time with her, given they were close in age.

It couldn't be. If she was ordered to watch over me, what reason would she have to keep me alive?

Sakuya had looked into Ryoma Mikoshiba. She couldn't find anything regarding how he came to cooperate with Princess Lupis, but she did figure out he was a merciless man. Or rather, she was forced to acknowledge it, since he had demonstrated as much in his battle with Branzo the Black Spider and with yesterday's flooding tactic...

He's got the skill. Even if he hasn't gained thaumaturgy yet, he's essentially a top-class warrior.

Duke Gelhart had dispatched her through her clan to serve as a decoy and assassin. Having mingled with the mercenaries during his fight with Branzo, Sakuya had managed to appraise Ryoma's strength.

If we were to fight on one-on-one, we'd be about even... No, it's too soon to say that was the extent of what he could do... If I'm really going to kill him, I'd have to use poison, or attack him in his sleep.

The image of Branzo's massive form soaring through the air as if thrown by magic, only to have his neck stomped out like an insect, surfaced clearly in Sakuya's mind. There was no doubting how cold of a man Ryoma was. And any suspicions she'd had turned to certainties when she saw yesterday's flooding tactic.

To think of a ploy like that when he's already this skilled... He's definitely a dangerous man.

She'd only been ordered to gather information for now, but eventually, the order to assassinate him would definitely come. From the perspective of her employer, Duke Gelhart, Ryoma was a pawn that had to be removed from the board, by any means necessary...

As Sakuya kept working with that in mind, a light flashed in her eyes for a moment.

Two consecutive flashes, and then three more after a pause... So it's time...

Using a mirror's reflected light was the method of communication she'd established with her contact before infiltrating Ryoma's forces. Since she was behind enemy lines, she'd have to be cautious when communicating with her allies. Meeting them directly was out of the question, and given the situation, so were secret messages.

And so they decided on reflected light. Its biggest advantage was that the enemy wouldn't catch on to it, and one could easily write it off as mere coincidence.

Sakuya continued working without the slightest change in expression. But deep inside, she honed her heart like a cold blade... to accomplish her task of assassinating Ryoma Mikoshiba.

Poisoning his food won't work... He only eats the food those two make...

Only Laura and Sara prepared Ryoma's meals, and they entrusted no one else to carry them. They were quite thorough in their protection of him.

Which means my only sure-fire way of killing him would be melee combat... Perhaps a blade laced with poison...

That said, a melee fight would limit Sakuya's avenues of escape as an assassin.

It's either do or die...

Even a first class assassin walked into battle knowing their life was on the line.

Small wonder, then, that she neglected to notice Sara's gaze fixated on her back...

The second day's night was almost past. The moon was cloaked by clouds, with torches set around the place being the camp's lone source of illumination.

Something whooshed by.

Weaving across that boundary between light and darkness, a black figure swiftly made its way across the tents. None of the sentries noticed it, though.

The character was cloaked in a black mask and black clothes, with even their gloves and boots being the color of night. Accurately evading the torchlight, they ran like the wind. It felt almost obvious the sentries would fail to notice them.

Here...

The shadow strained their eyes. Under daylight there would be no mistaking the tent, but it was difficult to discern during the dark night. That said, an assassin ordered to kill naturally had to be gifted with good night vision. The shadow carefully confirmed it was the right tent strictly out of wary caution.

The shadow drew the sword at their waist, and took a small ceramic bottle out of their pocket, spilling its contents carefully over the blade. The black, viscous liquid coated the sword.

The shadow then corked the bottle, returned it to their pocket, and then took out a piece of cloth. Covering the blade with the cloth down to its hilt, they carefully rubbed it over the blade, being mindful to not apply too much force.

This should do... I need only eliminate Ryoma Mikoshiba with my own two hands...

Confirming that the black liquid adequately coated the blade, the shadow slowly moved to the tent's entrance.

There were no guards at Ryoma's tent. The shadow didn't know if it was out of confidence or if he simply found their presence irritating, but Ryoma made it clear that he didn't want any guards placed around his tent.

If this was a sporadic decision made within the last few days, the shadow would have suspected a trap. But they couldn't suspect it, because Ryoma had given that order from the very beginning.

The shadow swiftly looked around the interior from the entrance. Perhaps it was because Ryoma was asleep, but the tent was completely dark, without any candlelight.

There were several chairs and a table for meetings in the center of the room, with Ryoma's personal desk being further in. Ryoma's sword and armor were hung to the left of the entrance.

Opposite of that was a bed, with a black figure resting over it. With darkness dominating the tent, it was hard to discern just what that figure was. Judging it to be Ryoma Mikoshiba's sleeping figure, the shadow silently crept towards the bed.

Now's my chance!

The shadow swung up its blade silently. There was no one around, making it the optimal time to assassinate their target. No assassin would let this chance slip by.

The blade then cut through the wind sharply, and the shadow confidently believed they had succeeded in their appointed task.

But that faith would be ruthlessly shattered the next moment.

Ting!

A metallic sound, most unlike the sound of flesh being cut through that the shadow expected to hear, rang out in the tent.

And taking advantage of the moment the shadow froze up in shock, someone sneaking up on it from behind went on the offensive.

An arm as thick as a rock planted its fist into the shadow's neck, forcibly knocking all the air out of its mouth.

"Guh..."

The shadow tried to suppress the groan escaping its throat, but that very act rendered it defenseless once again, as its attacker slammed their fist into its right shoulder next, bashing into its sensitive weak spot.

With their right arm momentarily numbed, their blade fell to the ground.

No! This is a trap!

The shadow finally grasped the situation it was in. But the aftereffects of the punch to its diaphragm made its movements too sluggish.

No... My body won't move in time!

Its right arm was still numb, and while its sensation was gradually returning, it was still a major handicap. The shadow gave up on resisting, and instead focused on finding an escape route.

The tent's entrance is behind them... But in this situation I won't be able to break through them. In which case...

By discarding any thoughts of futile resistance and electing to focus on escape, the shadow proved their status as a first-class assassin. The tent was thankfully made of fabric, and unlike wood, any blade could serve to cut a way out of it.

The shadow swiftly wheeled around, running to the opposite side compared to the entrance, leaping over the desk and pushing its body forward, holding up its blade to swiftly cut through the fabric.

"What might you be doing here this late at night?" Sara's voice spoke to the shadow from above.

"Ah!"

Sara definitively sensed the face behind the mask filling with surprise.

"Is this really something to be surprised over?"

The shadow ignored Sara's words and looked around its surroundings.

Where?! Which direction has the least people?!

The way in which the shadow didn't give up, no matter what, was the very image of a professional, but there was no chance of it getting away with Sara blocking its path.

"It's pointless!" Sara lifted her arm, and several fully-armored soldiers appeared from the darkness.

There were roughly twenty of them, and they were led by Lione and Boltz. Even a first-class assassin wouldn't be able to break through such an encirclement.

"Firstly, drop all the weapons on your person!"

After a moment of hesitation, the shadow abided by Sara's order and reached into its pocket. The mercenaries tensed up.

Should I throw it away? Or do I...

Should they obey or not? Only the end result could say which choice would be correct. If they held on to their weapon and resisted, they could be able to decisively break through this encirclement, which would make the option of throwing their weapons away and surrendering peacefully foolish in hindsight.

But then again, the opposite also held true.

"Don't worry, we won't kill you," Sara ordered, reining in the mercenaries' agitation. "Resisting would land you the worst possible conclusion, though... All right? Please, put down your weapons, slowly."

They're being cautious... Breaking through is impossible...

Quickly calculating their options, the shadow reached into their pocket, taking out the small bottle and dropping it at her feet.

Still... If they're ordering me to throw away my weapons, they probably won't kill me right away... Which means I still have my chances.

And as the shadow kept stubbornly groping for a chance, they obeyed Sara's order and dropped all the weapons they carried to the ground. In so doing, gambling for their own survival...

The moon finally showed itself from between the clouds, lighting up the area.

“Start by taking off your mask.”

Obeying Ryoma’s command, the figure undid the fabric that covered their face, and the light of the lamp shone over the figure of a black-haired mercenary. It was Sakuya.

“Well, now that we can all see each other’s faces, I think it’ll be much easier for us to talk.”

Sakuya regarded Ryoma’s words by looking around, wondering if she was being taken for a fool.

“Talk? Don’t you mean interrogate?”

Aside from Ryoma and Sakuya, the tent was populated by Ryoma’s would-be aides; Lione, Boltz and the Malfist sisters, with more than ten other soldiers standing guard outside. The atmosphere was certainly a touch too heavy for mere casual conversation.

“Oh, that’s just a difference in perception, see? If nothing else, I came here to hold a conversation.”

Those words did relieve some of Sakuya’s tension.

Torture doesn’t seem likely for now... I thought he’d have me cut down where I stand, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.

If nothing else, Sakuya gathered that she wasn’t in immediate danger. That wasn’t to say she was letting down her guard, though, but some of her fears were alleviated, at least when it came to physical violence.

“So... What do you intend to speak about to an assassin who came to kill you?”

“Oh, really now. Just lighten up a bit, alright?” Ryoma answered her with a wry smile.

Sakuya loosened up her tensed body, so he’d expected her to be a bit more amicable, but she wasn’t that naive, it seemed. Her expression conveyed that while she trusted that she wasn’t in physical danger, she didn’t intend to say anything needless.

Well, now... How do I get her to talk...?

Ryoma had no intention of getting any information regarding the war out of Sakuya. The reason for that was simple; no matter what information she might give him, Ryoma had no way of confirming its credibility.

Information was precious, of course. In the hands of an apt tactician, it could serve as a blade that would bring a whole country down. But some things mattered more than information.

And what mattered more than the information was how accurate and current that information was.

He could be provided with whatever information he wanted to hear, but so long as he couldn't trust the person who delivered it, or had doubts about their motives, that information was meaningless.

The boy who cried wolf continually tricked everyone around him, and as a result, no one believed him when he actually did see a wolf. The same held true in this case, too.

Ignoring lies altogether was preferable to being fooled once. It was in many ways a safe decision. But that would mean Sakuya had no value to them.

Or so it was, until Ryoma saw the weapon in her hands...

"I'm not going to ask about who hired you. You wouldn't talk anyway... And I have no way of knowing if anything you do say is true or not."

Sakuya's expression changed at Ryoma's words. If she were to take what Ryoma just said at face value, there was no value in Ryoma keeping her alive.

Just what is he trying to get here?

The small doubt rising inside Sakuya gradually began to cloud over her heart. Nothing was scarier than not knowing what your enemy had in store for you.

"Then why keep me alive? I have no use for you." Even as she said that, Sakuya already came to her conclusion inside.

Yes, a reason any woman would pray from the bottom of her heart wasn't the right one.

Maybe he's after my body...?

Sakuya's fear wasn't unfounded. Her appearance was quite attractive. Her black hair was long and sleek, and her slightly tanned, healthy skin was soft and supple. Her assassin's training resulted in her limbs and muscles being tight, but her breasts were still conspicuous enough. Put simply, she was more than beautiful enough to stir a man's lust.

Being an assassin, she'd seen time and again just how nasty and filthy of a place the world could be, and the fear of being forcefully ravaged by a man was always there in the back of her mind.

She was resolved to lay down her own life if she failed in her assassination, but as a woman, it was hard for her to do away with the fear of having her body defiled. All the more so since she'd never known a man before.

No... I don't think that's likely... Sakuya discarded that idea, her gaze quickly turning to Lione and the other women present. If that were the case, he wouldn't have the other women attending.

Putting aside those with extremely particular tendencies, few people enjoyed having their lovemaking seen by other people. And as far as Sakuya knew, Ryoma Mikoshiba wasn't interested in such matters in the slightest. But if that was the case, his intentions were all the more unclear.

"Well, I guess the biggest reason would be personal interest." Ryoma answered, picking up on Sakuya's doubts.

"Personal interest?" Sakuya asked in a perplexed manner.

"See this?"

Ryoma stuck out Sakuya's blade in front of her.

"What about it?" Sakuya couldn't understand what made Ryoma so interested.

It was a katana with a blade of approximately 70 centimeters. And Sakuya realized this wasn't a weapon one saw often on the western continent. But it was too weak of a reason for Ryoma to keep an assassin alive, let alone one caught trying to take his own life.

“This is a good katana. The weight and workmanship are exquisite, too. And it’s practical, at that.” Ryoma nodded with satisfaction, drawing the katana from its scabbard and holding it up against the light.



“Why do you use this?”

Sakuya couldn’t understand the meaning behind Ryoma’s question. It was a tool for killing people. What other reason did an assassin need to use a weapon? But she did understand enough to know the man in front of her wouldn’t accept such an answer.

Possible answers came and went in her mind, and Ryoma changed his question, seeing the doubt in her eyes.

“Are you Japanese?”

But Sakuya’s expression didn’t change at that question, either. She looked like a person who’d just heard some sort of unfamiliar jargon.

“What’s that...? I don’t understand.”

Ryoma didn’t expect Sakuya would answer like that.

