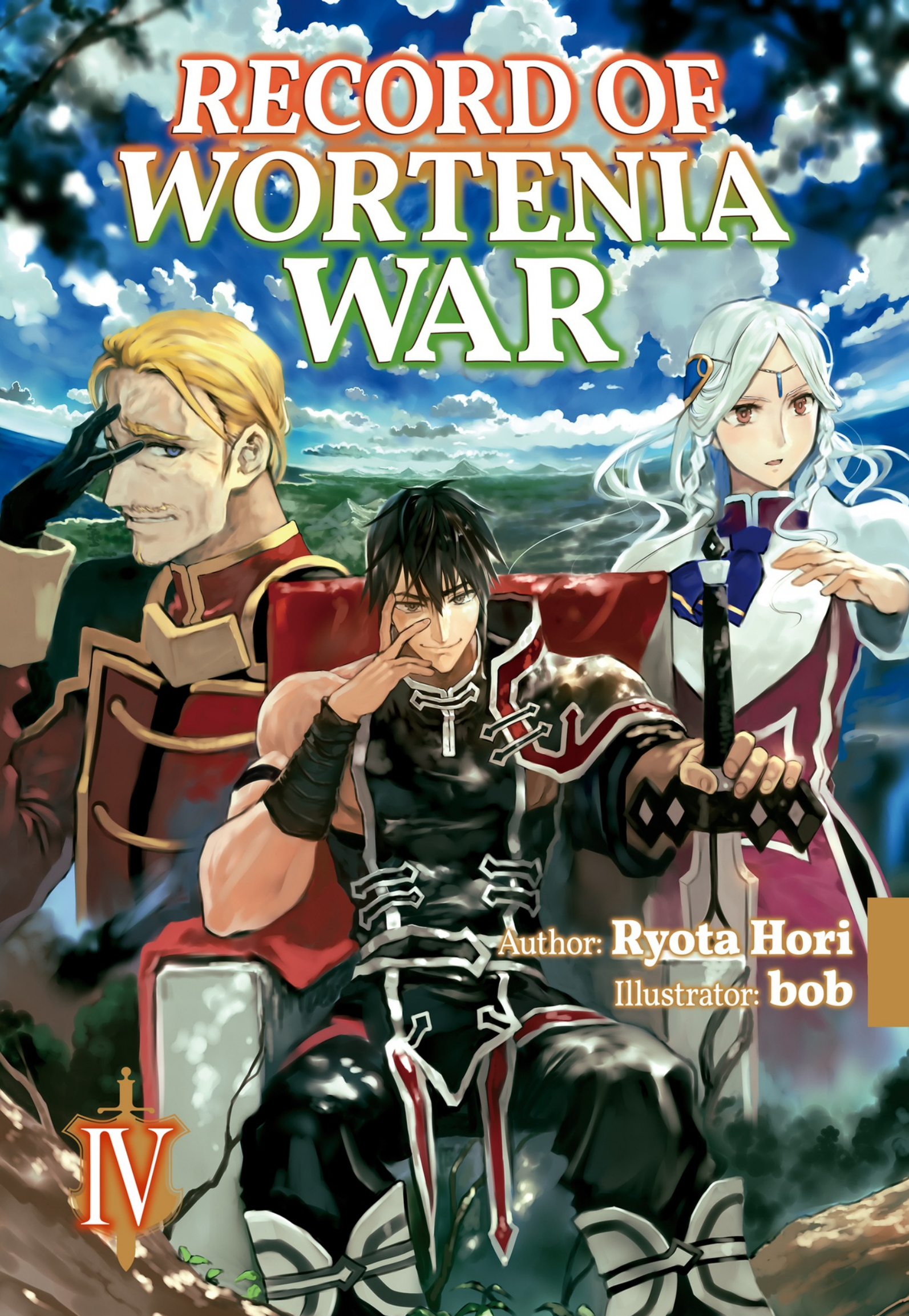
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**

IV


“Let victory be upon us! Glory to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria!”
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR


...
"What will Master Ryoma do...?"
"He has sent me as a mediator."


“Your guess
was accurate,
milord.”

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1
INESCAPABLE SIN

CHAPTER 2
AN UNEXPECTED MESSENGER

CHAPTER 3
CLASH

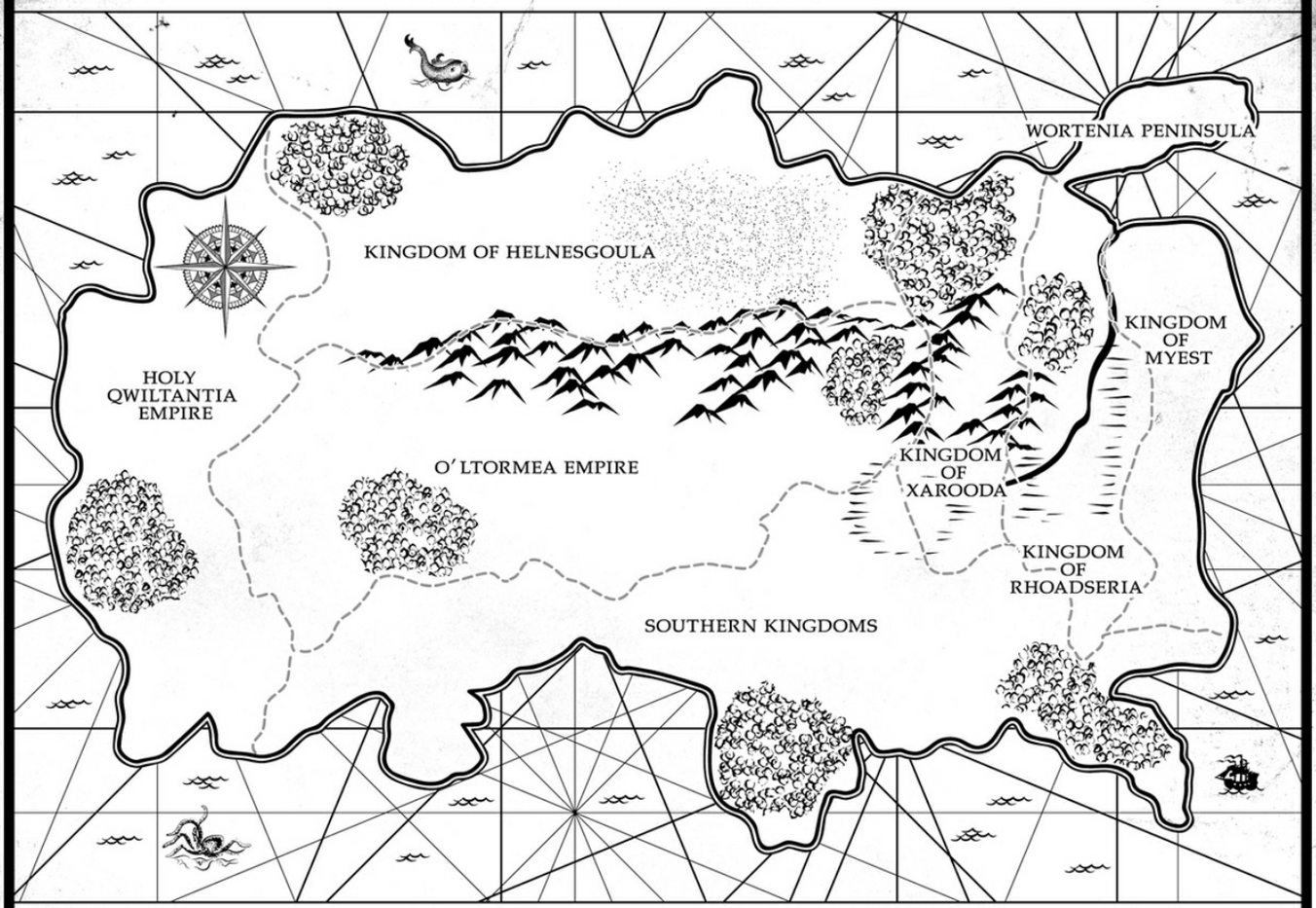
CHAPTER 4
HELENA'S REVENGE

CHAPTER 5
A NEW BATTLEFIELD

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

As the sun was about to dip below the horizon, a single old man stood on the lawn of an old-style estate built in Tokyo's Suginami ward.

He's still at it...

After admitting their unexpected guests to the living room, Asuka's eyes settled on the figure of her granduncle, who was practicing his sword swings. The twilight rays reflected off the two drawn blades he held in each hand.

Flowing motions. It was the kind of practice done by following a specific form exactly as prescribed. The sight played out before Asuka like a play or a dance. There was something of a refined grace to it, a beauty that would strike awe into the hearts of any who viewed it.

But as if to contrast with that grace, the severity of that training was unimaginable. Repeatedly swinging a heavy katana at a fixed speed, with the blade never once shifting, bordered on the impossible with normal muscle strength. Any sluggish movements that would kill the swings' momentum would have called his skill into question.

And on top of that, he wielded two heavy and real katanas. Swinging even one with both hands took a great deal of effort, so holding and handling two swords separately of each other only made the difficulty of his feat that much greater.

It was a training method that differed in purpose from the kind of training that lasted from dawn to nightfall. His movements may have seemed simple to the uninitiated, but the mental and physical strain they brought at least matched, if not exceeded, anything caused by prolonged training.

And Kouichiro had been training like that for over an hour.

Look at all that sweat... He's been spending more time training than he did before Ryoma disappeared.

The calendar marked the end of summer and the coming of autumn, making it a more or less pleasant season. But due to the unusual weather patterns of

late, that day was hot and humid, making it one of the days when one would be particularly thankful for the graceful protection of their air conditioner.

And despite that, sweat was pouring from Kouichiro's body like a waterfall, and Asuka thought she could see something like white steam rising from his body — but none of that could be attributed to the weather.

It had now been several months since Ryoma Mikoshiba disappeared without a trace from his high school, and Kouichiro's daily training had only seemed to increase in intensity since then.

Asuka perfectly understood his sorrow at having lost his beloved grandson, of course. And yet...

It feels like that's not the only reason. It's like he's trying to bottle something up... It's like... Yeah, it's like he knows why Ryoma disappeared...

Ever since she was an infant, Asuka would often accompany her mother and grandmother to this estate, and her relationship with Kouichiro went beyond merely distant relatives. Put simply, they saw each other as close family.

And it was all the more so because after she grew older, she paid Kouichiro and Ryoma — two men living together — daily visits, helping them with laundry and other chores.

It came across in how Asuka and Kouichiro referred to each other, too. Asuka's grandfather passed away when she was young, and so her granduncle ended up assuming that role for her, even if the word did usually signify one's formal relation to another family member.

But even as close as they were, it was doubtful the two of them perfectly understood each other.

Maybe I don't really know what's going on in Grandpa's heart...

For Asuka Kiryuu, Kouichiro Mikoshiba was a truly exceptional presence. The Mikoshiba family was a fundamentally affluent household. Apparently they were descended from the bloodline of the retainers of some daimyo from a certain domain, or perhaps even the daimyo himself.

Owing to that relation, they owned an estate with a large garden in one of

Tokyo's twenty-three wards, the building itself housing many precious items: dozens of Japanese katanas and an abundance of objects that could very well be considered national treasures and important cultural assets.

The estate also housed urns and tea bowls that could be traced back to the historical Sen no Rikyū, as well as hanging scrolls and folding screens that would leave any person interested in old works of art positively salivating.

Selling even one of these could fetch anywhere from several million to tens of millions of yen, and doing so would easily allow for one to live in luxury if they so desired; wear the finest clothes, and feast on the most exquisite of food.

If Kouichiro so desired, he could buy a villa or a yacht and spend the rest of his days eating in high-class restaurants. He could dress in designer clothes and exchange wristwatches that cost millions of yen each with the same frivolousness one changes a necktie with.

The same held true for housework. Kouichiro was indeed unfamiliar with chores and cleaning, but with the Mikoshiba household's financial condition, there was no need for him to bother himself with that. Putting aside the somewhat unrealistic options of a French maid or butler, hiring a housekeeper would have been perfectly possible.

But Kouichiro chose to live quietly and frugally.

When he left the house, he only went as far as the nearby shopping district. He never traveled abroad, nor did he have any hobbies to spend his money on.

The only luxury he indulged in, to Asuka's knowledge, was that he enjoyed famous local brands of sake every day, and even that only added up to a few tens of thousands of yen per month.

At the crack of dawn he would go straight to training, and come noon he would shut himself off in his room to read. In the evening he would entertain himself by playing go or shogi on his own, and after dinner he would go back to training.

He lead a life devoid of desire or vanity.

Looking at just the surface, the words "quiet retirement" may feel quite fitting to describe his life.

But... That can't be it. After all...

Though he lived as a recluse, in no way did Kouichiro reject this world. His attitude and way of thinking towards training made that clear. The intensity may have seemed fanatical at first sight, but he also had a thirst for knowledge that drove him to consume specialized books and manuals revolving around topics like politics, economics and military tactics.

With all of those taken into consideration, Kouichiro didn't give the impression of a reclusive old man.

If I had to say... It feels like he's working himself to the bone for some purpose.

The story of a historical manga she read the other day, based off the Chinese Historical Records, surfaced in Asuka's mind. A prince whose parents were killed used his thirst for revenge as his source of motivation, building up his national power.

Of course, Asuka didn't assume Kouichiro was plotting revenge on someone. The image that felt closer was one of a samurai dreaming of the day his household's honor would be restored.

Ah... Oh, silly me. I spent too much time staring at Grandpa's training when the detectives are waiting...

Asuka's mind returned to the detectives waiting in the living room.

The area the Mikoshiba household's estate stood in fell under the jurisdiction of Suginami's central police station, and these detectives were affiliated with the station's Community Safety Department.

Put more simply, they were officers that belonged to the department that dealt with juvenile crimes.

Recalling that made a certain doubt spring up in Asuka's mind.

Speaking of, Grandpa didn't call the police immediately when Ryoma disappeared... He didn't exactly stop Mom and the others from calling instead, but...

No matter how graced he was with athletic ability and how mature he was, Asuka's beloved cousin was still just a normal high-schooler, and regardless of

what Ryoma himself may think, he was still a minor for all the country's law was concerned.

There were some cases of people being indifferent at a child running away from home, especially in repeated cases, but Ryoma had never left the house without permission before. In which case, Asuka thought, it would only be natural for his relatives to immediately report his absence to the police and ask that they search for him.