What the hell? She’s a black haired, black-eyed assassin wielding a katana, and her skin’s tanned, but she looks like she’s from the yellow race... But when I ask her if she’s Japanese, she doesn’t react...? So she’s basically a shinobi with a katana, who doesn’t have anything to do with Japan? Is this some kind of society that’s unique to this Earth? Or just a coincidence...? No, the color of her skin and her name have to mean she’s somehow related to Japan. If it was just one thing I’d pass it off as a coincidence, but when so many things align...

Countless questions clashed in Ryoma’s mind. He’d had Sara keep an eye on her so far, and this was the first time he’d seen her face. He’d seen her from afar and learned she had black hair two days ago. He’d only learned her name was Sakuya during the previous day’s meeting.

Ryoma wasn’t aware of it at the time, but when Sara told him her name was Sakuya, his heart was filled with longing. Sakuya. He could envision the characters for her name. Was it the characters for ‘night’ and ‘bloom’? Perhaps another combination?

It could be several combinations, in truth, but whichever it was, the name ‘Sakuya’ had a distinctly Japanese ring to it. It was, if nothing else, not the sort of name a Westerner of non-mixed ethnic origin would have. She could very

well be a Japanese person, just like him.

Ryoma understandably suspected so. It had been over half a year since he was summoned to this world. Try as he might to not let it show, he was naturally overcome with homesickness. And all of a sudden, a person with what looked to be a connection to his homeland appeared. Feeling nostalgia at the sight of a fellow countryperson was only natural.

Incidentally, Ryoma felt absolutely no affinity for Saitou, who had served the Empire of O'ltormea. He'd met Saitou soon after he was summoned, and feared for his life. Furthermore, Saitou had sided with the empire Ryoma loathed and made an attempt on Ryoma's life, so the latter's impression of him was about as negative as could be.

In that regard, both Sakuya and Saitou made attempts on Ryoma's life, but her motives and background were still unknown. Cutting her down just because she was on the enemy's side was something his empathy couldn't allow. She might have been summoned and forced to become an assassin, after all.

There was also no denying that Sakuya was a woman, and a beautiful one at that. It wouldn't be odd to feel inclined to try and help her if she were in need.

Ryoma Mikoshiba was a cold and calculated person, but he was still human, and knew kindness and sympathy. It was these contradictions that made one human, after all.

Just as a kind, helpful superior at work might go home and beat their spouse once they're out of sight, so could a hated, overbearing superior actually be a warm, caring family man.

In that regard, Ryoma was a fairly transparent person. He was driven by simplistic reasons. He wanted to survive. To live. And to do that, he would kill anyone without regret.

But what if his life wasn't in immediate danger, and a person in front of him was in need of help? It was only natural for someone to extend a helping hand in such a situation.

Of course, he couldn't make absolute promises that he'd save them at any cost. Some problems were well and truly beyond his ability to help. But he

could at least hear them out; it was simply the human thing to do.

And considering it was a beauty who may have come from the same country as him, he felt all the more inclined to help. No man would find fault with Ryoma over that. It was for these reasons that he had Sakuya captured.

Or, put another way, were it not for these circumstances, Ryoma wouldn't have allowed an assassin who made an attempt on his life to live. And so, Sakuya's lack of reaction to the question of whether she was Japanese turned out to be something Ryoma didn't account for.

"Are you sure you're not Japanese?"

"What country is that? I don't know of it. Is it outside the western continent?"

He tried asking again, and Sakuya answered him clearly.

"If you aren't, then why do you have a Japanese katana?" Ryoma asked pensively.

Another possibility surfaced in his mind. He recalled what the blacksmith whom the owner of the Sea Rumble Parlor had introduced him to had mentioned— that people in the eastern continent wield katanas.

Maybe she's from the eastern continent? Ryoma naturally concluded.

But Sakuya's answer was, once again, something Ryoma did not expect to hear.

"Japanese katana? This is a weapon passed down within my clan."

"Passed down within your clan...?"

Sakuya's answer made Ryoma feel like something was off.

"That's right. Our clan uses katanas, and has done so for generations."

"Doesn't everyone use katanas in the eastern continent?"

"The eastern continent? We've never left the western continent."

Ryoma decided to put all the information he'd learned so far in order. This woman was called Sakuya, and had Japanese characteristics to her appearance. The weapon she used was a Japanese katana.

In China and the Middle East, single-edged swords similar to katanas were sometimes used, but their construction and materials differed greatly, and Ryoma wasn't so much of an amateur to not be able to tell the difference.

But Sakuya didn't know what a Japanese person was, nor did she know katanas were inherently a Japanese weapon, which was unthinkable for a modern Japanese person. No, in the modern age of information and the Internet, one could search the world over and be hard pressed to find someone who didn't know about Japan or its connection to katanas.

If nothing else, she wouldn't be Japanese or of Japanese descent. In which case, there was little chance of Sakuya being forcibly summoned to this world. So was she a descendant of the eastern continent, then? Ryoma didn't know if those that lived there shared physical attributes similar to Japanese otherworlders, but it wasn't outside the realm of possibility.

If so, perhaps Sakuya's name and physical attributes weren't all that unusual. And the blacksmith did tell him katanas were used in the eastern continent. If so, it would make sense for her to use it as a weapon.

That's all just speculation, and I have no proof. But... that would explain a lot.

After thinking of all that, Ryoma had to deny his own idea. Sakuya said this was a weapon passed down within her clan. If she was from the eastern continent, she wouldn't say so.

If nothing else, she wouldn't have considered a katana to be an unusual enough weapon to claim that only her clan made use of it.

And apparently, she'd never been to the eastern continent. Of course, her parents could have descended from there, and that would have resolved the issue neatly, but...

Her clan, she said... A clan, eh...?

There was no reason to take Sakuya at her word, but Ryoma didn't doubt her. After all, even if she were lying, there would be no meaning in doing so. Given her nature as an assassin, it was unthinkable that she'd talk about her client's identity, and if she were to start spilling details about that, Ryoma would immediately suspect that to be a lie.

But Ryoma had asked her something completely unrelated to that. Of course, in some situations, one wouldn't divulge such details to the enemy, but if that were the case, she'd have simply chosen to keep quiet, rather than go to the trouble of making up a lie. In that regard, Ryoma believed her words could be trusted.

"Then, does everyone in your clan use katanas?" Ryoma asked a different question.

"Yes."

"And you're sure you aren't from the eastern continent?" Ryoma asked once more, just to be sure, and was met with a silent shake of the head.

Silence fell over the tent. The Malfist sisters wouldn't interrupt Ryoma to begin with, and Lione and Boltz kept quiet. They likely had things to say, but were content with watching over the proceedings for now.

"Sis... Just what exactly is the lad trying to figure out here?" Boltz whispered to Lione, who stood at his side.

"Beats me... But it doesn't look like it's got anything to do with his tactics..."

"Yeah, don't seem that way to me either..."

"Must be some kind of personal reason..."

Anyone watching this exchange from inside the tent would come to that conclusion.

"Well, whatever it is, we oughta just shut up and pay attention for now."

Boltz nodded quietly at Lione's answer.

"You mentioned a clan... How many are there of you?" Ryoma broke his long silence with a question.

What's his angle? Why is he so interested in my clan?

Sakuya was desperate to find out just what the meaning behind his questions was, but any attempts to think about it were fruitless.

"About two hundred..." Sakuya eventually answered.

"Two hundred..." Ryoma chewed on her answer.

Two hundred men. It was easy enough to say, but realistically, that was quite a lot of people. Imagining a wedding might make it clear enough.

With all of the bride's and groom's relatives gathered along with their friends, having one hundred people was considered a lot. And if that number summed up to two hundred, it should give one an impression of just how many that would be. Ryoma's surprise wasn't unwarranted.

"Do you live in some village, with that many of you?"

Two hundred people was enough to populate a small village. Sakuya shook her head, however.

"No."

"So you're scattered across several villages?"

"No." She shook her head again.

Ryoma was left perplexed. They neither lived together in one place, nor were they scattered across several villages. Which left only one option.

"So you're vagabonds, then."

Sakuya nodded.

It was at that moment that a man's hoarse voice boomed across the tent.

"We have no choice but to do so. Such is our clan's fate..."

As the voice died down, an old man landed in front of the tent's entrance. Was he atop the tent up until now? True, the tent's poles were sturdy enough to support one's weight, but the man was surprisingly limber for that.

"Master Ryoma..." Sara and Lara whispered as they swiftly took to Ryoma's side at the sight of this suspicious intruder.

"It's fine. Stay as you are... Same for everyone else."

Ryoma whispered back, and Lione nodded back, awaiting orders.

Now then, an assassin clan... Looking forward to what he has to say...

If it was an ambush things would be different, but there wasn't much need to panic out of having one more assassin present, and so Ryoma felt comfortable

enough to eye the old man curiously.

But in contrast to Ryoma's composure, Sakuya's gaze was nailed to the old man. She likely didn't expect him to be here, because her eyes were wide with shock.

"Grandfather..." the words slipped from Sakuya's lips, "Why are you here...?"

The man had white hair and a white beard. Like Sakuya, he was dressed in black clothes and black leggings, and his face was etched with deep wrinkles that spoke of the hard life he'd led. In his hand was a bent cane that drew a small arc.

"Oh... So my arrival does not surprise you... I'm not sure if you're too foolish to realize the situation, or simply too gifted to understand..."

Ignoring Sakuya's situation, the old man whispered as he looked around the tent swiftly.

"Oh, we're definitely surprised. After all, we have an uninvited guest in our presence," Ryoma replied with a calm smile, but from the old man's point of view, no one looked at him with surprise.

An impressive man. This young one... He has control over everyone present here.

The old man was quite surprised. With the man at the top remaining composed, those under his command kept calm as well. In other words, young Ryoma Mikoshiba had complete control over the subordinates gathered here.

But controlling the situation was easier said than done. And despite that, this boy easily succeeded where men with more years of experience would fail.

"Hmph! Very well, then... I've just one thing to ask. Why did you spare this girl? What good would sparing an assassin who came for your life bring you? And why do you not try to capture me, when I have appeared so suddenly? It would be easy if you ordered the surrounding soldiers to do so."

"Oh? I thought you appeared in this tent because you already knew all that, old man. I was under the impression you're aware of what I want to ask you," Ryoma answered with a smirk.

If his intent was to save Sakuya, he wouldn't have spoken up and made such an entrance. The fact the old man revealed himself was proof he had cast aside all sense of enmity toward Ryoma.

"I see, so you've already appraised the situation. You're a calm whelp, aren't you... In that case, allow me to ask you. Are you a man of Hinomoto?" The old man asked Ryoma back.

His eyes were thick with an unyielding force of will that wouldn't tolerate any lies. Hinomoto was an ancient term referring to Japan. In other words, "a man of Hinomoto" meant "Japanese." But a modern Japanese person wouldn't include such an archaic name in casual conversation. You'd only hear that term used in a historical novel, or at best, a film or TV series of a similar vein.

"Yes, that's right. I come from the place you call Hinomoto," Ryoma nodded, and at the same time, the old man's words made him come to his conclusion.

A man of Hinomoto, he says... If he's using such an old term for it, he's... probably exactly what I think he is.

"Hmm... I thought that the residents of Hinomoto had forsaken the ways of war in your time, and merely indulge in the spoils of hedonism instead... But it seems there were still warriors such as you among their numbers..." So said the old man, as he turned to Sakuya. "Sakuya. Stand and undo your clothes."

"Huh?" Sakuya went pale at his words. "What... Here...?"

She was an assassin, but a woman nonetheless. She rose to her feet, but seemed hesitant to take off her clothes. Indeed, unless one had some truly unusual interests, most anyone would show resistance to the idea of stripping naked in front of multiple people.

But that resistance seemed to have bought the old man's ire.

"Do not argue!"

As the old man spoke, a glint of light flashed from his staff before being absorbed back into it. When Ryoma saw this, his eyes lit up with curiosity.

"Ooh... Sword drawing techniques. You cut through her clothes without reaching her skin..."

It was a slash performed with godspeed, that did away with any and all needless motion. And on top of that, he slashed only what he intended to cut, not damaging so much as a hair on anything else, marking him as an undisputed master of his craft.

And as if to affirm Ryoma's words, Sakuya's clothes parted to the sides, fluttering to the ground in two cleanly cut halves, exposing two well-formed mounds adorned with red buds.

The air in the tent froze over, and as everyone else was taken aback, Ryoma half-mockingly applauded as he praised the old man.

"Your skill is quite impressive..."

He could say that without a hint of exaggeration. His praise at this overwhelming display of skill was as honest as could be.

The old man smiled at Ryoma's words, and snuck a confirming view at Sakuya's body. He then placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Hmm, as I thought... He landed a blow directly to your weak spot. And the bruise is small... It wasn't just a punch... A spear hand?"

Ryoma responded by silently sticking out his fist.

"Hmm... I see, you stuck out your index finger's second joint..." The man whispered as he observed the way Ryoma clenched his fist. "Quite effective for aiming at one's vulnerabilities..."

"Yes, it's a form of clutch called the finger knuckle fist."

The old man nodded at Ryoma's answer and ran his hand over Sakuya's abdomen, making her wince with pain.

"Ow!"

"Hm. So this is a bruise from a fist... Yes, yes, I see. You change the clutch of your fist based on where you hit. A similar technique is passed down in our clan... This one was meant to disrupt her breathing, yes?"

"Right." Ryoma nodded.

"With your skill level, you could have killed Sakuya at any moment...

Impressive.” The old man said, heaving a sigh.

It was hard to tell if he was lamenting Sakuya’s abilities or admiring Ryoma’s.

Hitting one’s weak points was easy enough a concept to verbalize, but being able to do it in the midst of combat was proof of the gap in skill between the two of them.

Unlike injuries aimed at the eyes or one’s vulnerable privates, a blow to the shoulder or diaphragm required a great deal of strength and an accurate angle to exhibit its desired effects. One couldn’t simply hit those places and expect to cripple the opponent.

The fact he could accurately strike at an assassin’s weak spots— while taking her by surprise in complete darkness, no less— spoke volumes about his skills.

“Well, I did catch her off guard. No telling how it would end if we were fighting face to face.”

It wasn’t a compliment or some attempt to console, but the old man scoffed at Ryoma’s remark.

“Imbecile. What sort of assassin fights face to face?”

His words made Ryoma smile bitterly. They certainly rang true.

“Yes, I suppose so... Oh, wait. I’m rather concerned about Sakuya here, so allow me.”

With that said, Ryoma went over to his bed, picked up a blanket and draped it over Sakuya’s shoulders.

“Th-Thank you.”

“Oh, no. This is just so I can look your way without hesitation.”

Hearing Ryoma’s words, Sakuya covered her breasts with her arms, remembering that her top was slashed off.



“Hmph. Don’t tell me you haven’t known a woman before, whelp?”

“It’s not a question of knowing or not knowing.” Ryoma answered with a shrug. “This is simply the minimum amount of respect I’d show towards any woman.”

Ryoma didn’t consider himself above being interested in women, but wasn’t the type to ogle a woman who’d had her clothes slashed off. Maybe if they were alone in a private room things would be different, but seeing how they were surrounded by other people, it felt all the more imprudent to do so.

Ryoma wasn’t sure if that much consideration was even necessary in this world, but he wasn’t going to go out of his way to break his own moral code unless his life was at risk.

“Now then... We have a few questions to ask ourselves. You don’t mind answering, right?” Ryoma changed the subject.

He couldn’t keep answering this old man’s questions repeatedly, after all. It wasn’t clear who he was, or why he showed himself.

“I do not mind...” The old man answered. “But I think you’ve already predicted most of the answers. Will you still ask, this late in the game?”

“Expectations don’t always align with reality.”

“I see...” The man said pensively. “You’re a cautious one... As a man leading an army should be. Very well, I will answer any question I can.”

“Good. Then first, let me confirm something. Are you and your tribe descendants of people who were summoned?”

“Aye, the first generation of our clan was summoned to this world some five centuries ago.” The old man promptly answered Ryoma’s question. “It is said a certain country in the western continent summoned them...”

“Five centuries ago... Wait, the whole first generation? It wasn’t just one person?”

Overtaken with surprise for a moment, Ryoma realized the old man had just off-handedly mentioned the most surprising detail yet.

“Indeed. Our ancestors’ entire village was summoned.”

“Their entire village...?”

“Aye...” The old man nodded. “Though, it was a small village of twenty or so...”

From what they were told, their ancestors were summoned along with the futons they slept in. It seemed the flow of time between this Earth and Rearth was the same, so a ritual being performed during the night wasn’t out of the question.

“So is it possible to summon entire villages even now?”

Ryoma didn’t recall of hearing about something this unnatural happening. Information traveled fast in his world, and if a whole village disappeared, it would cause quite the riot.

“Nay, ’tis a thing of the past. The catalysts needed for summoning are precious few and harder to come by nowadays, so even a larger country could only manage a few summonings a year.”

So that means... I pretty much got the shittiest roll of the dice...

Only a few summonings a year for a large country... Ryoma didn’t know how many countries there were in this world, but he assumed all of them combined could summon at most two to three hundred people a year. And while Ryoma never saw himself as particularly lucky, if what this old man said was to be believed, he could only rue how truly rotten his luck was.

After all, there were six billion people living in his world, so the probability of being picked out of all of them was astronomically small.

“I see... Next question, then. Why are you still assassins?”

They were summoned five hundred years ago. That was fine. But if they were summoned so long ago, why were they still working in that profession? How does an entire clan operate as assassins to begin with? This was something Ryoma wanted to check.

“Ours was originally a clan of *rappa*.”

Everyone but Ryoma and Sakuya looked at the old man with apprehension.

But being Japanese, Ryoma knew the meaning of that word, though it was admittedly an archaic one.

Rappa, otherwise known as suppa or kusa, were individuals who practiced a certain type of profession. They had many different names, but one stood out among the rest: Ninja.

Yes, if this old man was to be trusted, Sakuya's clan was a clan of ninjas.

Oh, I see... I think I understand why their clan stayed as it was in the five hundred years since.

Sure enough, if a ninja was thrown into a world torn asunder with warfare like this one, they would have no choice but to make use of their skills. They lived through five centuries in this world by polishing their combat skills.

And since they claimed to be *rappa*, it meant Sakuya and her clan weren't just assassins. They were adept at subterfuge, intelligence, disturbance and serving as bodyguards of important persons.

"Hmm, I understand... By the way, which school were you from?"

Of the ninja schools, the Iga and Koga were the most famous. Also, the house that controlled Kanto during the warring states period, Houjou, was served by the Fuuma clan, and the Uesugi house was served by Nokizaru. It was said the Togakushi school still remained in America.

In short, there were quite a few schools, and so Ryoma asked purely out of curiosity. The old man seemed to have no interest in that, however.

"I do not know. A rappa is a rappa. We steal, rob and kill. That's all there is to it. Names matter not."

The name of their school truly wasn't all that relevant. It may have been necessary if one were to make their name known throughout the land, but if they intended to only pass their skills down their clan, there truly was no need for a name to distinguish themselves from others.

"And do you happen to know the name of the region your ancestors lived in?"

"I do not know of its name, but it is passed down that they lived on a mountain adjacent to a lake." The old man honestly answered Ryoma's

persistent questioning.

There was no point in hiding this information.

A lake... Lake Hiwa, maybe? So they're probably descendants of the Koga or the Iga...

Those were ninja villages most people in modern Japan had heard of. It was plausible enough. Or it might be the Lake Suwa, in which case they might be related to the Togakushi school, said to originate in the nearby mount Togakushi of the same name.

I can't say I'm not curious, but I should probably leave it at that.

After all, ninjas were considered to date as far back as the Kamakura period. Some thirty schools were recorded in documents of the time, and if one were to count some uncertain legends that popped up over the years, there had been well over seventy schools.

Their history was shrouded in darkness. And indeed, the mention of them tickled at one's adventurous spirit, to say nothing of Ryoma's personal interest in history. He would have loved to go deeper into the subject, but now wasn't the time.

"Very well... One last question, then." Ryoma said. "Earlier, you answered my question with 'this is our clan's fate'... What did you mean by that?"

The answer to this final question was one he couldn't handily predict. Japanese ninja lived in their particular lands, and either sought out employers or work in the service of a particular master. There were likely plenty of people in power who would kill to have them in their employ. But regardless of that, they wandered without settling for five centuries.

There had to have been some particular reason for that. And Ryoma's question was an understandable one. He didn't get to have it answered, though.

"Mm. I cannot share that information with an outsider." The old man's face contorted significantly. "It touches on our clan's rules, you see."

"I understand. My apologies for asking, then." Ryoma bowed his head

apologetically.

“Oh... Are you not interested in knowing, though?”

Ryoma gave up so easily that the old man instead asked him curiously.

“I’ll pass. It’s not in my interest to pry into other people’s secrets... Besides, they say curiosity killed the cat.”

It was natural instinct for one to harbor interest in other people’s secrets, and the more closely guarded a secret was, the more it piqued one’s curiosity.

But secrets had reasons to be kept hidden, and what may be of little consequence for a stranger could mean the world to those involved.

Having people come after my life because I know too much would be no joke...

Life in this world was already worth little as it was. Ryoma’s point of view was that there was no need to put oneself in more risk than required.

“That’s quite the restraint for one so young... You’ve certainly grasped my interest! My name is Genou. Genou Igasaki. I look forward to a prolonged friendship.”

“Prolonged...?” Ryoma was taken aback by his words.

This was all too sudden.

“Drop the pretense. You saved Sakuya because you wanted to make her into your rappa, did you not? To that end, as her grandfather, I shall serve you alongside her!”

Genou smirked as if he had just done Ryoma a favor. He had such a scowl until now that when he smiled, he looked like an amicable old man.

“Grandfather...?” Sakuya asked fearfully.

“What is it, Sakuya? Don’t tell me you’re dissatisfied with this...? Having failed your task, you should be dead right now. But Master Mikoshiba here saved your life. Letting this one use you is preferable, no?”

Genou started referring to Ryoma as “Master Mikoshiba.” A definite step up from how he’d called him “you” or “whelp.” It seemed Genou was resolved to serve Ryoma.

“Ah... Well... Yes.” Realizing Genou had come to a decision, Sakuya was left with no choice but to nod.

“I’m sure you don’t mind, yes, Master Mikoshiba?”

Genou’s question made Ryoma sink into thought. True, he intended to help her if she was Japanese, and he did consider putting her skills as an assassin to use, but the conversation spiraled out of control with Genou’s sudden appearance.

What the hell’s going on here?

This was a godsend from Ryoma’s perspective. Apart from Sara and Laura, he was in a convenient alliance at best with everyone else. Lione and Boltz were mercenaries that he was able to trust on a personal level, but there was no telling when the knights could possibly betray him.

They only obeyed Ryoma’s orders because Princess Lupis had acknowledged him as commander. If Princess Lupis were to decide to abandon Ryoma instead, the knights would immediately ignore his orders.

In that regard, having capable comrades on his side was something he was thankful for. Except...

This is going too fast... These two showed up to kill me. But... They’re certainly worth using. If I can really get them on my side, it’d be really convenient... The only question is, what do they get out of asking me for this? But if they’re really thinking of serving me...

Ryoma fixed his gaze on Genou. He was in dire need of useful pawns.

I really need people who can handle intelligence... But how do I confirm if the information they bring me is true...? No... I guess that depends on my judgment...

“Fine,” Ryoma concluded.

At the end of the day, trusting someone always requires taking something of a gamble.

“In that case, I and my granddaughter, Sakuya, will be entering your service as of today, Master Mikoshiba... Nay, milord.”

Genou urged Sakuya to bow her head to Ryoma.

“Grandfather! What were you thinking?!” Sakuya finally let out her pent-up frustrations, lashing out at Genou.

They were in a forest a short distance away from the moat, and Sakuya and Genou were the only ones in the vicinity. The only witness of their exchange was the moon floating in the night sky.

“What are you so worked up over, girl?”

Genou’s calm voice only served to irritate Sakuya further.

“What, you ask...? Do you seriously intend to serve that man?!”

“Are you dissatisfied?” Genou casually disregarded Sakuya’s outburst.

“How would I not be?! To begin with, how would I simply accept forfeiting my original task and serving my assassination target?!” Complaints left Sakuya’s lips one after another. “What were you even doing there? I was the one specified for this job, so why were you following me?!”

She was merely eighteen years of age, but was still considered very capable among the younger members of the clan. She wasn’t one to let it go to her head, but she did take pride in her assassin’s skills.

But not only did she fail at her task, she was captured as well. That was irritating in and of itself, but having her grandfather— one of the clan’s elders— appear made it all the more humiliating.

As one of the elders, Genou wasn’t one for active duty, and so the fact he was out there meant the elders doubted Sakuya’s skills. Sakuya thought her abilities were acknowledged, which only made her feel more humiliated.

To top it all off, her grandfather had one-sidedly decided they would serve Ryoma Mikoshiba. Any expectation that she wouldn’t be upset would be exaggerated.

But in her anger, Sakuya had forgotten that despite their blood connection, there was a great gap in social status between her and Genou. She could one day well inherit his position as an elder, but right now, she was nothing more than a skilled lower-class ninja. She must have been quite agitated to hurl so

many complaints at a venerated elder.

This little fool is still lacking when it comes to keeping her heart in check... To lose her temper over this... Genou whispered in his heart, eyeing Sakuya coldly as her anger lingered. *But so be it. How long it has been since our clan found a prospective worthy master to serve? We mustn't let this chance pass us by...*

Normally, he wasn't one to stand for Sakuya to speak to him like this, which only went to show how elated he was. Enough so to not kill Sakuya where she stood.

"Who do you think you're talking to, girl?" The air chilled with murderous intent.