I understand why he waited the first night after the school reported Ryoma was gone, but even after that, Grandpa didn't contact the police... How come?

It wouldn't be odd for an onlooker to think Kouichiro was exceptionally cold and distant from his grandson, but Asuka knew full well that he raised Ryoma with love, and that made her granduncle's behavior all the more incomprehensible.

Even if one were to compromise and claim he had simply trusted Ryoma that deeply, there was no way he wouldn't be concerned for his grandson when he'd been missing for nearly six months.

If anything, Asuka interpreted Kouichiro's increased training and the fact that he hadn't eaten dinner much lately as proof of his irritation and anxiety at Ryoma's absence. She was, in fact, very convinced of that. There was no way he wasn't worried, and that was why Kouichiro's indifference towards asking the police to search for Ryoma felt all the more unnatural.

He never said anything in particular about not liking the police, either...

The first thing one would do when a relative went missing would be to ask the police to search for them. Japan was a country of the law, for better or worse, with 250,000 officials staffing posts all across the country. Of course, that didn't mean every single one of them would take part in the search, but even a child would know that still yielded better chances than one individual searching all on their own.

There were still people out there that didn't rely on the police, for all sorts of reasons and circumstances. But the Mikoshiba household didn't dabble in any shady dealings, as far as Asuka knew, and even if Kouichiro had his own reasons to dislike the police, he could still hire a private investigator to look into it.

Perhaps things would be different if he faced financial troubles, but it would do nothing to put a dent in the fortune their relatives eyed like starving hyenas.

He acts like he knows searching for him is pointless... Grandpa definitely knows something... And whatever it is, he's hiding it.

He couldn't or wouldn't say it, but whatever the truth was, Kouichiro held it.

"Grandpa, some detectives showed up. They said they have something to discuss..." Asuka parted her lips to speak, silencing the doubt surfacing in her heart.

Chapter 1: Inescapable Sin

After washing off all the sweat that poured from him with a hot bath, Kouichiro put on his blue monk's working clothes and made his way to the living room, where the detectives were waiting.

"Thank you for waiting. I was in the middle of my daily routine, so fixing my appearance took some time." Kouichiro bowed his head apologetically to the detectives sitting before him, with his back to the Japanese swords adorning the room's floor.

He sat in a straight posture unique to martial artists. Even the detectives, who were quite annoyed by having to wait for nearly thirty minutes, were beside themselves at the sight of this older man politely bowing his head to them.

"Not at all, Mr. Mikoshiba..." The senior detective Tachibana bowed his head awkwardly, with the junior detective Kusuda hurriedly following his example. "We should apologize for intruding on you without appointment."

After the old man and the two detectives exchanged modest apologies, Kouichiro cut to the heart of the matter.

"So, to what do I owe your visit today...? Are there any developments regarding my grandson's whereabouts?"

"No, nothing as of yet... We came to you today because we have a few questions about what happened that we wish to confirm."

Kouichiro's direct tone and glare made Tachibana look daunted, even though he was up against someone who should have been a normal civilian.

What the...? Cutting straight to the point already? And he's awfully calm about it to boot... I thought so the first time as well, but this old man's really unmanageable... But something definitely reeks about him.

Saying he kept calm may have sounded nice, but Tachibana had not once seen Kouichiro lose his composure. Not even once.

Of course, different people had different ways of processing anger and grief, with individual degrees of intensity. Whether someone let those emotions rise

to the surface differed by personality.

But even if one's way of expressing or suppressing those emotions differed, human beings tend to react to particular events with set patterns of behavior. Like having one's family disappear before one's eyes. Parents who lost their child. A child that had lost their parents. In Tachibana's long tenure as a detective, he'd seen many families struck by such grief.

And this was why Tachibana eyed this old man with a great deal of suspicion.

From Tachibana's perspective, this man gave an almost mechanical impression, only giving the shortest, most minimal responses to his questions.

"Yes, we have a few questions regarding your grandson... Are you sure you don't have any ideas about why he would go missing? Really, any little thing would help."

As his junior, Kusuda, read a few questions from a small notebook, Tachibana sat beside him, eyeing Kouichiro carefully.

Honestly speaking, Tachibana didn't have a favorable impression of Kouichiro Mikoshiba to begin with. Circumstances led him to work for the community safety division's Juvenile Observation and Protection Department, but he was originally an assistant inspector for the Criminal Affairs' Fourth Investigative Division.

They commonly dealt with organized crime and gang violence from the likes of the yakuza and foreign mafia, a truly crude occupation where one faced dangerous criminals on a daily basis.

It required grit, endurance, and resourcefulness, fields in which Tachibana excelled. He particularly excelled in his ability to see through people.

And in practice, most of the suspects Tachibana held suspicions of turned out to be real culprits, which stood as evidence of how accurate his intuition tended to be.

And it was from this perspective that this old man sitting before him was a curious presence.

Tachibana didn't suspect him of a crime, or anything of the sort. If nothing

else, a search of the police database didn't bring up any records of a criminal past, nor was there anything suspicious about his relatives. He was a completely ordinary citizen.

It was curious that he didn't seem to have any recorded professional past, but apparently the fortune he inherited from his family was quite considerable, so he likely wasn't in need of money.

If Tachibana was to put a negative spin on it, this man was rather like a NEET mooching off his parents.

At least as far as official records were concerned, Kouichiro Mikoshiba was nothing more than a moderately affluent member of the elderly. But upon meeting the man face to face, Tachibana's impression of him was completely overturned.

I'm trained in light kendo, aikido, karate, and martial arts myself, but... Still.

Tachibana was inching toward midlife, but he had muscles tempered like steel. A police officer's work required suppressing criminals, and no amount of training or skill would ever be enough.

Of course, gunning criminals down would be the easiest solution, but that was awfully problematic considering the sort of nation Japan was. Even a warning shot into the air could cause scandals from the press and human rights organizations.

And of course, the police bureaucracy cared little for the hardships of officers on the scene, pushing all the responsibility onto them. The handling of situations where the use of such force was put into question was never handled consistently across all such cases.

True, judgments on the scene aren't always correct ones, but that didn't mean those who weren't on the scene were able to provide valid critique of such judgments either.

Of course, there were some cases where using firearms was unavoidable, but it could take months or even years to reach that conclusion officially.

An officer wouldn't be able to work if the legitimacy of how they prevented a single crime was constantly called into question with months squandered on

trying to discern whether it was the right course of action.

There was no doubt that firearms were excessively powerful for the purpose of maintaining public order, but the near-endless trouble using them could drag one into meant they weren't usable except in the most dire of situations.

They were weapons permissible to have, but not permissible to use. They may as well have forbidden the use of live ammunition, instead giving the officers non-lethal practice rounds, but stun guns were more practical than that.

Of course, these sorts of complaints from the scene never transmitted to the upper echelons, and in the end the only true weapons officers had were their own trained bodies, collapsible batons, and their colleagues. And this left them with no choice but to practice martial arts.

They did it not for the sport, but out of necessity, for a practical weapon to defend their own lives, as well as life and property of the common man, from criminals.

As such, officers and other such professions involving danger, such as Self-Defense Forces personnel, trained up to black belt level, and then trained beyond even that, placing them well above civilian practitioners of that rank.

They had greater combat experience, and a difference in resolve and disposition. It was easy to claim that violence was evil, and in a manner of speaking, that appraisal wasn't wrong. But people like Tachibana and others like him knew for a fact that justice without power was its own brand of evil.

But even with all that considered, Tachibana felt the man sitting before him was an anomaly.

That wasn't to say he felt on edge, or that the old man posed some kind of threat to him. But years of experience made Tachibana sense something from Kouichiro.

Right... I've faced someone who felt like him before... I think it was back then.

He thought back to a man with a history of working as a professional assassin for a Hong Kong mafia organization. He originally trained in a special forces unit for the People's Liberation Army, and like many members of the mafia, found his way to the affluent streets of Hong Kong after falling on hard times.

According to the documents Tachibana received at the time, the man took on some pretty dirty jobs in the name of upholding the peace during his time in the army, directly staining his own hands with blood dozens of times.

It was said that men who had experience killing people gave off a different sort of aura, and indeed, upon seeing the man, Tachibana did note that the air he gave off was different from those around him.

This old man feels eerily similar to him... This is just a hunch, but...

Based on information gained from the International Criminal Police Organization, Tachibana's senior detective at the time was given the order to arrest this man who had entered Japanese territory.

It was initially doubtful how this fell under the Fourth Investigative Division's jurisdiction, but they had received an appeal for cooperation because the Japanese branch of the man's organization made contact with a large designated organized crime group.

At first the investigation went well. The informant Tachibana planted in the criminal group provided swift, accurate information. They had the date, time, and place the target would enter Japan. Tachibana knew everything, from what hotel the target would be staying in to the fake name he was going to use.

But just when he was a step away from arresting him, the young Tachibana stepped out of line from overeagerness, resulting in a savage counterattack from the assassin.

It was the worst possible outcome and the greatest blunder of his career — two members of the operation died in the line of duty, and upon completing his job, the assassin dropped off their radar, never to be seen again — just as if he'd disappeared off the face of the earth.

Tachibana had since narrowly avoided resignation, but having taken responsibility for the whole event, he was removed from the Fourth Investigative Division and the central government office, instead working for the regional police department.

And so, he was demoted to a position with the Juvenile Observation and Protection Department, where he had been ever since.

He had no intention whatsoever of looking down on the Community Safety Department's work, but this was certainly severe enough of a punishment for someone who had worked in the frontlines facing off against professional criminals.

That said, Tachibana wasn't displeased. Defending the citizens from professional criminals was important, but he understood that watching over the young, those who would carry the nation's future, was just as important of a job.

Besides, every now and then I happen upon cases like this one...

Even from the perspective of a veteran like Tachibana, this disappearance was a mysterious one.

Normally, cases like this one would begin with a search request, followed by a formal investigation to check if there was any proof of an incident, and that was usually where it ended.

Heartless as it may sound, even the police couldn't find every person that went missing. Of course, cases where evidence of criminal intent or emergency existed, such as child abduction or a missing person who left behind a suicide note, were treated differently. Even still, as time progressed, fewer and fewer people remained to work on the case.

Most people who heard of this would accuse the police of cold, unfair treatment, and in a manner of speaking, these complaints were justified. But the fact that it was impossible to defend every single citizen with limited resources and manpower held just as true.

However, when it came to this case, it was indeed an unusual one. After all, the missing high-school student had an unusually large, hulking physique. He was a minor, but unlike a primary or middle schooler, he was at a more autonomous age.

Plus, he wasn't just large; he was clearly trained. Tachibana had received a photograph of him taken during his high school admission, and the young man's large physique stood out at a glance.

Unless he was attacked by a large group, it was doubtful most people would

be able to do anything to this Ryoma Mikoshiba boy, impudent as that thought seemed. In other words, it was unlikely he was the victim of a crime.

In which case, the possibility of him disappearing of his own will grew more convincing, but that presented another problem: there was no discernible reason for him to do that.

He left his bag at school, and it had all his notebooks and textbooks. His cell phone, too. The only thing missing was a boxed lunch he supposedly received from Asuka Kiryuu. And that matches up with the testimony from his classmates, that he left the class with his lunch in hand... If he ran away from home, the timing for it is unnatural. And there are no witnesses, nor did he appear on any surveillance cameras from train stations or convenience stores in the area. He could have avoided them deliberately, and he might have used a car, but...

There were surveillance cameras at every corner of the modern world, and it was exceedingly difficult to avoid being caught on tape to at least some extent. Even if they didn't get a clear shot of him, it was unnatural that he didn't appear on any cameras within a several kilometer radius. And even if he ran away from home, leaving his cell phone in his bag was unthinkable in this day and age.

Something feels off about the old man, but nothing makes sense about the way the kid disappeared, either. From the photograph I can tell he's not just tall. From how wide his chest and neck are, he's clearly gone through considerable training, way beyond the scope of a hobby.

Asuka Kiryuu was standing next to him in the photograph, and his body matched her waist and thighs in girth.

He also inspected the photograph with a magnifying glass and found his fists had considerable calluses on them, the kind one would only get from practicing daily and over a long period of time with a karate straw post.

But there's no record of Ryoma Mikoshiba participating officially in any martial art or form of sports... Same as this old man... It feels like it was deliberately hidden, but why?

The more he dug into the place, the more Tachibana felt there was something off about Ryoma Mikoshiba. Or rather, something was unnatural about the

Mikoshiba family...

There's the matter of his parents, too...

The questioning ended about as expected, and Kusuda turned his eyes to Tachibana.

"Is there anything else, Mr. Tachibana?"

At first glance, nothing seemed to change about Kusuda's expression, but Tachibana noticed the slight change to the mask of his expression.

He's not incompetent, but he definitely wants to close this up by the book... I guess it makes sense, given how young he is...

Kusuda wasn't enthusiastic about working on this case, only taking part in it because Tachibana, the senior in charge of his training, was assigned to it. He was quite frankly apathetic in his investigation, and Tachibana could vaguely tell he wanted to get it over with as fast as possible.

I can relate to him not wanting to squander any more time on a case that doesn't look like it's going to bear any fruit...

There were essentially two ways to move up as a police officer. The first was to apply for an exam that would raise your rank. It was the safest, most certain, and most tiresome method of being promoted.

The other was to earn enough merit and achievements to be moved to one of the star postings. What it meant was that one remained part of their division, while their post would move from the local police station to the jurisdiction office. It was the equivalent of a businessman moving from a branch office to the head office of a company.

For all young Kusuda was concerned, he wanted out of this posting and its boring, unappealing work, and to move to the more flashy and appealing Criminal Investigations Department. Tachibana was aware of how, to that end, he was desperate for any chance to gain merit.

Tachibana didn't intend to justify that way of thinking, but considering where it stemmed from, he couldn't quite fault him for it, either.

Of course, considering his role as a police officer, it did come across as wrong.

At least as far as appearances go, no job was any more or less important than another when it came to police work; catching criminals wasn't everything. Handling lost articles, helping people find their way around the streets, and even guarding the entrance to the police station were important parts of maintaining the public order.

But those were plain, dull jobs that weren't appreciated by the citizens.

And with the section chief being the way he is...

Tachibana's lips curled as the face of their boss, who was always pressuring them to get results and up the numbers, surfaced in his mind. He didn't think highly of him. No. Frankly speaking, he thought of him as the scum of the earth. But then again, he only ever pressured his subordinates the way he did because he was pressured the same way by his own superiors.

Society stressed results and efficiency, and that wasn't limited to just police work. Modern Japan fully operated on the logic of numbers, and once most people saw past the pretense and appearances, they acted the way Kusuda did. Put another way, society had a way of crushing those that didn't conform to that line of thought.

"No, I don't have anything to ask." Feeling Kusuda's probing glance, Tachibana nodded, quashing the feeling of sorrow budding in his heart.

They'd mostly achieved what they came for. Tachibana was convinced his hunch was right on the money.

This old man is the key to this case. There's no doubt he's holding onto everything... The only question is how I should approach this going forward. I should probably gather some more info.

There was nothing more he could do for now. Even if he were to shower the old man with questions, he doubted he'd get a convincing answer out of him.

"I see... Then I suppose we'll be off. It's getting quite late, after all." Kusuda cracked a smile, relieved they could finally go home.

"Oh, do you want me to prepare dinner?" Asuka asked.

"No, we appreciate the offer, but we're on the clock right now," Tachibana

gratefully declined, rising to his feet.

“I see... I’m sorry we didn’t have much to treat you with,” Kouichiro said. “If anything else comes up, come by any time... Asuka, if you would?”

“I’ll show you the door.” Asuka nodded slightly.

With that said, she followed Tachibana and Kusuda out of the living room, as Kouichiro watched them go.

“That detective, Tachibana...”

Kouichiro reached for his favorite tea bowl, taking a sip of his now lukewarm tea and letting the taste linger on his tongue.

“Hmm. He might’ve picked up on something, but that’s all it’ll ever amount to.”

For Kouichiro, who knew the whole truth, nothing was more irritating than having a detective like Tachibana, who was simply too loyal to his duties, snoop around. That said, Kouichiro couldn’t offer Tachibana an answer he would accept.

The Otherworld Summoning.

On their own, the words didn’t feel that odd. Many Japanese works of fiction made use of it. But saying those words in reality was an entirely different story. If nothing else, had Kouichiro been in Tachibana’s position, he’d only take those words as the ramblings of a madman.

Still, there’s only one thing I can do...

Kouichiro had been carrying that guilt ever since he returned from the other world. Just thinking about why the companions that should have followed him weren’t with him drove him mad.

Following a path paved by many sacrifices, Kouichiro found his way back home to Japan, and just as everything seemed like it might finally be forgotten, it happened.

A hole opened at his feet, dragging his son and his son’s wife into its dark embrace. The two of them had heard of his story, and while they only half-believed it, they now knew what the situation meant. Their final cries, imploring

him to take care of their son, echoed in his ears to this very day.

The guilt of not going back to the other Earth with them, and of leaving them behind, sank to the bottom of Kouichiro's heart like a sort of sludge. But he lived on to this day to fulfill his final promise to them and take care of their son.

But now, even his beloved grandson had become a victim of his karma.

I am reaping what I sowed. They say what goes around comes around, and those words are all too true.

Kouichiro thought it had all ended with the sacrifice of his son and his son's wife. That he'd atoned for his sins. But the shackles of fate rejected his feelings, claiming Ryoma as well.

There was no proof, but Kouichiro was convinced Ryoma had been summoned to the other world.

Perhaps I should have told Ryoma, even if he wouldn't have believed me...

Regret and remorse formed ripples in Kouichiro's heart. He gazed into the empty tea bowl in his hands.

But his emotions soon blanked out at the sound of Asuka screaming.

"Asuka!"

At that moment Kouichiro rose to his feet in surprise, only to hear a faint humming sound coming from a sword's handle. Kouichiro's gaze fell on his beloved katanas, which sat enshrined in an alcove.

This is... Ouka and Kikuka are humming...?

These beloved swords had saved his life countless times in the other world. Even upon returning to Rearth, Kouichiro never neglected to keep them maintained every day. They were true blades, tools of manslaughter.

And now, many moons and years later, they spoke and sang to Kouichiro yet again.

Are they telling me to take them...?

That was, in a way, a foreboding decision. Taking the two swords from the alcove, Kouichiro rushed over to the entrance.

Impossible... No, it can't be!

Cursing the size of his own house, Kouichiro hurried to the entrance.

"No... This can't be... Not her, too... You can't take even Asuka away as well. Is that the punishment you would inflict on me?"

He'd paid once already with his son and his son's wife. He never expected to have to bear another sacrifice, but this curse had claimed his grandson next. And now tragedy was about to strike a third time.

Taking two turns down the hallway, Kouichiro arrived in the entrance hall, only to be greeted with the worst possible sight.

There was no one there. Neither the two detectives nor Asuka. In their place, a gaping black hole was open in the ground. A bottomless opening to the depths of hell. And Kouichiro knew awfully well what diving into it would mean.

But I can't abandon Asuka. If I don't go after her, she would definitely...

Unlike the grandson he raised and personally trained, Asuka wasn't as dutifully trained. In both heart and body, she was only an amateur girl of the modern age. That was more than enough to live in Japan, and her becoming too strong might actually make life harder going forward for her; that thought stopped Kouichiro from training her any further. And even now, he didn't feel he was wrong in that decision.

But in a world where the law had a less binding presence and human rights were a questionable concept, things were different. Nonaggression or self-defense rendered one incapable of defending themselves, to say nothing of others.

To survive in that world, one needed to be capable of mercilessly slaying their opponent, and needed to have the crisis management skills to know how to deal with threats ahead of time.

Of course, if one managed to find a way of surviving, they would come to develop those skills in that world, whether they wished to or not. But before she reached that state, Asuka would have to live through hell.

Yes, just as Kouichiro once did, in his youth...

There's plenty I'd like to take along if I could, but... I don't have the time to think it over. I'll have to make do with these two...

The hole in the ground was gradually closing. He only had a few moments left. In seconds, the two worlds would once again be separated.

Kouichiro tightened his grip on the two swords he cherished so greatly. At this point there was no way of knowing what country had summoned them, but there was no doubt he would have to fight.

Forgive me... In the end, even Asuka became involved in all of this, even though I feared this would happen... But I will protect her. I swear it. I will keep her safe, even if it claims my life. So please... Forgive your sinful brother.

Mouthing silent words of gratitude to his younger sister, who had always supported him and Ryoma, Kouichiro stepped forward.

"Wait for me, Asuka!"

With his swords in hand, Kouichiro once again soared back into that world of savagery, so he would not have to lose any more of his family.

Swallowing Kouichiro up, the hole sluggishly closed its maw, leaving in its wake an estate bereft of its master. The only witness of what transpired within these walls was the pale moon, overlooking everything from a crack in the grey clouds.

Chapter 2: An Unexpected Messenger

Lupis carefully examined the man who had suddenly appeared before her. His name was Akitake Sudou. He had black hair, black eyes and yellow skin. He looked to be in his forties, and while he wasn't very tall, his body overall seemed rather solid. He did have a bit of a gut, but that could likely be attributed to his age catching up with him. His arms and neck, however, did have a thickness to them that made him look like a seasoned warrior.

She'd seen people with some combination of these traits, but it was the first time she'd seen someone fulfill all of them. Yes, with the exception of one person. Ryoma Mikoshiba...

"Please do not stare at me so intently. I might blush."

Sudou's tone was far too crude for one speaking to a country's princess, but his facial expression somehow made her forgive his words. That was the atmosphere he gave off. However, his easy-going words only made Lupis tense up in renewed caution.

"I realize it is only natural for you to be wary, given I have appeared in the middle of the night without an appointment, but... Would you mind if I could at least take a seat? Standing for very long becomes hard at my age, you see."

And with that said, Sudou took a seat in the chair without waiting for Lupis's approval. A truly impudent approach. Lupis had never met anyone so brazen before, if nothing else.

"I ask again: Who are you?" Lupis said, aiming her sword at the man's neck as he crossed his legs composedly on his chair.



“I go by Akitake Sudou. You may think of me as a mediator of sorts, shall we say. Hired by a certain individual.”

Sudou’s words were composed, but their content was quite dangerous. Unlike official merchants, secret emissaries like him put their lives at risk. Depending on what he let slip, he could very well be executed to keep his mouth shut.

He doesn’t come across as a fool who doesn’t know his place... But he is awfully calm.

Something about that composure tugged at Lupis’s attention.

“What’s your objective here?”

“To negotiate with you, Your Highness Lupis Rhoadserians. What else?”

“How did you get in?”

“I swam upstream against the Thebes to reach the back side of the camp. But my, your commander... Mikoshiba, I believe? He’s truly skilled. He didn’t stop at just making sure the moat is fully guarded, and extended his safety net to the Thebes too. Swimming takes quite a toll at my age, and I nearly got caught by the guards... Horrid, I tell you. Simply horrid.” Sudou gave a carefree laugh.

Lupis couldn’t help but be shocked at his words, though.

He... swam up the Thebes...?

There were those who knew how to swim if the need presented itself, so that alone wasn’t so implausible. Even if there weren’t many chances to swim, some in this Earth did know how to swim if only by virtue of their livelihood, like fishermen and sailors. And true enough, the back of the base was patrolled, but not nearly as tightly as its front.

But the Thebes was a massive river that fertilized the entirety of Rhoadseria, and it was always rich with water, never running dry. At its deepest, it was anywhere from four times to five times the height of a man, and not only was it wide enough that one couldn’t cross it without a boat, its currents were also rather fast.

Unless one’s ship had sunk and their life was on the line, no one would ever seriously consider swimming across this river, even if they were sailors and

fishermen. They would at most splash about in the shoals. And that was why the side facing the Thebes was less secured.

The question became, then, why was Sudou that desperate to sneak into the camp?

“What are your intentions? What negotiations...?”

“Could you please put that dangerous thing away first? I’m a timid man, after all... Having a sword pointed at me by the woman known as the princess general is most unnerving,” Sudou said, and moved the sword’s tip away from his chest with a finger.

It was hard to tell if he was being honest or just trying to compliment her, but Lupis couldn’t discern the intent of the person sitting before her. Still, it was true that greeting a man who came to negotiate with a sword aimed at them was cruel. Even if he did sneak into a princess’s tent in the dead of night.

Lupis hesitantly sheathed her sword, though she did keep it within arm’s reach, so as to react to any surprise assault.

“Very well... Now we can discuss matters in peace.”

“You don’t have to comment on everything.” Lupis fixed her gaze on Sudou. “State your business already.”

Sudou remained flippant, however.

“Well, as I’m sure you might’ve imagined, I’ve been sent by one Duke Gelhart... Though the truth is a touch more nuanced than that, but for now that explanation will do.”

Lupis ignored his insolent tone. If she were to cling to every careless remark he made, the conversation wouldn’t go anywhere. Sudou, in the meanwhile, guessed at her thoughts from his gaze, and hardened his expression as he continued.

“Which brings me to my business... I will be direct. Duke Gelhart wishes to pledge allegiance to you, Your Highness.”

“Pledge allegiance?” Lupis scoffed. “Are you sure you don’t mean surrender?”

As inexperienced as she was, she was still royalty, and received considerable

education. She knew that if Duke Gelhart ordered anything at this point, it would be either his surrender or to have Lupis assassinated.

Of course, since he was surrendering before the final showdown, it was questionable how severely she could punish him, but whichever way it went, Duke Gelhart's power and authority would be severely diminished. There would be just about no chance of him regaining power.

But if he surrendered, she couldn't have him executed to begin with. His territory would also be a concern, because even if she could diminish it, she wouldn't be able to take all of his lands away, and the same held true for his fortune.

There was a difference between surrendering after the war had concluded and surrendering in the middle of battle. The winner couldn't press the surrendering party for conditions as harshly.

But while it would be one thing if their forces were equally matched, there was no reason for Duke Gelhart to decide to swear allegiance to Princess Lupis at this point in the war.

The nobles' faction held numerical superiority, but Princess Lupis would win due to having several times the number of knights, who were trained and proficient in thaumaturgy. Ryoma Mikoshiba took away the nobles' faction's locational advantage. And most of all, the nobles' faction was ultimately nothing more than a disorderly mob. They'd do anything to maintain their families' standing.

Had Duke Gelhart offered his allegiance before Princess Lupis's forces crossed the river, she may have begrudgingly agreed. Ferrying an army across the river was much easier said than done.

That was why Mikoshiba's achievements were so significant.

Lupis understood this, and so she deemed Sudou's words to be unacceptable. All that aside, Duke Gelhart was the one who used that illegitimate child he brought out of nowhere, Radine, and the contents of the will to form a just cause for battle. He was essentially a traitor to the crown.

For all Lupis was concerned, Duke Gelhart was the source and ringleader of

this political strife. Sparing his life wasn't an option for her.

At least it wasn't until she heard the words Sudou said next.

"Have you heard of a knight by the name of Mikhail Vanash?"

The moment he said those words, Lupis went pale. She didn't expect to hear the name of a man whose death she'd mourned until now, and her surprise was understandable.

"Huh...? What do you mean...? It can't be!"

A messenger who came for negotiations mentioned the name of a man who should be dead. That caused a single possibility to sprout in Lupis's heart.

"It can't be... Mikhail is..."

But then something tore apart the tent's fabric and forced its way in, as if to cut into her words.

"Huh?"

Lupis was then struck speechless by the movements Sudou performed right before her eyes. His heavy, middle-aged body had at some point disappeared from the chair, and was standing on both feet. Her eyes couldn't perceive the moment he got up. Something once again slashed through the air, but stabbed into the chair Sudou was sitting on just a moment ago.

"That's dangerous. Attacking without any warning is dreadful, even if I am an intruder," Sudou said, fixedly gazing at the chakram that had stabbed into the chair. "But oh, this is unusual. A chakram... If anyone were to use this weapon it would be Ryoma Mikoshiba himself, yes?"

Sudou's voice echoed through the tent, but no response came. In place of an answer, another chakram zoomed through the air, this time from the tent's entrance, roaring as it made way to Sudou's face.

"Good grief, ignoring me, are you...?" Sudou blocked the incoming chakram by picking up the chair.

Even as more than half the blade pierced through the wood, Sudou's tone remained as light as before. Even as more and more chakrams were being thrown at him.

“Could you please just show yourself already? It feels like I’m talking to myself, and that makes me feel quite foolish.”

More chakrams came flying even as he said that. Of course, Sudou himself didn’t know if he really was speaking to Ryoma, but he simply tried to provoke the other party. His tone remained flippant, but his concentration was fixed entirely on the tent’s entrance... Without knowing that this was exactly what Ryoma wanted him to do.