Genou's eyes narrowed like threads, glaring at Sakuya's face. The girl broke into a cold, chilling sweat and fell to her knees.

He's going to kill me... Ah! What have I... What did I just...?

Realizing she had been speaking above her place, Sakuya's heart froze at once. The elders weren't simply a gathering of old men and women. True, they didn't take assassination requests, but this didn't stand as proof of their lack of skill or weakness.

They had spent the majority of their life engaging in dirty work, and were graced with trueborn talent that brought them to the age of sixty. Skilled as she was, a mere eighteen-year-old like Sakuya couldn't hope to compare to them for the sheer amount of times they'd experienced battles to the death.

The murderous intent radiating from her grandfather dragged Sakuya back to reality.

"I-I apologize. I was out of line, speaking in that manner," Sakuya just barely managed to squeeze out those words of apology.

"It is fine..." Genou looked away from his granddaughter, who groveled at his feet. "I understand your reasoning. True enough, having accepted a job, you have a responsibility to see it through... But killing that man would be a waste."

"You think he's worth using...?" Sakuya asked timidly. "But what of the contract...?"

Contracts were especially binding for assassins. An untrustworthy assassin would never be hired, especially one that elected to serve their assassination target. It could have implications on the clan's livelihood and survival.

Genou, however, scoffed at Sakuya's objection.

"A trifling matter. Contracts are for peace of mind and nothing more! You are well aware of the humiliation our clan has been subjected to! Do you truly believe that noble Gelhart will give us the reward we were promised?"

Genou's words left Sakuya speechless. Some people would shower them with promises when signing the contract, only to skimp out on the payment once the job was done. The truly vile sent soldiers to eliminate them instead. Sakuya had been betrayed by clients several times in the past already.

And Duke Gelhart was infamous for his stinginess. The amount he specified this time was unusually high, but whether he would actually pay that much was a different matter altogether.

"But won't that reduce the number of clients we'll receive in the future...?"

"I do not mind. Not being able to work in this country is hardly an issue. We are vagabonds, when all is said and done. We need simply work in another country. I'm sure there's no shortage of lands that would desire our services. But what interests me much more is that man... He may very well be..."

Genou's words trailed off.

I mustn't tell Sakuya yet... And I must report this to the elder council... But that man. Were he simply a soft-hearted man, he'd have been a disappointment. But the skill I sensed from him... If I am not mistaken, our days of wandering may be at an end.

Genou whispered in his heart, recalling the events of the day. When Sakuya was captured, he was resolved to see his granddaughter's death.

Even among the clan, Sakuya was especially skilled, and was given considerable training. The elder council did not consider her to have simply been a ninja obeying orders. And so they dispatched her grandfather, Genou, to serve as insurance.

He was to confirm Sakuya's skills, and if she failed in her attempt, Genou was to take responsibility for the situation with his own two hands.

But even regardless of a grandfather's biased eyes, Sakuya's skills were impressive. Her nimbleness, the way she cloaked her presence, her resolve. They were all more than up to the highest standards.

But she was up against the wrong person.

Or rather, up against the worst possible match. Thanks to his long training, Genou's night vision was superior to Sakuya's, and having cut a peephole at the top of the tent, he was able to see the full details of Ryoma's plot.

He placed a corpse clad in armor in his bed, and stood like a model clad in armor himself...

Ryoma sat at the corner of the tent, posing as a figurehead that had armor placed on it. That alone was more than enough to fool any intruders to the tent without any illumination.

Leaving the armored corpse on the bed, he awaited Sakuya's arrival. Sakuya would never suspect someone would go to sleep in bed still wearing their armor, causing a momentary gap in her caution when the blade was deflected. And it was all too easy for Ryoma Mikoshiba to strike at the weak point of a staggered, surprised person.

Genou could only admire Ryoma's ploy.

"So, grandfather... Why did you choose to serve that man?" Sakuya called out to Genou, who had sunk into silent contemplation.

This was one thing Sakuya wanted explained to her, even if it meant spurring the old man's anger.

"I suspect our clan's vagabond ways may come to an end soon."

"Huh?!" Sakuya couldn't suppress her surprise at Genou's words.

Their clan had wandered this world for five hundred long years. And the old man just said that may come to an end.

"What do you mean by that...?"

“You have no need to know yet... It is only in the realm of possibility right now. Now then, are you done with your questions? Our Lord has given us two days. We won’t make it if we dawdle much further.”

Genou concluded his words, and turned around, heading deeper into the forest.

Their clan was currently secretly residing in the forest twenty kilometers north of Heraklion. Ryoma only gave them a two-day time period. Even with their tempered physical conditions, it was only barely enough time to make a round trip and report to the elder council.

“Yes, grandfather,” Sakuya nodded before taking off after Genou.

“Just what is the meaning of this, Genou?” one of the elders raised his voice in a shout. “Was it not your task to carry on Sakuya’s task should she fail?! To cancel it and swear to serve your assassination target is unheard of!”

Their anger was not unjustified. Even Sakuya, who sat across from her grandfather, didn’t quite fathom what the old man was thinking.

“W-Well...” Sakuya herself wanted to ask the same question.

If nothing else, she had no intent on giving up on her contract, but had no choice but to obey her grandfather, who was also one of the elders. Sakuya parted her lips to explain, but another elder cut into her words.

“Silence. No one asked you... This all happened because you failed to carry out your duties! You were supposedly skilled among the lower-ranking ninjas, but it seems our expectations were misplaced. And you have the audacity to return to us alive? By whose permission are you even present here to begin with?!”

The shout echoed through the small wooden cabin. The only people usually permitted entrance to this place were the five elders who decided the goings-on of the Igasaki clan. Even with Sakuya being Genou’s granddaughter, she was still a mere lower-ranking ninja and wasn’t permitted to be here.

But she was involved with this incident, and thus her presence here was required. She would have to report on what happened, if nothing else. And still, angry shouts bore down on her one after another.

“To start with, you...”

Sakuya wanted nothing more than for them to quiet down and give her a chance to explain herself. Unable to watch Sakuya’s plight any longer, another elder who had been observing the conversation parted her lips to speak.

“Now, now, Ryusai. No need to raise your voice. Sakuya was merely abiding by Genou’s orders, as any lower-ranking ninja should. Accusing her over that would be unjust.”

It was an old woman clad in a reddish-brown garment, her face wrought with wrinkles and her white hair tied in the back.

“It is just as Ume says...” another old woman sitting next to her nodded. “And I doubt Genou would act the way he did on a whim. Should we not hear his reason first, Jinnai?”

With that said, the old woman looked around, her thread-like eyes shining sharply. Scrutinized by that glare, the old man who had shouted at Sakuya sat back down in annoyance.

The women who placated the shouting old men were the two female elders, Ume and Sae. Along with Genou and the other two men, Ryusai and Jinnai, they formed the elder council.

Unsatisfied as the two men were, they were mediated by fellow elders. Both Ryusai, who had raised his voice, and Jinnai, who blamed Sakuya, had no choice but to restrain themselves. Still, this wasn’t to say Sae and Ume blindly sided with Genou.

“And still, Genou, Ryusai’s and Jinnai’s outrage is justified...” Ume said, directing a sharp glance in Genou’s direction. “We expect a convincing explanation.”

“That we do.” Sae also looked in Genou’s direction. “Surely you didn’t act out of some manner of whim.”

They were simply neutral and wanted to avoid not listening to the circumstances out of blind emotion; they certainly weren’t tacitly consenting to Genou’s actions.

But even in the face of the cold gazes directed his way, Genou parted his lips calmly.

“That man may be the one the first generation was looking for... At least, from what I’ve felt of him, it’s quite possible.”

The air froze over at those words.

“Genou... Is that...”

“It cannot be...”

The elders’ expression turned surprised.

“Are you sure, Genou...?”

“If that is true, we... No good! We must quickly go and greet him!” Ryusai said, and was met with a nod from Jinnai.

Sakuya could hardly contain her shock as she watched the normally calm members of the council react with dismay.

“Wait! I said it is just a possibility.”

““But—!””

Ryusai and Jinnai’s voices overlapped as they spoke out against Genou’s attempt to restrain them.

Their attitude was the opposite of how it had been earlier. But both Ryusai and Jinnai realized the grave importance of what Genou said.

“Enough!” Genou raised his voice.

“Just restrain yourselves, Genou merely brought it up as a possibility... Though we won’t deny we feel the same way as you two...” Ume turned her face to Genou, trying to placate the argument that broke out. “You have no doubt that he is of Hinomoto, like the ones of the first generation?”

“His eyes and hair are black just like ours, and his skin is yellow. And he called Sakuya ‘Japanese’... There is no mistaking that he is a man of Hinomoto.”

“I see, so there’s no problem with his bloodline...” Sae whispered softly. “The rest depends on his nature and heart... Though I suppose it’s not something we can conclude so quickly.”

“Ume, Sae, don’t you think we should meet that person as soon as possible after all? It would be too late if anything should happen.”

“Ryusai speaks the truth. He is currently in the midst of war with Duke Gelhart. Even if we give up on our contract, the duke might simply hire another assassin. What if something were to happen? Our chance to accomplish the clan’s goal would become all the more remote.”

Ryusai and Jinnai were both the proactive type. By contrast, the two women, Sae and Ume, were more cautious.

“Oh, we have no need to hurry. If he is the one the first generation sought, he will surely survive by his own strength.”

“Truly... We’ve already waited for five hundred years... We can introduce him to the clan once we’ve confirmed his nature...”

With three of the five elders advocating a cautious approach, Ryusai and Jinnai couldn’t object any further.

“For now, Sakuya and I will return to his side. I doubt it would take much time for his worth to become evident. What say you we use his war with Duke Gelhart to ascertain his prowess, my friends? Will you lend me your aid this time?”

Genou looked around.

“If you say so, Genou, I have no objection.”

“I agree with Ume.”

Since Ume and Sae were in agreement, the matter was all but decided. But Jinnai parted his lips to speak again.

“If you are that confident in his abilities that you have seen, I suppose that it is fine. But will you and Sakuya be alright on your own? We could send the rest of the clan’s younglings.”

“I concur with Jinnai. There’s no telling what might happen on the battlefield! Better to have safety in numbers, don’t you agree, Genou?”

Ryusai and Jinnai held no grudge against Genou. The two proposed the idea entirely out of concern for Ryoma’s well-being, and it was because he knew this

that Genou didn't coldly refuse their words.

"No... Considering the situation, he would have no reason to trust us. Bringing the younglings along without his knowledge and approval would be foolish. And since it is all still in the realm of possibility, letting the younglings know of him would be premature."

"Fair points," Ume gave a light nod. "If we bring such large numbers to him, he would surely become cautious of us."

"Aye, it is as Ume says. First, we must allow Genou to serve him loyally, so he gradually learns to trust us."

"That sounds reasonable..." Jinnai nodded deeply at her words, turning his gaze to Ryusai. "What say you, Ryusai?"

With that much said, Ryusai couldn't object much longer.

"I was a bit short-tempered, it seems." Ryusai scratched his head with a wry smile. "Hearing the man the first generation hoped for may finally be upon us seems to have made me flare up somewhat."

"We cannot fault you for it." Genou regarded him with a calm smile. "Our clan's most ardent wish may be on the cusp of being realized, after all."

At that moment, someone knocked on the door to their hut.

"Who is it?! We are in the middle of an important discussion right now!"

Jinnai swiftly rose to his feet and opened the door.

"It is you, Kojirou..." Jinnai's expression changed when he saw the middle-aged man before him gasping for air. "Why so pale?"

"There is urgent news I must relay to you..."

It must have been quite important, Jinnai thought as he brought his ears to Kojirou's lips.

"Yes... Mmm, mmm... What?!" Jinnai exclaimed. "The Divine Sword has hummed?!"

Raising one's voice like that was unacceptable for a ninja, but no one present could find in themselves to chastise Jinnai for it. They could all simply feel the

heavy silence bearing down on them as they struggled to process what Jinnai had just said.

It had been several days since Genou Igasaki spoke to the elder council.

Ryoma stood in his tent at the center of the camp, his heart absolutely mesmerized by the katana Genou had given him. It was no famous blade, but swords that had gained any kind of fame mostly owed that fame not so much to their quality, but rather to the person who wielded the blade, or to the history given to it.

For instance, the Dojigiri Yasutsuna, one of the blades celebrated as the Five Greatest Swords Under the Heavens, was known for the legend of how Watanabe no Tsuna, a warrior of the Minamoto clan, used it to sever an Oni's hand. Dubious authenticity of the tale aside, famous swords tend to have such legends attached to them.

But unfortunately, the katana in Ryoma's hands had no such history. In that regard, it couldn't be called a famous or excellent sword. But even if Ryoma did have that kind of sword in hand to start with, he'd be too awestruck to use it.

It doesn't have much in terms of artistic value, but it's certainly the best kind of weapon I could hope to find.

It was about 70 cm in length. The katana was of the typical variant used in normal combat, curved along the center of the blade. Since it was meant to be used on the battlefield, its guard and grip were entirely unadorned, in what was called Satsuma workmanship, and the blade was about twice as thick as an ordinary blade.

The rivets on the grip of a katana were usually bamboo, but this one used steel that would not bend easily. The grip, normally constructed to prevent it slipping out of the hand due to sweat, wasn't coated with silk, but rather with some kind of animal leather. In terms of devotion to practicality, it was no work of art, but more akin to a blade designed for manslaughter.

"Master Ryoma... Are you sure you can trust them?" Laura asked her master in a concerned, timid manner, as he eyed the sword adoringly.

She honestly couldn't recall many times she'd seen Ryoma in this much of a

good mood. She didn't want to ask anything too contrary of him, but on the other hand, Ryoma was acting so unlike himself that she couldn't help but do so.

"Huh...? Oh, you mean Genou?" Ryoma said, drawing the sword in his hands.

He was seated on a carpet spread over the ground, swinging the sword upward.

"What do you think? Isn't this glint just beautiful?"

Without answering Laura's question, Ryoma eyed the light shining off the blade.

"Master Ryoma!"

"What? Are you that worried about them?" Ryoma asked, wincing at Laura's angry rebuke.

"Yes... You do remember they were assassins who came for your life, yes? There's no telling whether they might double cross you..."

This was a possibility Ryoma had considered, of course. There was no reason to believe what Genou Igasaki and his granddaughter said. But even with that obvious doubt pointed out, Ryoma simply smiled with composure.

"That's been obvious from the get-go. I was going to let them go free from the start, at least for the moment... But I guess things did go a bit off schedule."

"Be serious about this! Is it not that sword which occupies your full attention?!" Her eyes glared at the katana Genou had presented to Ryoma.



“Well, I suppose you got me there. It’s not exactly inconsequential,” Ryoma admitted unapologetically.

He probably knew there was no point in trying to pretend otherwise.

“But in their defense, they did come back by the appointed time.”

Laura couldn’t argue back much more than she already had at that response. After all, of all the leading forces, Ryoma was alone in his belief that Genou would return.

On that night, Genou and Sakuya said they wanted to leave the camp so they could report the situation to their clan, and Ryoma allowed it. Laura and Sara were vehemently against it, as were Lione and Boltz, but Ryoma didn’t lend their apprehensions any concern.

Ryoma couldn’t tell if Genou truly intended to serve him at the time, but he also thought that the one thing they wouldn’t do was just up and disappear somewhere. They wouldn’t flee if they gave up on the assassination, and if they didn’t give up on it, they had all the more reason to stay by their target’s side.

“That much is true, but...” Laura responded to Ryoma’s words with dissatisfaction.

And that dissatisfaction was understandable. The Malfist sisters had now spent six months at Ryoma’s side, and their loyalty to him was all the more rigid for it, but that didn’t mean their obedience to him was blind.

The two certainly thought and acted of their own wills; while they respected Ryoma, and certainly wouldn’t do anything to harm him, they would actively warn and remonstrate with him. Ryoma Mikoshiba was a strong and wise man, but they both knew he was no invincible hero.

I don’t care if he despises or shuns us for it... Our role is to point out whenever he overlooks something.

That was the role the sisters imposed on themselves, and Ryoma understood this very well. That was why he trusted them.

“Well, your concerns are definitely valid and understandable. I don’t trust them very much either. You two are the only subordinates I have absolute trust

in... You know that, right?”

Laura nodded. The twins both realized this wasn’t a situation where they could view their position optimistically. It was in this regard that gaining more subordinates he could use couldn’t be seen as a mistake.

“That said, however... You say you can’t trust the soldiers, but does the same not hold true for them as well?”

The soldiers Princess Lupis lent him and the assassins dispatched to assassinate her master were all untrustworthy. But from Laura’s perspective, the knights were the more dependable party in this situation. Sara was of similar mind, though she was currently away, showing Sakuya and Genou around the camp.

While neither group was trustworthy, the knights would at least refrain from harming Ryoma unless they were ordered to by the princess. Ryoma, however seemed to suspect the opposite, thinking Genou was more worthy of trust than the knights were.

“They are, but... Laura, you’re misunderstanding something... Well, never mind. I’ll just make this into your homework, so once you figure out what I mean, tell me.”

“Homework...?”

“Yeah, think about it with Sara and Lione... Oh, but not Boltz. He’d understand what I mean.”

Ryoma had recently taken to saying things like this, as if to teach Laura and Sara how to think more independently. He only had a few dependable subordinates, so he chose to make each individual one stronger.

Trying to understand the reasons behind Ryoma’s actions would not only teach them how to think, it would also allow them to understand his nature as a person better, thus killing two birds with one stone.

Boltz, however, had lifelong experience that granted him such wisdom. He was a commander on the field, and thus, Ryoma couldn’t pull him back from the frontlines, but he did want to have Boltz by his side and hear his opinions; almost as much so as he relied on the twins.

“Very well... But are you quite sure that katana isn’t the reason?” Laura glared at the sword in his hands again.

“Sigh... Don’t you trust me? I mean... I’m not dumb enough to put my trust in someone just because they gave me a sword.” Ryoma shook his head in exasperation.

Laura didn’t back down, however, her gaze bursting with sarcasm as she turned towards a spear propped up in the corner of Ryoma’s tent.

“I do believe they also presented you with that spear over there, yes?”

That spear had a shape unlike anything Ryoma saw before. Most of the spears used commonly in the western continent had straight tips, not unlike swords. Some were halberds, which had axe-like spearheads attached to them, but they weren’t the most accepted type.

But he’d never seen a cross-shaped spear with hooks on both sides of the blade before. Inspecting it more closely, some kind of metallic tube dangled from its hilt.

“Ah... Yeah, they did give me that cross-shaped spear, but, uh... Seriously, just because they gave me stuff doesn’t mean I trust them. Honest.”

Laura only barely managed to hold back a smile over how Ryoma’s words sounded like poor excuses. The more he pressed those claims, the less credible they sounded.

“Well, never mind. I have no objections, as long as you’ve thought your decisions through before making them.” Laura said before bowing her head and leaving the tent.

It seemed she had nothing more to say on the matter. At worst, even if Ryoma was fooled, the twins were prepared to defend Ryoma with their own bodies if they had to.

“Is she mad or something?” Ryoma, left alone in the tent, muttered to himself.

He’d only realized it recently, but Laura and Sara were vaguely similar to his cousin, Asuka. Or rather, they were exactly the same as her when the time

came to make a statement against him.

“Well, no big deal, I guess... I can’t deny that this is a pretty sweet gift...”

Ryoma understood that the sword Genou presented him with was more impressive than he’d ever imagined. The blade was thicker than standard, and the length was suited for fighting on the battlefield.

But the sweetest part of the deal wasn’t the gift itself, but the fact that Genou promised to handle the everyday maintenance of the katana. Ryoma could have handled it, but he didn’t have the means to fix any nicks in the blade or keep it whetted. In particular, the latter required the aid of an expert.

A sword used in real combat would suffer regular chips and nicks, with the blood of its victims sticking to the blade and dulling it over time. The hilt itself was covered in yarn to prevent slips in the hand, but spatters of blood could very well seep into the yarn and cause it to decay.

The sword wasn’t made to be an object of art, and so it didn’t have any coat of arms or any signs of unique craftsmanship. Its appearance was, in all honesty, trivial, but one couldn’t take a sword bereft of its edge to the battlefield.

With that in mind, a sword that one couldn’t properly maintain wasn’t a truly viable weapon. But Genou had resolved that problem, and Ryoma couldn’t help but feel grateful for it.

“I’m glad I set this as a condition...”

Upon hearing Genou’s request, Ryoma set this katana as a bargaining point. He’d thought of it upon seeing Sakuya’s katana, but what he’d been given was of a higher quality than he’d imagined.

“Still, I can’t exactly trust them over this alone...”

On its own, he was grateful for their giving him the katana and the spear, as the martial arts his grandfather taught him did make use of katanas and spears. He could use the spears and swords of this world, but he was more accustomed and comfortable fighting with a cross-shaped spear and katana.

But even with that said, Ryoma wasn’t naive enough to put his faith in Genou just because he gave him things he wanted.

“Genou Igasaki and his granddaughter, Sakuya... Descendants of Tateoka no Doshu, from the looks of it.”

There was a text known as the *Bansenshūkai*, composed during the Edo Period of Japan. It was a ninjutsu text composed by the Fujibayashi clan, one of the three greater ninja houses of the Iga, but it included records of the active Iga school ninjas who were active during the late Warring States Period.

It included the names of renowned masters, like Shimotsuge no Kizaru and Otowa no Kido. And it also extended to Tateoka no Doshu— otherwise known as Igasaki Doshun.

Genou made no claims to being part of the Iga school, but judging from his distinctive last name of Igasaki, it was likely he was distantly related to Igasaki Doshun.

The ninjas of the Igasaki were famous for training their young strictly from infancy, and their skill was acknowledged far and wide. Assuming he could form a relationship of trust with them, it would be a windfall for Ryoma.

It’d probably be best if I don’t do anything unnecessary until I win the war with Duke Gelhart, though... The question is how much this tactic will pay off...

Now that he’d used up his ace of the flooding attack, he could only rely on this tactic to swing the tides of the coming battle.

It’s been five days since Kael’s attack, and Duke Gelhart’s being quieter than I expected. Is my tactic being effective, or is he pulling something behind the scenes...? Whichever it is, there’s still two more days until Princess Lupis arrives. The final battle’s right ahead of us...

A sunset not unlike any other sluggishly sank below the horizon.

Now then, how will things go?

Ryoma wasn’t one to believe in God. But right now, he did want to pray for a victory in the upcoming battle against Duke Gelhart...

“Are the formations ready?!” Duke Gelhart’s angry shout echoed through his office, with no less vigor than any prior day.

After Kael’s crushing defeat, Duke Gelhart sent a mobilization order to the

rest of the nobles' faction. In addition to the thirty thousand troops already gathered in Heraklion, he called for them to gather the soldiers scattered across their territories and concentrate their armies in the city.

The time he'd given for them to do so was two days, but fewer nobles than expected had heeded his call. But it wasn't just the nobles who were the problem.

"No, it's taking longer than expected..." one of his aides reported, prepared for the duke's rage to rain down on him.

"Idiots! Why are they taking their time?! It's been three days since I gave the order! I don't care if you have to extort the nobles, tell them to be in Heraklion by tomorrow!"

"But... The problem isn't with the nobles..." the aide desperately clung to his claims.

He would be held responsible for any half-baked orders he would receive and fail to fulfill, so if he didn't inform his master that his impossible requests were exactly that, it would be his head on the chopping block.

"What do you mean?! What is the problem, then?!"

Duke Gelhart's words prompted the aide to fearfully explain the situation, which turned out to be a more severe problem than Duke Gelhart had ever imagined.

Just what is going on here? Why are the commoners refusing to conscript?! They were promised they could take the gear of any enemies they kill!

Having heard his aide's explanation, Duke Gelhart sent everyone away from his room, sinking into his chair gravely.

No... I know exactly what the reason is. It's all his fault...

Ryoma Mikoshiba's name surfaced in Duke Gelhart's mind.

The aide's explanation was as such: after Kael's loss of six thousand men, Duke Gelhart's forces stood at just below sixty thousand men. That included the territories directly under Duke Gelhart's control, as well as the conscripted commoners of the rest of the nobles' faction.

The problem began with the fact that Heraklion lacked the production capacity to support sixty thousand men. Or rather, any city imaginable lacked such a capacity.

Perhaps things were different for a country as large as the Empire of O'ltormea, but Rhoadseria's territories, at least, didn't have any such cities. What this meant was that their total force of sixty thousand could only be used for a limited time.

And now, Duke Gelhart had sent a mobilization order to take down Ryoma's force of a mere two thousand. That was likely because Princess Lupis was approaching Heraklion using the bridgehead Ryoma secured.

If he was going to send all his forces to clash against the princess, using it to crush the nuisance currently before his eyes felt like a natural progression for the duke, and so he issued his mobilization order. But it wasn't being heeded.

The reason it was being ignored was because of a rumor that spread among the commoners, reaching as far as the villages and territories belonging to the nobles' faction.

Even now, that bloody idiot Kael gets in my way!

Duke Gelhart cursed in his heart. His anger was great enough that if Kael was before his eyes right now, he may well have cut him down with his own two hands.

Ryoma's flooding attack claimed six thousand out of Kael's eight thousand men, and exaggerated news of the event had spread to Heraklion and its surrounding villages.

"Hey! Have you heard? Sir Kael lost!"

"Yeah, I hear he lost despite having four times the enemy's forces, right?"

"Yeah... Apparently most of his men got slaughtered."

"Whoa, scary..."

"Hey, d'you know who the enemy commander was?"

"Yes... They say it's some cold-blooded demon named Ryoma Mikoshiba."

“The hell?! A demon? That’s ridiculous!”

“Idiot! You can’t just talk like that! They say he flooded the Thebes to drown Sir Kael’s soldiers!”