“Your Highness! Over here, hurry!”

All of a sudden the tent’s fabric was torn apart, and Meltina rushed in from behind Lupis. Even a sturdy tent made to withstand rain and wind was made of cloth, after all, and could be easily torn apart by a sword.

“Meltina!”

“Come, Your Highness, we must hurry!”

Meltina lead Lupis out of the tent through the tear, where the perimeter was completely surrounded by knights. While Princess Lupis was still reeling, unable to keep up with the rapidly shifting situation, Meltina raised her voice.

“Sir Mikoshiba, I’ve secured Her Highness!”

As if in response to her words, the knights all tilted the torches they were holding forward.

“All right. Do it!”

At Ryoma’s command, several dozen torches were thrown at the tent, scattering embers and sparks as they soared through the air.

“Wait, no, you can’t kill him...!” Lupis shouted as hard as she could. “Meltina, please! Hurry, get water! Extinguish those flames!”

Not yet, at least! From what that Sudou person said, Mikhail might still be...

That emotion spurred Princess Lupis forward. She knew how low of a chance it was, but people had a way of clinging to the hope before their eyes. But her words came far too late, and the flurry of torches had already ignited the tent. In addition, the knights already had their swords drawn, expecting Sudou to burst out of the tent. Everyone present was bent on delivering the intruder who

snuck into the princess's tent to his death.

"What are you saying, Your Highness? Isn't he an assassin?" Meltina asked.

She was struggling to get a handle on the situation, too. She was awakened from her bed, told that Princess Lupis was in danger and rushed over after putting on her armor. She then only abided by Ryoma's instructions.

Meltina didn't know what was going on, and couldn't fathom what Princess Lupis was saying. She had no idea about the hint Sudou had dropped regarding Mikhail's survival.

"Forget all that, just save him, save Sudou!" Lupis ordered her men to save Sudou from death's maw.

Overwhelmed by Princess Lupis's angry shouting, Meltina shifted her gaze to the burning tent.

"But... At this point it's..."

The fire had completely overtaken the cloth that made up the tent, which had by now reduced to a huge campfire. Going into that tent would be throwing oneself into one of two fates: suffocating from lack of oxygen or catching fire and burning to death. Whichever of the two it was, it was doubtful Sudou would survive.

But it was then that the sound of the knights' shocked voices reached Meltina's ears.

"Oh! He just...!"

"Prepare the spears! Forward! Forward!"

"Don't let him get away!"

The knights from the other side of the tent called out.

"Meltina!"

"Yes!"

Meltina still didn't understand the situation, but she did know Princess Lupis wished for this assassin's life to be saved. And so Meltina went about fulfilling her mistress's wishes, albeit while feeling rather dubious about it.

“My word... That was an awful thing to do... I might be an enemy, but you could spare a bit more mercy. Burning a person alive... Unacceptable. Simply unacceptable. Goes against human decency, I’d say.”

Sudou appeared before Ryoma. His clothes were charred here and there, but he had no visible wounds.

“Are you really human...?”

Even though he was composed, Ryoma couldn’t restrain his surprise at the sight of Sudou walking calmly out of the burning tent’s entrance.

“Ah, finally remembered how to speak, have you? My, how very joyous.”

But Ryoma simply ignored his words, drawing his katana.

“Hmm, gone quiet again? Even curtness should have its limits...”

But Ryoma ignored Sudou’s wisecracks, hiding the katana with his body by holding it in a flank stance, closing the gap between them in a moment. And then, with his gaze fixed on Sudou’s abdomen, he swept his sword forward.

At that moment, the dull sound of clashing metal rang out, as a spray of sparks bloomed between the two.

“Could we settle this another day, considering how lightly armed I am? This truly is becoming too much to bear, even for me.”

At some point, a dagger appeared in Sudou’s hands, and he spoke while using it to parry Ryoma’s attack. It was hard to tell if he was speaking truthfully or not — whether he truly had the leisure to stay composed or not. None of the surrounding knights could tell what Sudou was thinking — not even Ryoma could know. But Ryoma only cared about one thing right now, and it wasn’t this man’s intentions.

A dead man’s intentions didn’t matter in the slightest, after all.

Ryoma’s right leg stomped at the ground hard. Sudou evaded, avoiding the front of his leg being stepped on, and that made Ryoma lose focus for a split second, which Sudou took as a chance to widen the gap between them.

“Hmph... Dreadful. You’re not listening to a word I’m saying... I cannot afford to fight you here...”

But while Sudou may not have had any will to fight, Ryoma was the exact opposite. He silently held the katana over his head, straining his muscles to deliver a slash. His eyes shined with dark bloodlust, which menaced Sudou.



“An overhead position, the stance of fire... This is a problem...” Sudou muttered in an almost resigned fashion.

I’ve tried to shake him as much as I could, but nothing’s working. I thought it might make his swordplay falter, but it hasn’t done a thing. He’s even calmly reading my actions... He’s probably realized that all I have is this dagger for self-defense...

He had left behind his usual sword and the many hidden weapons he’d kept hidden in his clothes, as they would have weighed him down in his swim through the Thebes. His sole weapon was this dagger, and having realized this, Ryoma chose the stance of fire. The most aggressive stance, that was also the least suited for defense — a stance that was in many ways reckless. But with only a dagger in hand, Sudou wouldn’t be able to block the incoming slash.

It was obvious that even if he managed to block it, he’d be overpowered. The raised katana would bear down on him with all of Ryoma’s strength and his weight, which was double that of the common man. The most he could do was predict its range and try to avoid the slash altogether.

What a bother... I can’t afford to die here... But at the same time, I can’t kill him without properly appraising him...

Sudou turned his consciousness to his own chakras, but it was then that the goddess of fate smiled upon him.

“Sir Mikoshiba, stop! That’s enough!” Meltina pushed between them, finally appearing on the scene.

She must have run over, because her shapely chest was rising and falling with fatigued breathing.

“What are you doing...?” Ryoma asked, maintaining his stance. “Why are you stopping me?”

His gaze was still unrelentingly fixed on Sudou.

His voice was as sharp as a blade, and unlike his usual tone.

“I don’t know myself! But Her Highness ordered it!”

“Princess Lupis...? Is that true?”

“Yes, there’s no mistaking it. She gave me a direct order to spare him.”

At her words, Ryoma exhaled grandly and lowered his sword. But he’d only switched his stance to a low position, so he could cut Sudou down in the event he did anything suspicious. He didn’t allow carelessness to sneak into his heart.

“Fine. I won’t cut him down for now, but we need to understand the situation. I’m sorry, but could you bring Her Highness over?”

“I’m here!” Princess Lupis hurried over, running between the knights.

Ryoma then asked her. His attitude may have been too coarse considering he was speaking to royalty, but no one faulted Ryoma for it in this situation. Even if it was Princess Lupis’s order, no one saw a reason to keep an intruder that snuck into the camp under the veil of night alive.

“I’ve heard what Lady Meltina said... Could you explain what she meant?”

“Very well.” Princess Lupis nodded. “But first, I must ask this man something.”

She then turned her gaze to Sudou.

“You called yourself Sudou, yes? I would like to speak with you. Could you come with me?”

“Yes, yes. Of course.” Sudou readily accepted Princess Lupis’s proposal. “I would love for things to calm down and for us to continue our conversation from earlier.”

“Then Mikoshiba, please have a new tent prepared. Meltina, go and call Helena and the others.”

“Very well... But do be careful...”

While Ryoma was quite unconvinced, he left along with Meltina to do as Princess Lupis ordered.

“Your Highness... Why are you gathering people?” Sudou asked suspiciously upon hearing Princess Lupis’s words. “I would much prefer to speak with you privately.”

He’d judged from her behavior that Princess Lupis was interested in negotiations, and the fact he hadn’t been killed meant that she was interested

in hearing of Mikhail's condition. But she still had people gathered.

Why?

This was very much Princess Lupis letting her private emotions take hold, and wasn't something she would want people to see.

"When it comes to deciding matters of the state, even a ruler can't make choices arbitrarily. Or will you tell me you won't talk unless it's just the two of us?"

Sudou realized he'd made light of the princess.

Hmm... It seems she isn't as much of a fool as I've thought. But this only requires me to reword things a bit... She's still just an inexperienced princess... The problem is that man... I knew he'd be impressive, since he killed Gaius Valkland, but... He really is troublesome. I can see how he managed to give Saitou the slip.

Sudou struggled to keep the black bloodlust rising in his heart contained. It wasn't time to become involved with Ryoma Mikoshiba yet. Sudou had a mission to accomplish.

Even if I do eventually have him killed, he can't be treated the same as any other target... Getting involved with him needlessly would be dangerous... But so be it. For now, I must focus on the task at hand.

Sudou swiftly calculated his choices and bowed his head to Princess Lupis in assent.

In a newly prepared tent stood sixteen people. Princess Lupis, Meltina, Helena and Ryoma were naturally there, but so were Ryoma's personal confidants — Laura, Sara, Lione and Boltz — as well as Count Bergstone and others of the neutral faction's nobles. In other words, everyone who made up the core of the Princess's faction.

Their gazes were all directed to the mysterious man who introduced himself as Sudou, who had finally parted his lips and spoke decisively.

"So, as I've already explained, Duke Gelhart wishes to pledge allegiance to Her Highness... And as proof of that, he promises to return Mikhail Vanash, who is

currently under his protection in Heraklion. To that end, he sent me as a mediator.”

Sudou concluded his words, and a deep silence fell over the tent. Or rather, the offer was so sudden everyone couldn’t quite keep up with how things were developing. The ringleader of the rebellion came to pledge allegiance to them on the eve of the final battle. Nothing could be more unexpected.

“Laura... This is bad, isn’t it...?” Sara whispered into Laura’s ear.

“It is... This may have an effect on Master Ryoma’s plans...” Laura answered, fixing her gaze on Ryoma, who watched Sudou speak.

“It almost certainly will...”

“Yes... Very much so...”

The two’s whispering was drowned out by the tumult that filled the tent. Lione spoke to Boltz, Meltina whispered to Princess Lupis, and the nobles consulted each other with low voices. The only two who were perfectly silent were Ryoma and Helena.

“What will Master Ryoma do...?” Sara asked, but Laura had no answer.

In the end, the sisters could only anxiously watch over Ryoma. One could go so far as to say that it didn’t matter to the sisters which conclusion was reached at the end of this meeting. They only needed to act in Ryoma Mikoshiba’s favor.

Ryoma closed his eyes and calmly adjusted his posture. Doing so helped him restrain the emotions surging up in his heart, and that was his only way of breaking through the current situation. Once Sudou concluded his explanation, Ryoma snuck a single glance at Princess Lupis, who had fallen silent.

So she really won’t budge... This is giving me a headache...

Honestly speaking, while Ryoma trusted Princess Lupis as a person, he had little to no trust in her skills. She’d been educated as a noble and was by no means stupid, and had a fair amount of knowledge when it came to military affairs, which meant that as rulers go, she was qualified.

But Ryoma had vaguely noticed that Lupis Rhoadserians lacked one trait that was critical for a ruler, and yet he didn’t expect her to come off as this foolish.

What Sudou said... That they only started the rebellion out of respect for the late king's will, and didn't mean to turn against the royal family? Bullshit... They did way too much for that to be their motive... And he said he wants to turn to our side because he can't forgive Hodram Albrecht for turning against the royal family and plotting rebellion? He must think we're stupid.

Those were Ryoma's feelings upon hearing Sudou's story. Duke Gelhart hoped to get away by saying he only acted on the late king's will, and to curry favor and show his loyalty by saying he was outraged by General Albrecht turning coat. He would pin the stigma of being a rebel entirely on General Albrecht and get away scot-free.

Usually, one wouldn't gather everyone to hear this proposal out, but no one raised their voice in anger at this foolish prospect.

Everyone's thinking the same thing...

As rude as it may be to think this of a ruler, Ryoma didn't trust her political skills to begin with, and so believed she shouldn't be allowed to arbitrarily make a decision regarding Sudou's proposal. Lupis herself knew she wasn't inadequate in this situation, but Ryoma could only praise this judgment if, after hearing Sudou's explanation, she'd reject it of her own will.

In the end, Princess Lupis doesn't want Mikhail Vanash to die...

Ryoma's heart grew cold. True, Mikhail was a passionately loyal and skilled knight, and was one of Princess Lupis's most trusted retainers alongside Meltina. It was only human nature for Princess Lupis to not want to abandon him, and Ryoma didn't mean to fault her for that in and of itself. But a ruler couldn't let such personal emotions take over. She had to restrain them.

This wasn't a question of how trusted or loyal Mikhail was. No retainers, no matter how dear to one's heart or skilled they were, were worth relinquishing the chance to claim Duke Gelhart's head.

Duke Gelhart was a traitor who raised a rebellion against Princess Lupis. No single life, as close and loyal as it may be, was worth saving if it meant pardoning him...

Is he really more important than winning the war, more important than

keeping Rhoadseria unified as a country...?

True, Princess Lupis still hadn't stated her feelings on the matter, so for the time being, Ryoma was only assuming she wanted to have Mikhail saved. Still, Ryoma was convinced this was the case.

No, likely everyone present thought the same. She wouldn't have kept Sudou alive after he snuck into a royal's tent without permission if she didn't think so. No punishment would seem lenient, but she insisted Sudou be spared and brought here, so she could hear what he had to say. This alone put her feelings on full display.

She doesn't want Mikhail to die, so she has to accept Duke Gelhart's offer. But Princess Lupis knows she has no legitimacy to make that decision, and that's why she gathered everyone here. So it's not just her name being dragged through the mud.

If Princess Lupis was to accept this offer of her own judgment, others would surely object to her decision. And that was why she gathered everyone here — to obfuscate who was responsible for making that choice.

"I would like to hear your opinions, then."

Ryoma had to hold back a clicking of the tongue at hearing those words leave Princess Lupis's lips. But as angry as it made him, he couldn't lash out here.

"Would anyone like to share their thoughts?"

Princess Lupis's words were met with silence. As everyone held their tongue, Princess Lupis's gaze wandered across the round table. Ryoma himself didn't think Mikhail's life was worth pardoning Duke Gelhart, and everyone present, Princess Lupis included, thought the same. The mere comparison felt foolish.

And so, it was clear what needed to be said, but since Princess Lupis wished to spare Mikhail, no one could bring themselves to say it. What Princess Lupis wanted was to have her will approved under the guise of an opinion.

If Ryoma were to suggest they should discard Mikhail's life, Princess Lupis would no doubt resent him for it after this meeting. And that grudge would grow with the passage of time, eventually leading her to ignore Ryoma's opinion for emotional reasons. And on top of that, other knights like Mikhail

would riot at the decision.

“You’re leaving Mikhail to die?!”

“What’s the point if you won’t save your own men?!”

“How dare you say that, you outsider!”

Ryoma would be absolutely showered with those insults. At times, reason came at the cost of emotion. That was for certain. But if the ruler was to drown in their own emotions, it would cause a distortion to form somewhere else. A distortion that would decisively hurt someone else.

At that moment, Ryoma felt Helena turn a piercing gaze to him.

“I can’t...” Ryoma shook his head as he whispered to Helena.

He’d realized from her gaze what she was trying to say.

“Then let me...” she whispered back, but he shook his head again.

“Don’t. If Princess Lupis grows suspicious of you here, it would become difficult to reorganize everything later...”

Even Helena would be seen as the villain if she were to tell her to give up on Mikhail. She wasn’t well-trusted by Princess Lupis the way Meltina and Mikhail were. Helena was skilled enough to be known as Rhoadseria’s White Goddess of War, so there would be less opposition to her making the suggestion compared to a neophyte like Ryoma.

But Ryoma didn’t see Princess Lupis choosing to discard Mikhail’s life over Helena’s advice.

“Then what do we do? The way things are going is...” Helena seemingly felt the situation was as dangerous as Ryoma thought it to be.

Accepting Duke Gelhart’s excuses and allowing him to swear allegiance would mean indirectly acknowledging Princess Radine. It would make it so he only acted in accordance to the late king’s last will.

Accepting the turncoat known as Duke Gelhart into the kingdom of Rhoadseria would also automatically elevate Princess Radine to the position of second in line for the throne. Princess Lupis would be creating her greatest

political opponent with her own actions, making her already shaky position all the more unstable.

If only one could fix this, it would be Meltina, but...

Ryoma's eyes moved to Meltina, who was seated beside the princess.

No good... She's just happy Mikhail is alive... I understand being happy your colleague and friend is alive, but... She doesn't see how bad things are going. It's pointless to expect anything out of her... Which means...

Giving up on Meltina, who was simply smiling with relief and joy, Ryoma wracked his brains over a way to break this deadlock.

Killing Duke Gelhart is a no-go... But just getting rid of General Albrecht would be enough... The problem is what comes later... Princess Lupis won't be able to rein Duke Gelhart in... Even if she temporarily strips him of his power, he'd still end up gathering political power sooner or later...

A cold thought then surfaced in Ryoma's mind. Killing Duke Gelhart was a choice he had to make only because he considered the future of the kingdom of Rhoadseria as a country. It was Princess Lupis's problem. Why should an outsider to this country like Ryoma risk his position to kill Duke Gelhart?

If she wants to save Mikhail that badly... I suppose we should just let her...

At that moment, Ryoma gave up on Princess Lupis.

Or to be exact, he gave up on her future. From that moment on, Lupis Rhoadserians's fate would rely on her own abilities.

Rest easy, Your Highness. I won't betray you. But the way things are going, you will absolutely, positively die. I don't know how many years down the road it'll come, but I can see it clearly... So I'll leave Helena and the others with my warning. But that's the last time I'll help you. The people of Rhoadseria will have to handle the rest. I'd keep a very, very close eye on Gelhart if I were you.

Whispering so in his heart, Ryoma raised his hand to receive permission to speak.

"Then may I, if you don't mind?"

When those words echoed through the tent, Lupis was momentarily

overtaken with fear. She knew her decision was wrong. But her emotionality, her kindness prohibited her from electing to cast Mikhail's life aside.

"Very well. You may speak."

"Thank you." Ryoma rose to his feet at Princess Lupis's approval. "I am in favor of accepting Mr. Sudou's offer and taking Duke Gelhart on his offer of allegiance!"

Ryoma's words shook the tent.

"What?! Are you serious, Sir Mikoshiba?!"

"Yes, Count Bergstone. Quite serious."

"Unbelievable. I never imagined such words might leave your lips..."

Count Bergstone had spent all his days in the palace, grappling with the matter of this political unrest. As a noble, he had in-depth knowledge on matters of domestic importance and diplomacy. And that experience made it all too clear to him just how dangerous taking that offer would be for Princess Lupis.

"Do you... have some kind of plan...?"

Count Bergstone was so utterly taken aback by Ryoma's words that he asked the question even though the enemy's messenger, Sudou, was present.

"Not at all. But we can't afford to abandon a loyal knight like Sir Mikhail, and Duke Gelhart's words do have some truth. It's best to avoid war whenever possible. Heraklion is surrounded by farmlands, so damaging those lands will influence tax collection. Wouldn't having Duke Gelhart swear his allegiance to Princess Lupis save us that trouble?"

Nothing Ryoma said was a lie. Hurting the duke's lands would indeed hurt tax collection, and from a short-term perspective, having him swear allegiance to their side wasn't a bad option.

But the count was left unconvinced. They'd accounted for the effect marching on Heraklion would have on the taxes, so Ryoma had already made allowances for that matter.

"But Your Highness! Before we accept the duke's proposal, I suggest we add a

few conditions of our own.”

“What do you mean?”

“Even if he didn’t act out of malice, our armies have already crossed swords once. Sir Mikhail’s release won’t be enough to balance things out. What say you that we revoke him of his position of duke and demand indemnities?”

Princess Lupis pondered over Ryoma’s words. She wasn’t foolish enough to think Sudou’s proposal was in any way worth it, either. She wouldn’t have even considered it if Mikhail’s return wasn’t mentioned, and so Ryoma’s opinion was quite clear to her.

But if we push the negotiations so far they end up falling apart... Mikhail might not be saved...

She’d already once assumed him dead, but if he was still alive, she wanted to save him at all costs. Lupis’s heart wavered between reason and emotion. But without regard for her conflict, Sudou made his next play.

“Very well. Duke Gelhart has entrusted me with full authority in case such demands rise... So, I vote for relinquishing his title as a duke and fifty thousand gold coins in indemnities.”

His words once again filled the tent with tumult.

“““Fifty thousand?!”””

The amount Sudou offered more than simply covered the war expenses. The nobles heaved a sigh of relief. If nothing else, they would be able to repay their subordinates for putting their lives at risk and guarantee their households’ casual income.

Sudou smirked thinly, feeling the atmosphere in the tent mellow down.

Hmph, nobles always prioritize their house. It’s a good thing I chose a large number that would leave a lasting impact instead of starting small and trying to bargain...

Fifty thousand gold coins was a very large sum of money, even for an affluent noble house like Duke Gelhart’s. He only offered this amount to gain control of the situation. But when Ryoma spoke next, Sudou’s face contorted bitterly.

“No, I would like to also ask that in addition to those requests, he is not to have any position in the palace for a period of five years.”

Hmph... So he predicted I would offer those. That was a risk I was prepared to take before I came here... But forbidding him from having a posting is unexpected.

But that was one condition Ryoma wouldn’t back down from. If that wasn’t upheld, Princess Lupis and her inferior political prowess would just fall victim to Duke Gelhart. And so, he said five years. In five years, Princess Lupis and the nobles under her would grow used to running the country and perhaps be able to shrug off Duke Gelhart’s attempts to gain power.

Of course, whether that came to pass depended on Lupis and her retainers, and even Ryoma couldn’t take responsibility to see it happen. This was his way of securing the country’s potential future while abiding by Lupis’s wish to save Mikhail.

“And there’s something I’d like the duke’s assistance with,” Ryoma said meaningfully, to which Sudou narrowed his eyes.

Hmph... He probably means those spies masked as merchants he employed earlier... He wants Duke Gelhart to spread those rumors through the nobles’ faction, too... True, a rumor coming from multiple sources seems more credible...

Sudou was already beginning to see what Ryoma had planned. Having lived in a different world from this one that was blessed with technology and science, he knew well enough how important information and intelligence could be.

Whatever the case, I have to do what I can to preserve Duke Gelhart’s position.

Duke Gelhart was a very useful tool for both the Empire of O’ltormea and the organization. They could discard and replace him if needed, but Sudou frankly wanted to keep using him for as long as possible. Seeking out a new tool would require time and effort, after all.

“Yes, very well... I shall accept those terms in Duke Gelhart’s stead. Will this be all, Your Highness?”

Sudou turned the conversation to Princess Lupis, who was standing there dumbfounded, and had no choice but to nod.

“Yes... That’s fine...”

Hearing those words, Sudou nodded in satisfaction. These negotiations were by no means easy for him, either.

“Good. Then I will return to Heraklion to report to Duke Gelhart and see to Sir Mikhail’s release. After that, we will speak to Mr. Mikoshiba regarding his request.” And with that said, Sudou bowed his head to the princess and left the tent.

With Sudou gone, the meeting concluded. The participants returned to their allotted tents, leaving only Ryoma, Lione, Boltz and the Malfist sisters in the tent where the talks took place.

“Are ya really alright with that?” Lione asked.

“I did what I could.” Ryoma shrugged. “I tried to do as much as possible given the situation... Asking for any more than that without giving up on Mikhail would be asking for the moon.”

Ryoma was confident he achieved the best result possible given the circumstances. He almost wanted to compliment himself for reducing the damage this much under Princess Lupis’s emotional drunkenness.

“Would five years be enough?” Sara asked.

“Who knows?” Ryoma shrugged again. “Honestly, I can’t be bothered to care about them for that long.”



Ryoma’s actions in that conference were effectively a granting of borrowed time. If this entire matter could be summarized in medicinal terms, then Duke Gelhart and General Albrecht were fatal diseases eating away at the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

But Princess Lupis, the so-called patient in need of surgery, didn’t want to have Duke Gelhart removed, or rather, rejected the cost of it being removed. The cost could be likened to the doctor’s fee or the time spent in the hospital. To gain something, one had to give up on something else, and that was true regardless of whether it was this world or Ryoma’s.

So since the patient, Lupis, rejected the operation, Ryoma had no choice but to take the second best course of action while being well aware of the risks. He’d contained the outbreak of the disease called Duke Gelhart for five years, hoping that during that time the patient would gain the vitality needed to fight this disease off.

He had no other choice. All he could do was hope that Princess Lupis would use the five years he’d bought her wisely. That was something the people of Rhoadseria would have to worry about, though. It wasn’t something Ryoma, who had only become involved with this country by coincidence, should be concerned about.

“I suppose that means the only enemy we have left to defeat is General Albrecht and his two thousand knights... Now that Duke Gelhart has turned to self-defense, the other nobles will be scrambling to preserve their positions.”

Lione and the others nodded at Ryoma’s smirk. The nobles were a considerable presence because of the financial and military force of their territories, but they had one major flaw. The nobles were a gathering of individual rulers, and so once the situation turned against them, they would rush to defend their territory no matter how bad it made them look, even if they had to push their so-called allies, the other nobles, out of the way to do it.

And Ryoma had already planted the story that would make them rush to defend themselves.

“So General Albrecht will be the one stuck with the Old Maid in hand, eh...?”

“Even fellow nobles would sacrifice each other if they have to, so they’d never prioritize General Albrecht, who was originally their enemy. But forget that, the general will have his hands full protecting himself and won’t even care about what goes on around him. It’d be essentially impossible for him to stay in Rhoadseria’s territory now. His only option would be to flee to another country. Well, we can assume we already have Albrecht checked. Question is, how many nobles will we be able to cull...?”

With General Albrecht dead, the current war will come to a close. But in terms of what will happen to the kingdom going forward, it would only mark the start of the postwar measures.

“I’d like to have at least a third of them gone, but can that princess make such a decisive choice...? Who knows.”

“All according to yer script, boy... Chills me to the bone,” Lione said jokingly, shrugging her shoulders.

“I had to make a lot of changes to my plan halfway through, though,” Ryoma replied with a bitter smile.

Helena’s participation, Mikhail’s disobedience, General Albrecht’s betrayal and Duke Gelhart’s allegiance. Ryoma couldn’t very well say everything happened exactly as he planned it. But it would all end soon.

“Either tomorrow or the day after that...”

“We’ll be attacking Heraklion,” Laura said.

“Yeah. And that’s the final battle!” Ryoma nodded.

And so the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s final battle approached its climax, in a way unlike what Ryoma had initially conceived.

Chapter 3: Clash

“Everyone! We have finally reached this battlefield...! The last confrontation is about to begin. This battle will decide the fate of the kingdom of Rhoadseria. The enemy’s numbers are few. I am confident that if each and every one of you will fight to the best of your ability, our victory will be unshakeable. I believe in your loyalty and strength...! Let victory be upon us! Glory to the kingdom of Rhoadseria!”

Princess Lupis stood upon a platform, speaking before the knights. They responded to her oration with cheering that shook Heraklion’s plains.

“““Victory! Let victory be upon us! Glory to the kingdom of Rhoadseria!”””

Raising their fists to the heavens, the knights cheered as they clicked the butt-ends of their spears into the ground. The grudges General Albrecht had built up over the years among the knights were now on the verge of erupting like a volcano. Finally, they had their chance for revenge.

And under such overwhelmingly favorable conditions, at that. The effects of Duke Gelhart’s defection to Princess Lupis’s side were swift and noticeable. It wasn’t for nothing that he’d spent his years in the palace, embroiled in political power struggles.

Duke Gelhart accepted all of Ryoma’s conditions, and immediately began working to undermine the other nobles, namely the ones beneath Count Adelheit. Coupled with Ryoma’s own efforts, the results of the endeavor were exceedingly potent.

It all happened the day before Lupis gave the knights her speech. Count Adelheit was unable to contain his surprise upon learning of an unexpected visit from Duke Gelhart, but still greeted him out of polite courtesy.

“Ah, Duke Gelhart... My apologies for the other day...”

Count Adelheit was currently in a camp outside of Heraklion, gathering his forces to meet Princess Lupis’s. Count Adelheit was quite surprised to find Duke Gelhart had left the safety of Heraklion’s walls for the dangerous areas of the

battlefield.

“Oh, no, pardon my sudden intrusion.”