“For real...? Thaumaturgy can’t accomplish such a thing, right...? Can a human even do that?”

“What’d I tell you? He’s a demon!”

Those kinds of baseless rumors were spreading like wildfire. The commoners were going around telling stories that would make Ryoma himself laugh out loud had he heard them. The commoners certainly weren’t laughing, though.

That devil was their enemy, after all.

“Hey... Doesn’t this sound really bad for us?”

“Yeah... They say he shows no mercy to his enemies...”

“I heard he slaughters all his prisoners, too.”

Truth and lies mingled to form the single image of a devil named Ryoma Mikoshiba. And as those rumors were circulating, the mobilization order was handed down. Most people wouldn’t dare volunteer to become soldiers in that situation unless they were truly and utterly mad.

And so, regardless of the mobilization order, only thirty thousand gathered under Duke Gelhart’s banner.

“Blast it all!” Malice spilled from Duke Gelhart’s lips.

The situation was far worse than he had imagined. He’d had his aides deploy knights to the farmlands and forcibly gather soldiers, but it seemed that gathering the sixty thousand he expected to have would be impossible.

“Fifty thousand at best... No, under the circumstances, that’s an optimistic estimate... If worse comes to worst, we won’t even reach that number...”

If they were to be too forceful with coercing the commoners, they could very well just panic and flee the villages. Such was the extent of the fear which Ryoma Mikoshiba had whipped up within them.

In terms of quality, he would never be able to gather the sort of knights

Princess Lupis had on her side. He absolutely needed the numerical advantage to bridge that gap— but he couldn't gather those numbers.

"It can't be." An ominous thought crossed the duke's mind. "Is this all part of the enemy's plan...?"

Kael's defeat was an inconvenient truth, but how did it spread among the commoners in such precise detail? This situation was all too disadvantageous for Duke Gelhart, and if this was some manner of coincidence, he would have wanted to choke the life out of the gods.

But what if it wasn't a coincidence? What if the enemy spun their plot not just against the eight thousand before their eyes, but while looking over the situation from a wider perspective? Maybe their objective wasn't simply to drown his soldiers to death.

What if the man who spread that rumor was Ryoma Mikoshiba himself?

"No... It can't be... That's not possible! If that were the case... he'd have to be some sort of devil who can see the future!"

Gelhart brushed off the terror starting to creep over his mind. But his heart surely feared Ryoma Mikoshiba— and that fear would go on to change Ryoma's own fate.

Chapter 4: Those Who Struggle

“Sudou... I’m begging you, please help me...”

As the sunset’s red glow illuminated the room in Heraklion’s castle, Duke Gelhart bowed his head before a man whose face was obscured with a hood.

“Please raise your head, Sir Duke,” a dignified response came from beneath the hood. “I am not worthy of having someone as lofty as you kowtow before me...”

That said, any courtesy this man showed was certainly hypocritical.

“Please! You’re the only one I can turn to!”

It was an attitude one would never expect out of Duke Gelhart. Sudou was sneering at him from beneath his hood, though, because he knew exactly why Duke Gelhart was maintaining such a modest approach.

The reason could be traced back to the events of that morning.

“You’re asking me to hand command of all the nobles’ faction’s military to you? What’s gotten into you, Hodram? Have you gone mad?!”

Duke Gelhart’s shout echoed through the room as he eyed General Albrecht with bloodshot eyes. And it wasn’t his usual anger, which was often steeped with irony. True wrath, steeped with murderous intent, emanated from the duke’s body like fire.

That anger was natural, however. General Albrecht’s demand was simply that preposterous. The general, however, showed no sign of impatience. Despite his status as a guest, he grandly demanded Duke Gelhart handed over command of the military, which was very much the core of one’s might and authority, entirely to him, but his eyes were as calm as a still spring.

“Of course. With your command, we would end up losing a war we should, by all accounts, be winning. Do you not understand this, Duke Gelhart?”

“You bastard! I sheltered you after you fled, and this is how you repay me?!”

This meeting was for them to decide their future course of action, but had by

now become an arena for the duke and general to vie for the right to lead.

“But we shall certainly win without a doubt if I take the lead. Sorry to say, but you are not the right man for this role, Duke Gelhart. Diminutive though my skills are, would it not be better if the reins were handed to me?”

Duke Gelhart initially thought to give him the right to command part of his soldiers, and to make good use of him. General Albrecht, however, saw no point in having someone with no actual experience in the lead to begin with. Taking command on his own would be more efficient.

Soon after the council began, General Albrecht rejected Duke Gelhart’s proposal, which complicated the meeting.

“Preposterous drivel! There are plenty of experienced warriors under Duke Gelhart’s command! There’s no need to relinquish command to you, General!”

“Oh? That’s the first I’ve heard of such experienced warriors. But I have heard of... What was his name again? The one who lost despite having four times the enemy’s numbers...? Oh, yes, Kael. I know him quite well indeed.”

General Albrecht’s face contorted with mockery. The aide who had called for the General was at a loss for words. It was true that Duke Gelhart didn’t have a commander more skilled than Kael.

“Th-That’s...”

“To begin with! I believe that the fact Duke Gelhart has placed such an incompetent commander in charge of his army calls his own abilities into question. Is that not so?”

“What?!”

“The nerve!”

Duke Gelhart and his aides flared up upon hearing General Albrecht’s audacious statement.

“Oh? I merely speak the truth, and still you grow angry? This only proves how pathetic a man you are, honorable Duke Gelhart!” said General Albrecht, his tone absolutely rife with contempt for the duke.

Hypocritical courtesy? No... It was nothing more than outright scorn.

“You bastard... What are you thinking?” Duke Gelhart asked.

Why? How can he afford to act so confident...? All he has under his command is two thousand knights. I have twenty thousand, though they’re currently in position... Why?

True, his situation was unfavorable because of Ryoma Mikoshiba’s actions, but he couldn’t see what General Albrecht’s justification for acting so aggressively was.

“I want to win this war, and I am only doing what is necessary to ensure that outcome.”

I understand that much... But that can’t be all there is to it!

Looking at things impartially, General Albrecht’s claims were justified. There was no doubting that, in terms of capability, General Albrecht was the best man for the job. But...

“I agree with General Albrecht’s opinion!”

Duke Gelhart’s conflicted thoughts were disturbed by a call from one of the corners of the room.

“““What?!”””

All eyes in the room focused on one man.

“Did you not hear me? Then I shall say it again! I concur that all rights of command should go to General Albrecht!”

The conference room went completely silent. No one could find the words to respond to what had just happened.

“What is the meaning of this?” Duke Gelhart growled in a cold, quiet voice. “Are you betraying me... Kael?!”

Of all people, it was Kael, the one who had given Albrecht the pretext to delegitimize the duke, who spoke up in the general’s favor. It was impossible for Duke Gelhart to suppress his anger.

“What are you saying, milord? I am simply acting to see that my duties are fulfilled in the best manner possible!”

“What...?” Duke Gelhart was taken aback by Kael’s borderline aggressive words.

“To begin with, you only accepted me because you respected my talent for command, and I’m not acting out my role of ensuring you win this war, milord!”

Kael then paused, looking around the nobles sitting in the conference room.

“So, if we’re to beat an enemy even I couldn’t defeat, we’ve no choice but to hand command over to a general more experienced than myself!”

“K-Kael... How dare you!” Duke Gelhart realized Kael’s intentions.

The bastard is trying to strike while the iron’s hot and get in Hodram’s favor! I’ve been had... I shouldn’t have let him attend this meeting!

He’d realized Duke Gelhart didn’t trust him after his earlier defeat and acted out of self-preservation.

This was truly a careless mistake. Duke Gelhart decided to give up on Kael upon learning of his defeat, but he didn’t imagine Kael would be aware of that. The duke’s tendency to get as much use out of him as possible granted Kael a chance to turn things in his favor.

Blast it all! Why did I call Kael here?!

Duke Gelhart’s gaze bored into the aide sitting beside him. But this was the duke’s fault, after all. When his aide proposed to punish Kael, he said he would deal with him later on, but he never gave the order to withdraw his authority. And what became of that?

Despite being treated as having been punished, he was given the same treatment as before, in which case he would naturally be present in an important discussion with General Albrecht regarding their future policy.

“Oh! So you’re Sir Kael...! My, I suppose one shouldn’t rely on rumors after all. I never expected you’d have such clear ability to assess the situation!”

“Your kind words are not worthy of being bestowed upon me.”

General Albrecht had done nothing but mock Kael earlier, but now his tone was the direct opposite of that, and despite having heard the general speak foul of him, Kael didn’t seem to mind.

“I see... If Sir Kael says so, I have no option but to concur with his words.”

“What!”

“What is this foolishness... Count Adelheit! What are you saying?!”

Yet another one of Duke Gelhart’s men spoke in approval of General Albrecht’s taking command of the military.

His aide’s face turned white. Hardly surprising. Count Adelheit was the second most important man in the nobles’ faction. In other words, the man who served as Duke Gelhart’s right-hand man for years approved of General Albrecht’s opinion.

“My apologies. Duke Gelhart... Please, do not think ill of us over this. We are responsible for our vassals... We cannot afford to sit idly by and let death claim us.”

His tone made it clear it was a grave choice he had to bitterly make, but it did nothing to silence Duke Gelhart. The man had leeched off Rhoadseria for decades. Responsibility for his vassals? Duke Gelhart knew full well Adelheit felt nothing of the sort.

But him appearing to be a kind-hearted, apologetic old man who made a pained decision certainly did silence everyone around them.

This is... already done for...

While his heart was seething with enmity and rage, his mind clearly perceived the situation. With the second most-powerful man in the nobles’ faction being in favor of General Albrecht, the duke’s opinion wasn’t worth anything.

And indeed, the other members of the faction were rushing to support the general, as if a dam had broken.

“It seems we’re in agreement, then. I will take command of our troops!” General Albrecht concluded the meeting with those words, leaving Duke Gelhart seated in his chair all alone in a state of utter shock.

“Please, Sudou...! You’re the only one I can trust! I beg of you!”

Sudou regarded Duke Gelhart’s entreaty with cold eyes, and the duke clung to him, thinking his request was being ignored.

Was it Kael's idea, or General Albrecht's? Whoever thought of this plot, the end result was that Duke Gelhart's control over his faction had been snatched away. He was already at his wit's end over Princess Lupis's imminent arrival with her forces.

To think this used to be Rhoadseria's prime minister... He's nothing but trash who lost in a power struggle...

Sudou regarded Duke Gelhart with scorn.

Any influential person is but a mere man once they fall from power... I suppose that's true of any politician, though...

But Sudou couldn't abandon Duke Gelhart if he was to accomplish his goal. At least for now.

According to the empire's orders, the invasion of Xarooda will only start in half a year... I suppose so long as I keep him alive, I still have some leeway to take measures...

"Rest assured, Duke Gelhart. I will help you."

Sudou kindly placed his hands over Duke Gelhart's own, which were gripping at his robe.

"Oh! Truly? Will you really help me...?! But... My current situation is..."

There wasn't a hint of his usual overbearing attitude. He was so servile, Sudou suspected the duke would lick his boots if he demanded it.

"Do not worry, I have a plan."

"Really! You think you can break through this situation?"

But Duke Gelhart's tone returned to its normal haughtiness within moments. He may have acted abject and unoppressive, but it was just acting. Sudou didn't mind, though.

"Well, it would require you to take on a considerable burden, my lord."

Duke Gelhart's expression darkened at Sudou's words.

"A burden, you say... Do you mean money? Authority...? You don't mean my head, do you?"

This man... Even at this point in the game, he's as rapacious as ever...

Sudou couldn't help but feel downcast at how greedy and coarse nobles could be.

"You don't have to worry about your head. However, I'm afraid you have no choice but to give up on your money and authority."

"Nonsense...! What's the point, then?!"

"No, no, you misunderstand. You may have to give up on those, but that's not to say it can't be dealt with."

"What do you mean?" The duke's expression changed.

"At the moment, there are very few options available to you. General Albrecht wrested control over the soldiers from you, after all."

"I know that much! Don't state the obvious!" Duke Gelhart raised his voice at Sudou, as if the man was rubbing salt in his wound.

"But that's a stroke of luck in its own way."

"What? What do you mean?! How is Hodram taking over my army a stroke of luck?!"

"Bluntly speaking, the enemy commander is extremely sharp. Frankly, I don't think you stand much of a chance."

"What?! How dare you!" If looks could kill, Duke Gelhart's glare would have struck Sudou dead on the spot.

"Please. I insist that you hear me out," but Sudou's voice did not waver.

And yet, the atmosphere behind his words was completely different. A cold, sharp, powerful fog of murderous intent filled the air, and faced with that pressure, Duke Gelhart's heart sunk back into calmness.

"I-I'm sorry..." words of apology slipped from his lips.

"I will continue my explanation, then. I could hardly believe it myself, but the flooding attack that defeated Sir Kael was quite impressive. And the way they manipulated the spread of information afterwards was precise, as well."