Saying this much was the kind of lip service one would expect. There was no denying that Duke Gelhart felt quite bitterly over Count Adelheit’s betrayal. He did serve alongside him for many years in the nobles’ faction. It was only natural he’d be upset.

However, one couldn’t see that anger burning in Duke Gelhart’s eyes. He was a haughty man, to be sure, but was capable of deprecating himself as much as necessary if it suited his needs. Perhaps one would call him a good actor. Or simply an adult.

Of course, he couldn’t quite fool Count Adelheit, who had served as his number two for years, but it still served to ease up the conversation. People were more prone to listen to someone when they spoke calmly, and not listen when they were being looked down upon.

“Still, to see you come all the way here... I must wonder what business you could have with me. We’re preparing to battle as General Albrecht ordered, so I haven’t much in the way of free time... Our battle with Princess Lupis is set to begin soon...”

Count Adelheit’s words were correct, but carried their implications. In other words, he didn’t have the time to spare for Duke Gelhart, a man in his decline.

“Ah, I’m sorry to hear I’ve found you at a bad time... But Count Adelheit, have you heard of the steep measures Princess Lupis is taking right now?” Duke Gelhart asked ominously.

Count Adelheit knew what Duke Gelhart was going for, but he still couldn’t help but ask.

“Steep measures...? Just what is the princess plotting?”

“You’re interested to hear?”

“Of course. Do tell.”

If Princess Lupis was trying some kind of tactic, Count Adelheit couldn’t ignore it, even if it was Duke Gelhart who delivered the news. The nobles’ instincts

spurred them to keep their households safe, and so being driven by emotion and ignoring this wouldn't do. He would simply have to confirm the truth of what he heard here later.

Duke Gelhart spoke abruptly, with Count Adelheit eyeing him suspiciously, trying to ascertain the authenticity of his words.

"Princess Lupis has sent small groups of her knights to burn down the territories of the nobles associated with General Albrecht."

At that moment, Count Adelheit became completely pale.

"I-It can't be! That's impossible... Princess Lupis isn't one to allow such conduct!"

Adelheit couldn't help but raise his voice. True, burning down territories was a viable tactic in prolonged wars. Ravaging the enemy's territories chipped away at their financial prowess and applied psychological pressure. It also allowed for the other side to acquire more goods to fund their war effort. It was a truly effective strategy.

But this war was different. It was a war between fellow Rhoadserians. Princess Lupis burning down the nobles' territories would be dealing a blow to her own country's economy. It was effectively a suicidal tactic that dealt as much damage to her as it did to her foes.

And to begin with, would Lupis Rhoadserians, known for being merciful, employ a tactic that burdened her commoners?

"I find it hard to believe... The princess wouldn't do that... Are you sure you haven't heard wrong?"

Count Adelheit's question was understandable. He'd seen her in a few audiences, and didn't think she was a person of that caliber. That very thought was what Duke Gelhart was aiming for. He was confident he'd managed to fool Count Adelheit with his words.

"True. Princess Lupis is a kind one, as you say..."

"She is, so you must be somehow mistaken. She would never agree to hurting Rhoadseria's citizens!"

His tone seemed to imply that despite siding with the rebels, Count Adelheit didn't seem to quite understand that he was opposed to Princess Lupis. This was perhaps proof that he didn't understand the true meaning of this war. In conventional war, attacking the enemy's territories when they're relatively unguarded is an obvious tactic.

But Count Adelheit's somewhat complacent perception was one most nobles who've met Princess Lupis in her audiences would share. Put another way, her kind and merciful nature is what spurred them to rebel in the first place.

Yes, the count's perspective would've in fact been correct... Until now.

Duke Gelhart suppressed the smirk rising to his lips and continued speaking with a humble expression.

"However... That man serving under the princess wouldn't shrink away from such foul means..."

Count Adelheit's expression stiffened. He had guessed at what Duke Gelhart was trying to say.

"That man... You mean, that rumored devil..."

"Indeed..." Duke Gelhart nodded slowly. "The Devil of Heraklion, they call him."

"Ryoma Mikoshiba..." Count Adelheit spoke his name fearfully.

Duke Gelhart nodded silently.

Ryoma Mikoshiba. The man who drowned thousands with a flooding attack and viciously slew the survivors. The people living in Heraklion and its surroundings had fearfully dubbed him the "Devil of Heraklion."

This was a false image that resulted from the rumors Ryoma spread being greatly exaggerated, but the uneducated masses believed them. Indeed, even in this world of endless strife, a commander who accepts no surrenders and takes no prisoners is unusual. Most would take all the prisoners they could in hopes of demanding ransoms for them, or sell them to slave merchants.

The rumors had already reached Count Adelheit's ears. Many commoners brought them up when they begged to be allowed to go back home, after all.

“But... Those are just rumors, right? You’re not saying he’s a real devil, are you?”

Duke Gelhart laughed loudly and shook his head.

“I didn’t expect to hear such nonsense from a count such as yourself. The only ones who would believe him to be a devil are the lowly masses.”

But he then stopped laughing, and all emotion left his face. He looked around, as if worried that this devil might be hiding nearby.

“But I certainly think that Mikoshiba fellow is cruel and merciless enough to be called a devil. That flood attack and his actions after that make it clear to me that he won’t hesitate to burn any territories down.”

His whisper was full of terror toward Ryoma. He was no real devil, of course. Ruthless though he may be, he didn’t gain any kind of sick pleasure from killing. But that image of a devil was important, and Duke Gelhart did harbor actual fear toward Ryoma. He was only half-acting here. The other half was his honest feelings.

“Well, yes, I suppose that’s something the Devil of Heraklion might do, but... Are you sure what you’re telling me is true?”

Count Adelheit didn’t seem to believe it yet. Or rather, didn’t want to believe. And Duke Gelhart understood his feelings perfectly well. But he’d only come here to sow the seeds of fear and suspicion in his heart.

“Oh, I’ve simply heard this rumor and thought I should share it with you. Whether you believe it or not is up to you, good Count... Now then. I suppose I shouldn’t take up any more of your precious time. I will take my leave.”

“H-Huh... G-Going back already? You shouldn’t have to hurry!”

Count Adelheit seemed to have forgotten what he said at first and now tried to get the Duke to stay. A part of him felt he couldn’t simply let him leave after he had left him in so much anxiety. He wanted more clear information.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t dare impose on you any longer... Ah, I know. If you want to hear more about this, ask the town’s merchants. That’s where I learned of this rumor. I’m sure they’ll be able to give you a clearer answer.”

Count Adelheit couldn’t keep him any longer after he’d said this much.

“I see. Thank you for sharing this information with me.”

“Oh, no, pardon me for intruding when you’re so busy. I bid you farewell, then.”

With that said, Duke Gelhart left the tent. As he watched the man leave, Count Adelheit’s mind started accelerating.

“Come! I need someone!”

He rang a bell, which prompted an aide to run in. Count Adelheit ordered him to gather his army’s commanders. He would send them to investigate the authenticity of Duke Gelhart’s rumors.

The information would reach him that very night. Apparently, some of his subordinates caught wind of the rumors and were looking into them already.

“Then it’s true?!”

Count Adelheit was taken aback by his subordinates’ report.

“It’s hard to say if it’s true, but... That’s certainly what the merchants in Heraklion say...”

His aides’ words viciously knocked down his heart. Nobles were always ones to only bet on the winning horse. Preserving their family’s prestige, wealth, and territory was always the first thing on their mind. They clung stubbornly to their territories, and even if they didn’t cherish their subjects, no governor would sit back and let his land burn.

Nobles produced nothing, after all. They lived by feasting on the wealth produced by their people. So they couldn’t afford to have their lands put to the flame. And to top it off, this dispatch of soldiers took most of their lands’ men, leaving only the women and children there. Setting up a defensive line like that was unthinkable, and any nobles that left their estates behind to come here would be hit particularly hard.

This is awful... Terrible, even... But... What do I do...?

Count Adelheit felt the anxiety wash over him. If the rumors were true, he had only one choice: to pull back his army, and use it to defend his territory and

family. But if they were to turn back and go back home with nothing to show for it, all they would have left is debt. His own men hadn't locked swords with the enemy yet, but they were still putting their lives on the line. Not offering them any recompense would be too much.

The same held true for the commoners. They put aside their daily livelihood to enlist. They didn't require any actual prize, but he would need to at least exempt them from next year's tax. So no matter what he did, going back empty-handed would only result in dissatisfaction.

But if it's true, my family... My wife and grandchildren...

If they were to be taken captive, he would pay off their ransoms. If they were sold off to slavers, he would buy their freedom back. But if they fell to the hands of the Devil of Heraklion... That man would ignore all dignity shown toward nobles and slaughter woman and child alike.

Count Adelheit's heart was shackled with fear. His sons, who were standing at his side, understood the reason behind their father's complicated expression perfectly, but couldn't find any words. No, it was likely that everyone present in the tent wanted nothing more than to leave this place to help their families...

"Sir count! My apologies!" A soldier entered their tent, apparently to report something.

"What is this?!" Count Adelheit glanced at him coldly, annoyed at having been distracted from his thoughts, and dismissively waved his hand. "I said that we are not to be disturbed!"

"Y-Yes, I am aware, but..." the soldier stammered timidly. "Viscount Romane and several other nobles have arrived, saying they seek an audience with you... I've informed them of your orders, but they insist that it is urgent... Erm... What say you?"

The count sighed. He probably knew the reason Viscount Romane arrived.

"Very well. Guide them in..."

Watching the soldier leave, Count Adelheit spoke to his eldest son.

"What do you think? So it really is..."

“My opinion is likely the same as yours, Father...”

“So you think so, too... What are we to do?”

Count Adelheit prided himself on having raised his eldest son into a wise man.

He’s of the same opinion as me. So if nothing else, he’s no fool... However...

“It’s probably for the best if we pull back our numbers, even if by force... Staying here won’t raise our morale and I don’t believe we’ll win. And the longer we draw this out, the greater the chance our conscripted soldiers rise up in rebellion.”

They wanted to go back home if they could, but the nobles couldn’t simply withdraw from this battle so easily. Doing it thoughtlessly would simply mark them as traitors and turn the rest of the nobles’ faction against them. But his son suggested they retreat, even with that in mind.

So what do we do...? Do we pull back, or stay here...?

Multiple possibilities popped up and then fizzled out in his mind, but his thoughts were soon disturbed by a man’s voice.

“Your elder boy’s words are most apt! This war is all but over.”

The soldier likely showed him the way here. Six men clad in armor entered the tent.

“Oh, Viscount Romane...” Count Adelheit spoke to the middle-aged man standing in the middle of the row. “A pleasure to see you... But still, could you explain what you meant by this? We can’t simply turn around and go back to our territories with Princess Lupis marching on us.”

Romane was a short, middle-aged man, who rudely settled down into a chair without being prompted to do so and crossed his arms brazenly. His conduct was far ruder than is normally tolerated by the nobility, but no one made to blame him for it. They knew saying anything would be wasted effort.

“Spare me the empty courtesy, good count. We haven’t the time for this right now... We will be returning to our territories,” the viscount said plainly.

The curtness of it all only lent his words more credibility, though.

“What?!” Count Adelheit went pale.

Has he gone mad...?!

Viscount Romane was part of Count Adelheit’s faction, but was always a very haughty person who was exceedingly hard to deal with. But that nature also granted him some positive traits. He was a skilled warrior and made himself into something of the low-ranking nobles’ leader figure.

The low-ranking nobles each only had a force of several dozens to a hundred or so, which on its own wasn’t a number one could fight a war with. At most, it could be used for camp security or managing the food stores. But even such small forces could become significant numbers when gathered.

But of course, simple cooperation wasn’t enough. When people of equal rank gathered together, it would only result in them getting in each other’s way. That was simply how nobles tended to be. However, so long as someone held authority over the soldiers as a commander, any gathering of men could become a useful force.

It could happen through dignity, intimidation, or wealth. So long as people were led by someone with something that let them stand superior to others, any pawn on the chessboard could be made into a knight. That was why Count Adelheit tacitly put up with Viscount Romane’s attitude.

But his declaration that they would leave of their own accord was one thing he couldn’t stay silent on.

“That’s impossible!” he shouted at him, mustering all the dignity he could. “How dare you do that on your discretion?! Do you intend to betray Duke Gelhart?!”

Count Adelheit and the rest of the nobles had already usurped the faction from Duke Gelhart in favor of General Albrecht, but were still technically considered the Duke’s army. Even if he was left with no effective authority or power, he was still nominally the banner they gathered beneath.

But Viscount Romane simply regarded the Count with a sneer.

“You say that now, of all times? We only turned our backs on Duke Gelhart a few days ago. As aged as you might be, good count, I’m sure your old mind can

still recall what happened several days ago.”

His voice was thick with clear scorn, to which the count’s aides reacted by reaching for their swords.

“Stop!”

Count Adelheit stopped his men from cutting the viscount down. He then turned a resigned expression at the man.

“You are right. There’s no point in trying to keep up appearances at this point. Then let us get to the main question here... Why?”

He asked the viscount why he decided to retreat back to his territory. He already had a fairly good idea of what he would say, but he wanted to hear it straight from the man’s mouth. In so doing, he would be able to decide how to act himself, too.

“Does it even need to be said...?” Viscount Romane went red with irritation. “It’s the rumors...”

He was probably quite annoyed.

“I knew it... So they’re true...?”

Viscount Romane shook his head.

“So you’re retreating without confirming the rumors...? All of you...?” Count Adelheit looked to the young men standing behind the viscount.

One young man stepped forward to meet his gaze.

“We don’t believe the authenticity of those rumors matters at this point, sir count,” he said.

Count Adelheit couldn’t recall his name.

He must be one of the low-ranking nobles under Viscount Romane.

“Which house do you hail from, young one?”

“This one is Lechre, eldest son of Baron Mondo’s household,” Viscount Romane answered. “I’ve taken him under my wing. His father is a complete and utter good-for-nothing fool, but Lechre here is quite the promising young man. He’s my most highly-valued aide.”

Count Adelheit's gaze turned sharp at that introduction.

Eldest son of the Mondo household... His father, the current governor, is said to be quite the fool, but I did hear his son is quite impressive... And sure enough...

There were several hundreds of nobles in Rhoadseria. Most nobles might be acquainted with most of the others, but Count Adelheit was the nobles' faction's number two man. To him, the majority of the nobles were no different from the common rabble.

But he did know a bit about the Mondo household. The current governor, Lechre's father, suddenly started raising the tolls for entering his territory. Thanks to that, the merchants employed by the count had been complaining quite a bit.

Having dug up what he could from his memories, the count once again fixed his gaze on Lechre.

"I see. Then, Sir Lechre, let me ask you again. What did you mean by that?"

"The rumor is already circulating among the commoners, and they refuse to listen to our orders, insisting that they go home."

The commoners would be the ones hurt most by the territories being razed, as their houses and assets would all be burned to ash. Nobles could still receive the favor of their relatives, but the commoners were struggling just to defend their hard-earned livelihood. They couldn't care much for someone else's life at this point. And so, they wanted to go home and protect their meager fortunes and families.

Count Adelheit, however, simply clicked his tongue and gave the boy an exasperated, mocking look.

"Such foolishness... Is there ever a time they don't complain over something or another? Hurt a few of them to set an example and be done with it."

If someone said anything like this on Ryoma's world, it would cause a huge scandal. He would be labeled a fascist and militarist and receive the verbal equivalent of a lynching in terms of criticism.

But what he just described was a commonly used means of maintaining public order and governing a noble's territory in this world. And a highly-effective one, at that... At least normally. But this time things were different.

"Well, you see..." Lechre shook his head. "The commoners are willing to revolt... They've physically resisted us."

"The commoners did what?!" Count Adelheit rose from his chair.

He was quite shocked by what he'd just heard. He didn't think the commoners were that well-supported.

"Yes, we've quelled their resistance this time, but several knights were severely injured. Things ended favorably this time, but they could well have died at that rate. We've looked into it, and similar things are happening throughout the nobles' faction... And..."

"And what? There's more?!"

Count Adelheit honestly didn't want Lechre to say any more. If things got any worse, even a bold man like him wouldn't be able to take it.

"Marquis Schwartzen and his clique are already retreating."

All the blood drained from Count Adelheit's face at the sound of that name.

"It can't be... How dare he?!"

Marquis Schwartzen was the nobles' faction's third most powerful man. Duke Gelhart trusted Count Adelheit more, and so he was above him within the faction. But in terms of the size of their territories and the low-ranking nobles under their wing, Marquis Schwartzen was second only to Duke Gelhart himself. The forces he contributed formed the second greatest chunk of the nobles' faction's total ranks in this war. His retreating from the battlefield was something that couldn't be ignored.

"Did you report this to General Albrecht?!"

This was what interested Count Adelheit the most. It was only natural to look up to General Albrecht's decisions, since he held supreme authority over the army. But Lechre simply replied with a crooked, malignant smile.

"Surely you jest. What would reporting this to him now achieve...? Marquis

Schwartzen's army has notified us they will attack us if we interfere with their retreat. And so we can't do anything... Marquis Schwartzen's army forms a fourth of the nobles' faction's forces. If we clash with them, well, perhaps we would emerge victorious, but we wouldn't get away unscathed."

"That's... true."

"In which case, what should the nobles do now? What would guarantee our survival? Would it be reporting to General Albrecht?"

Sensing the meaning lurking behind those words, Count Adelheit's expression contorted in a nasty fashion.

"Sacrifice General Albrecht's forces...? And you all agree to this?"

They responded to his words with silence. A silence that meant consent. It was sickeningly foul, but even as he was disgusted with their approach, he did understand why they did this. This was all the work of the nobles' instincts, instilled in them since birth. They spurred them to do anything to defend their status and family name.

And Count Adelheit knew that making a fuss all by himself at this point would achieve nothing. Leaning heavily back into the backrest of his chair, he heaved a resigned sigh into the air.

"Very well... If you're resolved to go that far, I've nothing left to say. I'll abide by your decision."

Everyone else nodded silently.

"I'm glad you understand," Viscount Romane said and turned on his heels. "We will retreat at once, then. Regardless of whether the rumors are true or not, we must attend to the defense of our territories!"

As he watched him leave, a whisper escaped Count Adelheit's lips.

"We betray Duke Gelhart, and then turn on General Albrecht, too... Maintaining the power of one's families may require one to dirty their hands, but still..."

The aides standing at his sides were all uniformly silent. They, too, were feeling the bitterness of what being a noble meant.

“But Your Highness! You must give the order to march!”

As Princess Lupis stood frozen in place, unable to give the order to march on Heraklion, Meltina implored her. Thanks to Ryoma’s schemes, the noble armies that were deployed around Heraklion had all returned to their territories.

With Duke Gelhart on their side, all that remained was to defeat General Albrecht, the 2,500 knights under his command and the small army of one thousand men belonging to low-ranking nobles who didn’t understand what the others were doing and stayed behind. They had holed up in a corner of Heraklion. Their morale was, of course, at rock bottom.

By comparison, Princess Lupis had 25,000 men under her command. Not too long ago, Princess Lupis was on the back foot, but now the tables had turned completely. The knights standing before her all eagerly awaited her orders. Being indeed ten times the enemy’s numbers, their morale was, naturally, sky high.

But Princess Lupis’s heart was gripped by a dark emotion that was the direct opposite of her knights’ elation. She wasn’t able to rejoice in a situation where it wouldn’t be odd for her to flit around in joy.

Her terror of him hung over her like a shadow.

So this is his power... He overturned such a position of weakness... Ryoma Mikoshiba... He scares me. His intellect and wit scare me. His ruthlessness scares me. The heart, that lacks all respect for royalty, scares me... And if we defeat Albrecht, that man will leave this country. That’s fine... That’s what we agreed on, to begin with. But what if he turns against me...? I won’t be able to match him, no matter what... Is there even anyone in this country that can? Even Helena admits he’s better than her... If he were to ever turn against us... This country will fall into a far larger crisis that Gelhart or Albrecht ever were...

She knew this from the very beginning. No, perhaps it would be more correct to say that she’d fooled herself into thinking she knew that. The anxiety she’d become aware of, and that she’d tried her hardest not to think about, surged up in her heart now, when they were on the cusp of routing General Albrecht’s army.

Still, she had to push that fear away.

No... I'll need to think of that later. Right now I need to get rid of Albrecht!

Nodding back to Meltina shortly, Princess Lupis fixed her gaze forward.

This was all... all for this moment!

"All forces, march!"

Meltina nodded to Princess Lupis and pointed in Heraklion's direction. Right now, beating Albrecht was what mattered.

""""Ooooh!""""

Raising their voices once again, the soldiers set off at once. They had but one goal: To claim General Albrecht's head.

"Master Ryoma... Are you sure?"

The knights led by Princess Lupis made for Heraklion, kicking up a cloud of dust in their wake. A group of people overlooked the march from high ground located a short ways off from the knights.

"Yeah, us participating in Heraklion's invasion would achieve nothing," Ryoma answered Laura's question shortly.

The people present here were the hundred or so mercenaries lead by Lione and Boltz, as well as the Malfist sisters. Everyone was geared and ready to head for the frontlines, but their commander, Ryoma, didn't move to the battlefield.

"But lad... This war won't end if we don't attack Heraklion, you know?" Boltz voiced his doubts, mouthing the question everyone present was asking themselves.

"It won't end if we don't attack the city, eh...? I see... Do you all feel that way?"

Everyone nodded at Ryoma's query. General Albrecht wasn't going to move his army out of the city, and so the war wouldn't end until they took Heraklion. Duke Gelhart had already turned to the princess's side, after all. Ryoma smiled, realizing the meaning behind Boltz's question.

"So let me ask you something, instead. Right now, General Albrecht is in the city with his knights and the nobles that didn't bail in time. Now that Gelhart is

on the princess's side, the general is the last enemy we have left. We good so far?"

Everyone nodded. The rumors Ryoma spread about his supposed scorched earth tactics made the defending nobles pull back their forces and retreat home. Thanks to that, there was no sign of any soldiers in Heraklion's vicinity, and this was how Princess Lupis was able to carry out this final battle. Since Duke Gelhart swore allegiance to Princess Lupis, her only remaining adversaries were General Albrecht and his lackeys.

"What's the size of Princess Lupis's forces?"

"Twenty-five thousand men."

"Like Sara said. And Albrecht's?"

"Three thousand, give or take five hundred men!" Boltz chimed in.

"Exactly." Ryoma looked around at everyone. "They've got almost ten times his forces, so do you really think Albrecht holed himself up in Heraklion in that situation?"

Everyone then realized what Ryoma meant.

"So yer saying he isn't hiding in the city, boy?" Lione asked.

"Yeah. Well, honestly it's probably more of a 50-50 chance... From what I know, Albrecht is a very haughty, unpleasant old man, but at the same time, he doesn't know when to give up."

"So whaddaya think mister general-who-won't-give-up's gonna do?"

"Well, for starters, if he holes up in Heraklion, he can't hope for reinforcements. The nobles' faction turned their backs on him once and won't send troops to help him again. Duke Gelhart won't shelter him, either. If he shows up, he'd organize his army and send it to crush Albrecht. Which means he's got two options, accepting defeat, or running away... But I can't see that weasel picking honorable defeat."

"What, so him runnin' is the only option left... But can he really do that under such a disadvantage? We're talking ten times his men in numbers here. Ten times. Runnin's easier said than done; he'll need to cut through the siege and

evade pursuit.”

He wouldn’t accept defeat, and holding a siege wouldn’t work. So his only choice was to flee Heraklion and run. Even a child could come to that conclusion. Lione’s response was apt, though. She’d seen many battles and knew how difficult a retreat could be.

Marching an army forward was relatively simple, but once one wanted to retreat, things suddenly became that much more complicated.

On top of that, knights had superb individual combat skills, but their performance dropped when it came to working in formations. And what mattered the most in a battle of retreat was not individual strength, but specifically teamwork and working in a formation. A group can only survive so long as everyone covers for each other.

Conversely, when people start ignoring the formations and going off on their own, those left behind only die. Of course, based on the conditions of the battle, different tactics bring forth different results, as history has shown plenty of times.

So not only were the knights forced into a battle of retreat, which they weren’t fit for in the first place, they had to do it under an overwhelming numerical disadvantage. Their chances of surviving were essentially zero.

“Yeah, I think you’re right there.” Ryoma nodded at Lione’s doubts, and went on to state his own concerns. “Well, I did tweak things a bit to make it come to this... But all that is assuming General Albrecht retreated with his men... I think that at worst, he may have abandoned his knights and bailed alone...”

Everyone was dumbstruck by Ryoma’s suggestion.

“No, boy... That’s too much.”

“Lad! Isn’t that a little...?”

True, he could escape without his men, but would a knight that climbed to the rank of general ever make that choice? A king or a noble was one thing, but knights stubbornly clung to their honor and good name. So abandoning one’s men and retreating, and before a decisive final battle, at that?

Even Boltz and Lione, who had seen countless battles, had trouble remembering anyone that shameless. But Ryoma still considered the possibility. He knew some people would stop at nothing if it would ensure their survival.

“I mean, it’s all in the realm of possibility so far...” Ryoma shrugged. “It doesn’t change the fact our side needs to attack Heraklion. But a force of our size isn’t gonna influence the outcome of that battle, you know? So I asked Princess Lupis for permission to act in a separate group.”

I see. Lione turned an exasperated gaze at Ryoma. *So the general holed up his forces in the city so they can serve as a decoy to draw attention off of him. He basically ordered his men to die for him... A nasty old man to the end, ain’t he. But still, the boy read through the weasel’s actions and moved accordingly. Damn...*

Lione cussed at the old general in her heart. Ryoma didn’t make any definitive statements, but everyone present didn’t think it was fifty-fifty like he said. They felt like that future would definitely come to pass. And it was true that with this much of an advantage, it hardly mattered if Ryoma and his group took part in the attack on Heraklion.

But considering their reward after the war, their decision to not participate might not put them at a disadvantage, but it certainly didn’t help them. Ryoma being here despite that meant the probability of Albrecht trying to escape was exceedingly high.

“Still unconvinced?” Ryoma asked, to which everyone shook their heads.

It seemed his explanation was enough.

“All right. Now we just need to wait for Gennou to return...”

“Gennou?” Laura asked, looking around.

Sure enough, Gennou and Sakuya weren’t in sight.

“Oh, don’t worry... I just sent them to get in contact with our people inside the city... Oh! Speak of the devil, here they are... How did it go, Gennou?”

The mercenaries he had disguised as merchants were scattered all around Heraklion, working undercover. Most of their work consisted of leaking rumors

to the commoners regarding Ryoma Mikoshiba, while some also infiltrated the city itself and reported on the enemy's movements. With Duke Gelhart's turning coat, they focused their investigations on General Albrecht.

Gennou and Sakuya snuck into Heraklion to serve as their contacts, and Ryoma had just caught sight of them approaching.

"We've kept you waiting, milord."

"Pardon our tardiness."

The two lowered their heads at Ryoma, apologizing for taking too long to return before turning to the main topic at hand.

"Your guess was accurate, milord... The ones watching the general's estate report that he summoned merchants just yesterday, and apparently negotiated some kind of deal with them."

Ryoma nodded at Gennou's words.

"Negotiations, huh? Do they know what it was?"

Ryoma anticipated Gennou's report, but didn't plan to jump to any conclusions regarding General Albrecht's motives yet.

"Yes, they asked one of the merchants on his way out. Apparently he sold off clothes and some title deeds. Looks like he liquified his assets in a hurry."

"Right... So that means..."

Turning his assets into cash could only mean one thing. He was trying to escape the country, after all.

"I think it's safe to assume he was gathering funds to escape..."

"He apparently bought a lot of preserved foods, too," Gennou said.

"Preserved foods... Yeah, he's definitely cutting off his men..." Ryoma's gaze sharpened.

If he was going along with his men, he wouldn't need to buy food, since the army had units that dealt in provisions. The supreme commander wouldn't need to rely on a merchant for food, and yet he did. Which meant he didn't want his men to learn about what he was doing.

“He likely drew everyone’s attention to Heraklion so he could escape during the battle.”

“What about his escape route? Any ideas, Gennou?”

“Nay.” The old ninja shook his head. “Sadly I could not dig that deep. However...”

“What? Does something seem off to you?”

“If he intends to take his family along, I do not think it likely he will escape on foot. I’ve seen carriages being loaded, so I suspect he may use the highway.”

“Master Ryoma! Here!” Sara swiftly spread out a map she’d been carrying in front of Ryoma.

“So this here is Heraklion... There’s about four roads he could take.”