"Spread of information...? Are you talking about those certain rumors?"

“Yes. There is no mistaking that the rumors were the work of the enemy commander himself.”

“So it really was him...” Duke Gelhart seemed to have realized that.

“Do you think General Albrecht would be able to defeat a person capable of such exact planning...? This is only speculation, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the enemy still has more tricks up his sleeve.”

“You truly believe so?!”

“Yes. At the very least, I would press the advantage if I were him.”

Duke Gelhart had a feeling that Sudou was smiling behind his hood.

“Then what do we do? Should we warn Hodram?!” Duke Gelhart made a suggestion that anyone else could have thought of.

Thinking about it logically, one would come to conclude that doing so would do next to nothing in terms of improving Duke Gelhart’s standing, but evidently, he hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“That would be meaningless,” Sudou shook his head in denial. “Rather, you should view it as an opportunity.”

“Opportunity? What do you mean?”

“I am saying, breathe not a word to General Albrecht and allow him to lose to Princess Lupis.”

“Are you insane?! That would spell the end of everything!”

He may have had Princess Radine as a just cause, but from Princess Lupis’s point of view, this was nothing more than an attempted insurrection, and Duke Gelhart was its ringleader. If he lost the war to Princess Lupis, he would no doubt be held responsible.

But Sudou shook his head again.

“That will be fine. All the responsibility will fall onto General Albrecht.”

“What?!”

“He stole away your right to lead, after all, so why not use these circumstances to your advantage as much as you are able to?”

Duke Gelhart could practically feel the cruel smile on Sudou's face.

"But is that even possible? Even if you tell me to push the responsibility onto him, I'm still the one who mobilized the army. That fact won't change..."

"Yes, but if you play your hand right, you can minimize your responsibility. Someone will have to be executed as the ringleader. Under normal circumstances it would have to be you, but..."

"That's it! Now it would be Hodram!"

"Precisely. If there are two people to execute as the ringleader, one's life may be spared depending on how the negotiations go."

"But... Do I have a bargaining chip that would convince Princess Lupis to spare my life?"

Few things would make one inclined to spare a rebellion's ringleader, and it was impossible for Duke Gelhart to capture General Albrecht and hand him over to the princess. But in contrast to the duke's concerns, Sudou answered easily.

"Are you sure you don't have a bargaining chip? Have you checked your dungeon?"

"My dungeon... Dungeon... The dungeon!"

Sudou's words reminded Duke Gelhart of a certain someone.

"But... Is there really that much value to them?"

True, he realized what kind of bargaining chip Sudou had implied, but Duke Gelhart doubted there was enough value in it to merit his life being spared.

"Oh, don't worry." He could hear Sudou stifle a chuckle behind his hood. "Princess Lupis will respond to your negotiations... Without a doubt."

Still gripped with faint anxiety, Duke Gelhart had no choice but to nod. He was now in a critical situation, with his life hanging in the balance.

The day of the decisive battle was fast approaching, and no one could know how it would end...

The sun finally rose on the seventh day—the promised date of Princess Lupis's

arrival. Ryoma's group stood on the banks of the Thebes, their gaze fixated on the glimmering spear's edge on the opposite shore.

On the other side of the river was the first formation led by Helena, which had begun crossing the river.

"Nothing happened in the end..."

"Yeah. I thought we might be attacked during the night, but..." Ryoma nodded at Sara's comment. "Duke Gelhart never pressed on us, for whatever reason."

They had anticipated that Duke Gelhart would personally march on them following Kael's defeat, but the enemy's main force never showed itself, and Princess Lupis eventually arrived with reinforcements.

They kept their security poised in the empty moat the night before the promised date, suspecting they might be raided then.

"Perhaps the rumors you spread were effective?"

"I don't doubt they did, but they wouldn't diminish the enemy's numbers to zero. I think it would cut their numbers down by thirty percent at best."

Just as Sara pointed out, the rumors Ryoma spread sowed unrest among the peasants, but that wasn't to say he could prevent all of them from being conscripted.

The duke could threaten them with violence or buy them off with money. If he used that sort of might after issuing his order, some of the commoners would have no choice but to join, like it or not.

It would bite into his numbers, but Ryoma didn't think it was possible that absolutely no one heeded the duke's call to arms. He didn't doubt the success of his plot, but at the same time, he didn't overestimate its effectiveness.

"Still no movement from Heraklion?"

"Yes, the scouts are still keeping an eye on the city. If the enemy makes a move, they will let us know at once."

"If their idea is to attack while the forces are crossing the river, they'd need to send out their forces right about now or they won't make it in time..." Ryoma cocked his head.

“In which case... Perhaps they want to hold a decisive battle on the plains?”

“A decisive battle, eh...?”

There was woodland and plains standing between Ryoma’s camp along the Thebes and Duke Gelhart’s stronghold at Heraklion. The plains in particular boasted a large surface area, with spanning farmlands producing wheat and other things, thanks to the Thebes’s branches streaming in water. Heraklion was a fairly bountiful region, even within Rhoadseria. But if that land were to become a battlefield, it would all be reduced to ashes.

Still, if their analysis of the situation was correct, Duke Gelhart’s aim was to hold a final battle— he could have no other intentions if he relinquished the precious chance to attack them during the river crossing.

The plains were prime terrain for mobilizing a large army, and so the idea was by no means a foolish one, but it would cause great damage when thinking about the idea of maintaining Rhoadseria in the future. The whole matter didn’t seem right to Ryoma.

Isn’t something fishy about this whole thing? I’m definitely getting weird vibes from this... It’s like someone’s behind the scenes, pulling the strings of this war...

Ryoma felt someone’s will was at play here, as he tried to piece the situation together.

But... It doesn’t feel like they’re trying to get Duke Gelhart to win... No, it’s like they’re trying to get him to lose... How would that make sense?

“Master Ryoma?” Sara said, peeking at Ryoma’s face.

“Oh... Sorry. Just caught up in my thoughts...”

“I could leave if I am interfering, then.”

“Nah, it’s nothing to fuss over... But Sara, have you considered the possibility of a siege battle?” Ryoma said, as if to change the subject.

Not much point in dwelling on this right now, is there... I can leave it be so long as we’re not placed at a disadvantage...

Mentally convincing himself of that, Ryoma worked to hide his feelings and returned to the question he asked Sara.

“A siege battle...? I think that’s extremely unlikely.”

Ryoma couldn’t help but smile at Sara’s answer. Incidentally, he didn’t even consider the chance that Duke Gelhart might try holing up himself in Heraklion, the reason being that considering Heraklion’s scale as a city, it likely didn’t have the provisions to support many thousands of soldiers in addition to its own citizens.

In other words, even if the enemy gathered their soldiers, they didn’t have the capacity to maintain them over a prolonged period. Ryoma estimated them to only be able to support their army for half a month at best.

“If they try to fortify themselves in Heraklion with their usual forces, it’s doubtful they’d be able to push back Princess Lupis’s forces, and if they gather enough forces to defend the city, they’d run out of provisions within a month.”

In the end, they didn’t have enough for one option or the other. If they didn’t gather all their forces, they wouldn’t be able to withstand a siege, but if they did, their provisions wouldn’t last.

After all, Duke Gelhart’s only option was to opt for a clash with Princess Lupis over a short period of time using all of his forces. The same held true for Princess Lupis, though.

Ryoma nodded deeply at Sara’s answer. The Malfist sisters’ eye for tactics had improved over the last few months, which Ryoma was quite pleased with. It meant his chances of survival were improving.

“Sir Ryoma! Three thousand knights under Lady Helena’s command have crossed the river!”

“Understood. Guide Helena to my tent, then prepare tents for the rest of the soldiers and let them rest.” Ryoma instructed the knight who gave him the report, and then returned to his tent with Sara by his side.

The moment of truth was rapidly closing in.

“This is impressive...” Helena voiced her surprise at Ryoma. “To have secured a bridgehead like this...”

“It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Modesty can come off as condescending at times, you know. If nothing else, you don’t fool me. I’m sure Her Majesty will be impressed with your achievements when she arrives.”

Even as Ryoma shrugged it all off modestly, Helena showered him with praise.



“Personally, I’m worried she’ll scold me instead...”

Helena looked surprised at Ryoma’s words. She didn’t understand where one was to find fault with Ryoma. Ryoma did have a matter in mind, however—Mikhail Vanash’s fate.

Ryoma reported everything to Helena without hiding the facts, thinking any attempt to obfuscate things would just harm her trust.

“I see... So Mikhail...”

“Yeah, we haven’t confirmed if he was killed in battle or not, but there was no sign of him after the scouting mission failed. Not of him, or his body... It’s clear he violated orders, but he was still a close aide to the princess...”

Helena heaved a sigh, which could be read as one of either exhaustion or exasperation.

What a bother... This really is something of a problem...

Once Ryoma had honestly filled her in on what happened, she realized his apprehensions. Mikhail was Ryoma’s subordinate, but at the same time, he was placed to watch over him. This was a necessary role to play, as Ryoma was a newcomer shouldering an important duty. Princess Lupis couldn’t afford for him to betray her in the middle of the war after she granted him command over her soldiers.

And so Princess Lupis sent Mikhail, the retainer that was second only to Meltina in terms of loyalty towards her, to keep an eye on him. That stood as a testament to just how much she trusted the man.

And then, even if it was his just desserts for defying orders, he died under Ryoma’s command. His survival was uncertain, but judging by the situation, he was likely dead. So from Princess Lupis’s perspective, she had lost a precious retainer because of Ryoma.

If she understood he died in battle, Ryoma would have been better off. At worst, she could come to believe Ryoma arranged for his death.

“Do you believe I’m overthinking this?”

Helena was hard-pressed for an answer to Ryoma’s doubts. It was easy to

laugh it off as him overthinking the matter, but considering things realistically, one couldn't easily shrug off his concerns.

"No... But you have to report it either way, right?"

"Right... That's actually why I spoke to you about it first."

If Ryoma baited Mikhail into a trap, the 1500 knights present wouldn't follow Ryoma's orders. From Helena's position, the fact that Ryoma had established this bridgehead and was able to wait for reinforcements to arrive alone proved his innocence.

But whether that would convince Princess Lupis was a gamble. Both Ryoma and Helena hadn't interacted with the princess very much, and the princess only saw them as retainers. They only attended meetings with her. And just as she sent Mikhail to keep an eye on him, he didn't trust her either.

"Well, it's fine... I'll have to be the one to give her the report..." Helena resolved to be the one to take the brunt of that blow.

While there was a perfectly reasonable explanation to the matter, it could easily come off as a lie if the person involved was tasked with explaining it. But if Helena were to break the news, Princess Lupis would be less prone to react in an emotional manner.

"Sorry to drop this on you, Lady Helena. Thank you."

Swiftly realizing her intent, Ryoma let her handle everything.

"It's fine, letting you go down here would just cause problems for me... Right. You should prioritize reorganizing your formations for the time being," Helena allotted Ryoma a task. "Someone would need to do that anyway... I'll talk to her about it after dinner today."

That task was to make up a reason for Ryoma to not need to break the news himself. She hadn't served all those years as Rhoadseria's general for naught.

"Understood... I'll be off, then."

Ryoma bowed and left the tent, with Helena heaving a sigh as she watched him leave.

"Now then... How do I break the news...? Maybe it'd be better to tell Meltina

first instead of Her Majesty...”

It wasn’t directly related to the war, but if she handled the situation wrongly and made Princess Lupis suspicious, it could influence Ryoma’s command.

“Yes, reporting it to Meltina would be wisest...” Concluding as such, Helena headed for the wharf, where the second wave of reinforcements, led by Meltina, was to arrive.

“Aaaaah...” A mixture of a sigh and a moan of lamentation escaped Meltina’s lips.

“Like I said, this wasn’t Ryoma’s mistake in particular.”

“No, I understand that much... It’s just...”

“Just what?” Helena’s tone became stronger upon repeating Meltina’s vague response.

“Sir Mikhail had been Her Majesty’s escort and bodyguard since she was a child... Truth be told, Her Majesty’s bond with him runs deeper than my bond with her...”

Helena went pale at Meltina’s words. This was exactly what Ryoma had feared.

“Do you think she’ll suspect Ryoma after all?”

“No, I don’t think that would be the case...” Meltina denied Helena’s concerns. “If you explain the situation clearly, no matter how saddened she may be, her anger won’t turn to Sir Mikoshiba...”

Meltina didn’t want for Princess Lupis to grow suspicious of Ryoma at this point, either. The princess’s faction owed all its superiority to his plots, after all.

“Then could you handle reporting it to Her Highness instead of me?”

“Yes, I’ll handle giving her the report.” Meltina nodded.

Come nightfall, the 23,000 troops led by Princess Lupis had crossed the Thebes. Tents were added to the camp at Ryoma’s command to accommodate the newcomers. And in one of those newly erected tents was Princess Lupis.

“Mikhail...”

Sitting on her bed, too modest for royalty to sleep in, she spoke Mikhail's name.

"Mikhail... Did you not say you'd always protect me...?"

Having heard from Meltina that his fate was unknown, Princess Lupis thought back to the days she spent with the knight in her youth. Pearl-like tears slid down her cheeks.

Upon hearing the report from Meltina, Princess Lupis had to suppress the anger that overcame her. Her responsibility as a princess forbade her from blaming Ryoma.

As a ruler, she had to judge things fairly, in which case, there was no fault with Ryoma's command. The one at fault was Mikhail, who had defied orders and cost five hundred men their lives.

She understood that much. At least, her mind did. But as a person, her heart denied that rational judgment.

As a result, Princess Lupis retreated to her tent after a quick dinner, where she shut herself away. She was aware that if she stayed there, she might have found fault with Ryoma.

"Aaah, Mikhail... Once upon a time, you said you'd make me your bride..."

A royal like Princess Lupis couldn't wed a simple knight, and she didn't truly wish for that. It was nothing more than a whimsical verbal promise made when she was a child. But memories like this one, which were usually banished to the back of one's mind and out of recollection's reach, seemed to rise to the surface one after another now.

"You said you would always keep me safe..."

For Princess Lupis, Mikhail was her most loyal retainer, with only Meltina being able to match him on that front. It was he who advised her to oppose General Albrecht's tyranny. If Meltina, a fellow woman, was a sister to her, Mikhail was akin to a brother or father to her.

The sorrow of losing him was even deeper than what she'd felt when her actual father, Pharst the Second, passed away. While they weren't estranged,

they were king and princess of the country before they were father and daughter, and so they could never quite build up that sort of affection.

“Oh,” a man’s voice suddenly spoke up behind Princess Lupis. “I see you’re as grief-stricken as I thought you would be, Your Highness.”

“Who are you?! An assassin...?!” Princess Lupis made the split-second decision to scream. “Someone! Come quickly!”

She didn’t know how this intruder had entered her tent, but there were knights standing guard nearby. Her scream should have made them come at once.

But wait though she did, not a single knight entered her tent.

“You’re wasting your breath, Your Highness. My thaumaturgy has put them to sleep for a while.”

The man’s words made the situation clear to her. She drew the sword leaning against the bed.

“You’re no assassin... What are you here for?”

Her words and actions felt a bit mismatched and awkward, but Princess Lupis was serious. No assassin would speak up like that, but that wasn’t to say he didn’t mean her any harm. She had no intention of letting down her guard until the man’s objective became clear.

“What am I here for, you ask... Right, fair enough. We’re short on time, so I’ll cut right to the heart of the matter. I’ve come to offer you a deal.”

The princess relaxed slightly at his answer.

“What do you mean? To start with, who are you? How did you get here?”

To answer Princess Lupis’s question, the man revealed his face from under the hood.

“I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. The name is Sudou. Akitake Sudou.”

Sudou bowed his head, in a gesture of non-hostility.

Epilogue

As the civil war in Rhoadseria approached its climax, the Empire of O'ltormea, sovereign of the center of the western continent, was preparing for its invasion of the kingdom of Xarooda. Both the government and the citizens were caught in a period of turbulence as they made their preparations for the upcoming invasion.

There's been quite a few unpredictable developments, starting with Gaius Valkland's death, but the invasion of Xarooda looks like it'll go as planned...

A small firm sat in the imperial capital's main street. As a place managed directly by the guild, it boasted enough influence that few people in the capital didn't know of it.

Looking down on the people passing by from his office on the third floor of the establishment, Kikukawa's heart was filled with inexplicable annoyance.

They just silently go about their daily lives, unaware of anything... The fools. They simply allow the system governing this world to exploit them...

Most of the people summoned to this other world died deeply despising it. The common masses never learned of that hatred, instead just living their daily lives. Never knowing the fury and malice of those who had their families and loved ones, their very lives, stolen from them.

Those who survived had to carry on their vengeance, no matter what they had to sacrifice to do it. But that wasn't to say Kikukawa didn't feel the slightest bit of anxiety for the organization's acts.

We have the right to do this. The right to exact revenge on this world. But... Is it truly just to involve these people in it?

The organization had but one goal— to bring this barbaric, filthy hell of a world under the control of those who came from Earth and forge a paradise for themselves here. That was the only way they had in this rotten world to reclaim what had been stolen from them.

He did believe it to be a lofty goal. Lofty enough to gamble his life on, both

figuratively and literally.

But on the other hand, the organization would have to spill much blood to make that vision a reality. The blood of friends, foes, and those uninvolved in the fighting.

“Director, may I have a moment?”

Kikukawa’s consciousness was jolted out of the sea of his foolish thoughts by a knock on the door.

“Yes, go ahead. What is it?”

As his words echoed through the rooms, Kikukawa’s secretary, one Reiko Asano, entered the room with a pile of paperwork supported under her opulent bosom.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your break, but we’ve received a report for our Rhoadseria agent, and I’ve brought it over,” Asano said, handing the documents over to Kikukawa.

“The Kingdom of Rhoadseria... You mean Sudou?”

He didn’t think it possible, and asked to confirm. Asano shook her head.

“No, it’s from my younger brother, though it was Sudou who ordered him to write the report.”

“Oh, figures. My condolences to your younger brother,” Kikukawa regarded Asano’s response with a bitter smile.

Normally, the one in charge, which would be Sudou in this case, was the one to file the reports, but the man in question greatly disliked doing paperwork. The job thus fell to Sudou’s aide in Rhoadseria, who was also Asano’s younger brother.

Sudou was one of the oldest members of the organization, and had known the president for the longest time, so he had a bad habit of not caring much about what those around him thought.

A troublesome man... Though he does get the job done.

Putting aside his penchant for cynicism and occasional negligence, Akitake

Sudou was a skilled man.

“The problem is the contents of the report.”

Judging from Sudou’s personality, this report was either of utmost importance or complete and total balderdash. The look in Asano’s eyes made it clear it wasn’t the latter, though.

“It’s... something of a concerning matter...” Asano said, pointing at a certain line in the document in Kikukawa’s hands.

“Hmm... Well, I’ll be damned...”

Her white fingers pointed at the name of a certain person.

“It seems he’s working under Lupis Rhoadserians.”

The name of a man they thought they would never have to deal with again.

“Ryoma Mikoshiba. Why did he have to turn up again...?”

But Kikukawa’s wishes were in vain, and the organization once again became involved with him.

Sudou...

Kikukawa prayed for Sudou, who was now facing this unexpected obstacle far away under Rhoadseria’s skies. But he knew that prayer was for nothing but peace of mind.

Afterword I doubt there are many newcomers left at his point, but hello to all first-time readers. And welcome back to those who've read volumes 1 and 2. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

So once again, for the sake of those who start reading from the afterword, let's go over the contents of volume 3, and my rationale behind writing it.

First, the somewhat well-established main concept—the fundamental question of how one can win against an enemy with a major numerical advantage, within a tight timeframe.

Most strategy books, including but not limited to *The Art of War*, will tell you that having greater numbers than the enemy is the first step to victory.

There is strength in numbers. This can be called a universal truth that applies everywhere in the world.

But every now and then, fiction will show us that the opposite result can be much more interesting. For example, Japanese history gives us the Battle of Okehazama.

The Oda clan's army of several thousand clashed against the tens of thousands led by the Imagawa clan, a battle which still grips the hearts of the Japanese people to this day. Another example is the battle of Thermopylae, held between the forces of ancient Greece and the Persians, which became the inspiration for the movie *300*, which still rouses the emotions of those interested in history.

I'm sure any of you who are aware of these stories know that while the Oda clan defeated the armies of Imagawa and went on to become a powerful force, the latter story ended with the Spartans being wiped out.

Both stories had conflicting endings, but in my eyes, both stand as proof to how the image of an underdog facing overwhelming odds has a way of exciting

our hearts. As is often the case with history, it's hard to draw the line between what is fact and what is fiction...

And so, volume 3's concept stresses the struggle of the underdog against a stronger opponent.

But, perhaps contrary to this author's feelings, our young protagonist isn't one to show any signs of distress or crisis, staying composed at all times... Still, I think it wouldn't be all that interesting to write the same things other people have, so you can certainly see that part as this series' distinctive flavor, if you will.

Now, the other selling point volume 3 has to offer is the introduction of ninjas, at long last. When you say Japan, you naturally think of ninjas. But for how major of a feature they tend to be, they're also something of a dangerous element to feature, as they become quite hackneyed if done poorly.

The question of how to implement them in an otherworld story without generating a strong negative reaction is where an author's skills are put to the test.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to all the people who have helped bring this book to completion, and to all of you, the readers who have picked it up.

I've finally managed to match the number of books I released through my previous publisher, and I believe I've even gone a bit beyond where I got there in terms of the story.

For a time, I thought this work might end up going unfinished, but we're regularly publishing new volumes. The credit for that goes not only to me as the author, but to you the readers, for refusing to abandon this work.

I will do my utmost to make sure volume 4 is delivered to you as soon as possible, so please continue to support Record of Wortenia War!

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: Spanner in the Works

Chapter 2: Opening Hostilities

Chapter 3: The Assassin

Chapter 4: Those Who Struggle

Epilogue

Afterword

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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 3

by Ryota Hori

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Original Japanese edition published in 2016 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

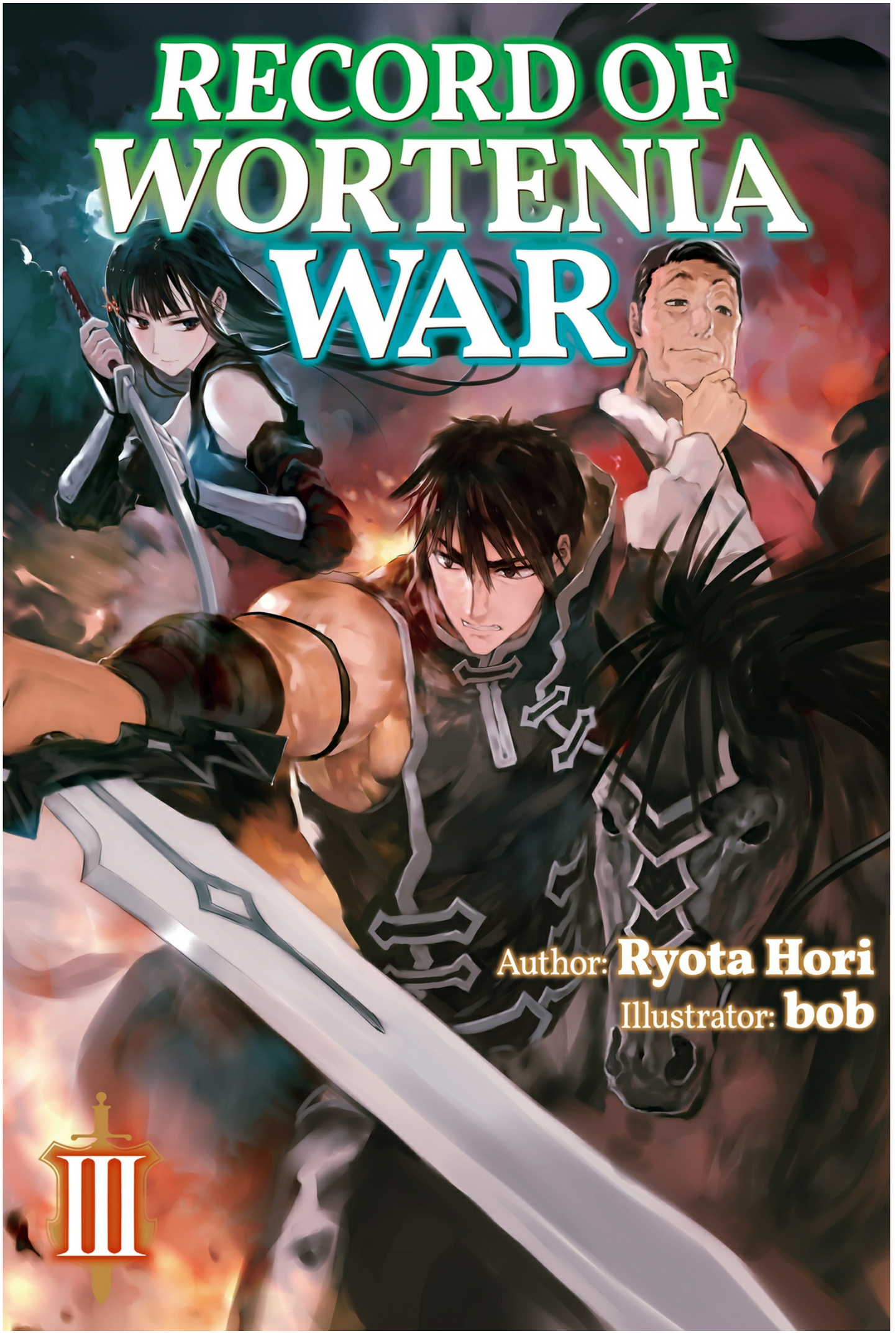
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Ebook edition 1.0: November 2019


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WORTENIA
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III