Ryoma quickly found the seven highways extending from Heraklion. Three of them were already seized by Princess Lupis’s forces. There was the possibility that Albrecht would pick those roads precisely for the sake of slipping right under the princess’s nose, but it was a dangerous choice to make if his family was with him. Ryoma kept in mind that Albrecht’s name and face were well-known within Rhoadseria’s borders as he narrowed down his choices.

“That leaves the southeast, south, southwest and west highways...” Laura pointed out. “And since he’s taking his family, we can probably rule out the west one leading to Xarooda.”

Ryoma nodded.

Right... The land of iron, Xarooda, has steep mountains. The terrain is too harsh for him to escape with his family...

“I think Laura is right.” Sara said. “We have been specially trained so we would be able to pass through that terrain, but ordinary women and children would have trouble. In which case, we can rule out the southwest for the same reason.”

Lione peeked into the map, and pointed at two roads extending south.

“Which leaves the southeast and south.”

Both roads led into the southern countries' regions. It was a gathering of countries and the site of some of the most tumultuous fighting in all the western continent. But that only meant that it was the perfect place to hide.

"Two roads, huh... So which one...?"

Ryoma looked up. He had about one hundred men on hand. They were all skilled, bright warriors, but the enemy would be resisting desperately. It would probably be wise to assume they matched his men in strength. In which case, the deciding factor would be how many men they had.

General Albrecht wanted to avoid being seen, so he couldn't bring a large army along to defend him. That said, ten or twenty knights simply wouldn't be enough to guard him and his family.

Splitting my forces would be a bad idea... But we can't let Albrecht get away, either. What do I do here...?

Considering Rhoadseria's future, they had to kill General Albrecht here. And there was the promise he made to Helena, too. Ideas popped in and out of his mind. As intelligent as he was, everything had a limit. He only had so many men and two roads to take, and he couldn't think of a tactic that would compensate for that.

"Master Ryoma," Sara whispered in his ear, pulling him from his thoughts.



“What, is something wrong?”

“We’ve received a report of a unit approaching us.”

“The enemy?”

Sara shook her head.

“It’s Lady Helena.”

Ryoma’s expression changed upon hearing her name.

“Helena... She should be attacking Heraklion with Princess Lupis... Are you sure?”

“Yes. They should arrive soon.”

“All right. Show them the way.”

Sara nodded and left. Eventually, the sound of hooves reached his ears from the road ahead as a group of twenty to thirty people arrived on horseback.

“Oh, thank goodness. I got here in time!”

Helena got off her horse in front of Ryoma, greeting him with a calm smile. Ryoma felt there was some dark passion to her smile.

“What are you doing here, Lady Helena? Shouldn’t you be helping attack Heraklion right now...? Are you sure it’s all right for you not to be there?”

Helena met Ryoma’s natural question with an implicit smile.

“Oh, but you’re not taking part in the attack either, are you? So the same holds for me... You see? It’s not that I don’t believe in you, but...”

It’s no wonder she became a national hero... She might be old, but her mind is still sharp. And she wants to deliver the finishing blow herself...

Ryoma realized what Helena was after. She came to cut off Albrecht’s escape, same as Ryoma did, and settle the score with her own two hands.

“How many men do you have, Lady Helena?”

“About three hundred.”

God, she’s really out to kill him... Figures, I guess...

The black flames of vengeance burned in Helena. Helena had roughly three thousand men under her direct command in this war, and she took the three hundred closest to her in order to come here. It was a show of just how resolved she was. It meant that she would stop at nothing to claim Albrecht's head. Even if General Albrecht were to choose to surrender, she would ignore it.

"So, what's the situation? Has Albrecht escaped Heraklion yet?"

Ryoma shook his head.

"I see... And there's no chance of him trying to hide in Heraklion and dying honorably, is there?" she asked anxiously.

It was all speculation, and Helena wasn't foolish enough to think her predictions were always right. And they couldn't afford to be wrong this time, because if they were, Helena's vengeance would end right then and there.

"No, I don't think so. I had my people look into it, and apparently he liquidated a lot of his assets to fund his escape... I think it's a safe bet that he's trying to escape to the border and try for a comeback in another country."

"I knew it... That does feel like something he'd think of," Helena spat out bitterly. "Any ideas on which way he'd go?"

Ryoma took the map from Sara and spread it out for Helena to see.

"We narrowed it down to two options. Considering they were preparing carriages and that his family isn't used to harsh journeys, we think he'll go south."

"Hmm, yes... If he went north or east, he'd have to go through the capital." Helena nodded lightly. "He'd probably avoid going through there. He could try to go around it, but those regions are under the nobles' faction's control. If he tried to go through them, they'd probably sell him out to the princess to buy her favor... Plus, it's the longest path to the border."

Princess Lupis was on the verge of winning the war, and the ones who'd simply looked on from the sidelines or opposed her were scrambling for ways to garner her favor and retain their status. Heading to the capital's vicinity at a time like this would be suicide for Albrecht.

It was very likely he'd avoid it. Everyone was out to offer his head up as tribute, after all.

"The east isn't likely, either... Xarooda's border areas are mountainous and steep... Which leaves..."

Helena came to the same conclusion as Ryoma, though she didn't seem at all conflicted. She was confident, somehow.

"Ryoma, are you torn between the south and southeast?"

Ryoma nodded quietly.

"Then let me solve that problem for you." Helena said and pointed to a certain point on the map. "Albrecht will be trying to escape from the south. I can't see him going anywhere else."

Helena was completely confident.

"Not to be disrespectful, but what's your basis for saying that?" Ryoma asked.

He felt the confidence in Helena's words, but didn't intend to trust her blindly until she told him what the foundation behind it was. But the next words to leave Helena's lips made that clear.

"His wife is descended from a noble family in the kingdom of Tarja."

The kingdom of Tarja was located several hundreds of kilometers south of Heraklion. His wife's country of origin would indeed be a good place to flee to. Her connection to them would help when they sought refuge.

"I see... Yeah, her having a connection to the place makes Tarja a good option... Except, what if he assumed we'd think that and goes the other way?"

Ryoma didn't intend to nitpick, and admitted her idea was convincing. But when Ryoma planned to escape the Empire of O'ltormea, he knew that picking the optimal way didn't always yield the best possible result. Because it was precisely that path that drew the most attention and was the easiest to predict.

That was why at times intentionally picking the less optimal way would throw one's opponents off-guard.

"So you're saying he might intentionally pick the other way. But I don't think

we need to worry about it this time... Because if he goes southeast, he'd find himself in the kingdom of Britannia."

Helena pointed at the country neighboring Tarja.

"It's about the same distance as Tarja, isn't it? Can't he flee there?"

Helena smiled wryly.

"I doubt he can. Tarja and Britannia have been rivals for years. If it was just Albrecht, perhaps he would have gone there, but his wife is Tarjan. Taking her there would be dangerous. And he can't discard his wife, either. If he does that, he really will run out of factions that would help him..."

"You think he's aiming to rebuild his power in Tarja? That he's still looking to build up his influence?"

"Oh, yes. There's no way he would back down even after this... He's not that naive of a man, you see."

If Helena was right, then there really was no doubting he was heading for Tarja. He'd rather go to the country his wife was related to over the country that had nothing to do with him.

But Helena's words only made another doubt surface in Ryoma's mind. He hadn't considered Albrecht's wife until now, but now realized Helena's vengeance wasn't limited to Albrecht himself. The blade of her revenge would extend to his family, too, which naturally included his wife...

The problem was the potential that the kingdom of Rhoadseria would make a new enemy for itself by letting Albrecht's wife die.

Helena knows Albrecht better than I do... I should probably work according to her judgment here, but... I'm worried about his wife being a noble of another country. Should we really let her kill someone like that...?

Ryoma didn't think a country would put up with one of its people being killed by a foreign country's army. They'd ignore the circumstances and react emotionally, which was how many wars broke out.

Ryoma shrugged that concern away.

In for a penny, in for a pound. This isn't my world. So long as we get rid of the

corpse in a way it won't be found, Rhoadseria can act dumb.

For better or worse, the technological standards of this world were low. Burying a corpse would be enough to make sure it wasn't found. There was no means of identifying DNA in this world, so once a corpse decomposed enough there would be no way of knowing who it belonged to.

"Very well. I'll abide by your commands."

By saying that, Ryoma showed he prioritized Helena's vengeance. Helena nodded quietly.

"Very well. What shall we do then?" Ryoma asked. "Attack them as soon as they leave Heraklion? Or wait further ahead and ambush them?"

Killing him near Heraklion would make it easy to make excuses in case her motive of revenge came to light. Killing him far away from the city, however, enabled them to move more openly and dispose of the bodies without fear of being seen.

"I think here would be a good spot..." Helena said, indicating a certain point on the map. "What say you?"

It was a forest that stood relatively isolated from any towns or cities, an ideal spot for deploying their men.

"Right... Then we should probably split our forces in two... I'll take two hundred and play the role of the hunting dog. That should make it easier for you, right?"

Helena closed her eyes, feeling the intent behind his words.

"Ryoma... Thank you."

Those words reflected the emotions in her heart... and spelled doom for General Albrecht and his family.

"No one's coming after us, right, Kael...?" General Albrecht asked as he peered out the carriage, looking at Kael who rode his horse parallel to him.

"Yes, milord... For the time being... I don't think anyone's realized we've escaped."

“I see... It’s a good thing I abided by your advice and made to escape as soon as Lupis’s forces moved in on us.”

“Yes! I’m grateful for your kind words!” Kael bowed his head respectfully.

Hmm, it was essentially a gamble, but... Looks like it’s going well. This man was more useful than I thought. Good manpower to pick up, considering what’s to come...

General Albrecht nodded, appreciating Kael’s performance so far. Albrecht had liquified his assets and gathered his aides in his estate, waiting for the right time. For the chance to escape Heraklion.

That time was that day’s afternoon. When Princess Lupis’s armies began marching to take Heraklion.

The city itself was in a state of chaos. The news of Duke Gelhart’s turning to Princess Lupis’s side hadn’t spread to the commoners, and so it seemed to them that the princess was marching to purge the duke’s rule.

Normally, what the ruling classes did had nothing to do with the commoners, but an army marching on a city meant there would naturally be civilian casualties. And so, the commoners elected to flee the town, all to protect their lives and meager fortunes.

General Albrecht and his entourage used the chaos that resulted from the commoners’ flight to escape the town.

“Hmph! They’d do well not to delude themselves into thinking this is over. I will get back at them for humiliating me... Lupis! Gelhart! You will rue the day you crossed Hodram Albrecht!”

Relieved by the fact that there were no pursuers in sight, words of vilification slipped from General Albrecht’s lips. He’d become completely indignant. Calling a member of royalty by their name and nothing else was usually a crime punishable by death, but he had already given up on his position in Rhoadseria.

Nobility, knighthood, royalty. Hodram Albrecht had already been expelled from the ruling classes of the kingdom of Rhoadseria. Still, his grudge had no legitimacy. The fact of the matter was that Princess Lupis didn’t set him up. He betrayed her of his own will and set up Duke Gelhart. The only one who set any

traps and betrayed anyone was General Albrecht.

But right now, his mind wasn't thinking that way. The only thing he was thinking about was how to blame everyone else for his plight. And it was perhaps this nature that resulted in him being forced to flee the country in the first place.

"How are my wife and daughter?" General Albrecht turned his gaze to the carriage moving behind his. "They're not inconvenienced in any way, I hope?"

"No, milord! The men are doing their utmost to make sure they're spending their time pleasantly."

"Good. Those two are my last hope, after all. Am I clear? I won't tolerate any mistakes."

"Rest assured, milord. We will escort you to Tarja safely... Am I right, men?!"

Kael prompted the men riding around the carriages.

""""Leave everything to us, sir!""""

Albrecht's final hope was also the final hope of everyone else here. All of them were people who couldn't stay in Rhoadseria any longer. That was their punishment for living lavishly behind the shield of the general's tyranny.

Taking bribes from passing merchants or stealing another's achievements to move up the ranks were among the lighter crimes people carried here. The worse ones ravaged the wives and daughters of their peers, and the most despicable of them even killed them to make sure they didn't talk.

The general's backing was the only reason these people could walk with their heads held high in blatant disregard of the law and common human decency. And with that gone, their lives were hanging by a thread. Even if they weren't tried by a court of justice, their victims would never forgive them.

The men understood this perfectly well, and this was why they didn't betray General Albrecht. His flourishing translated to their success, and his decline meant their demise. They weren't on his side out of loyalty, but out of a simple pragmatic perception of profit. But put another way, this is what made them precious, trustworthy pawns for the general.

“Good! You need only wait until I wed my daughter to Tarja’s prince. I will gain power as a maternal relative, and things will swing in my favor. I will see to it that you will all be treated accordingly!” General Albrecht laughed with satisfaction.

“““Yes!!!””” The surrounding knights replied in unison and bowed their heads.

This was General Albrecht’s last resort. The existence of the daughter he’d produced with his wife, a Tarjan noble. He intended to have her marry a Tarjan prince, and use that to elevate his status.

Of course, this was just his wish. He hadn’t spun any plots among the Tarjan royalty yet. But he had very few paths open to him, and this was the one that gave him the best chance of regaining his powerful position. His heart was far from broken. Men that had tasted the sweet fruit of power tended to become greedy.

I... I can’t be finished here! I will regain power, I swear it!

It was a pleasure that dominated the heart of man. And like a narcotic, it ate away at the heart.

“I will not let things end here!”

Black flames of deluded conviction burned in General Albrecht.

As the sun approached its zenith, sunlight washed over the land. The highways were clear of people due to the chaos of the war. Albrecht’s men kept driving their horses forward, rushing down the road. They were a group of armored knights on horseback, protecting several carriages. Their total numbers reached two hundred.

One row of knights, riding ahead of everyone else, then caught sight of a forested area ahead.

“Finally, we’ve made it here...” General Albrecht spat out tiredly. “Are there any signs of pursuers?”

“No, sir... None so far. I think that after coming this far, we can assume we are safe. Upon crossing this forest, it will be a short distance to the Tarjan border.”

“Just a little longer...” General Albrecht smiled at those words.

He then turned a concerned look at the carriage behind them. Kael, too, looked in that direction.

“The two have been quite patient.”

“Mmm...” Albrecht sighed in response. “Yes, they have... But I’m sure they’re approaching the limit of their patience. It seems my wife has lost her appetite, and isn’t willing to drink water, either. She says it makes her nauseous... My daughter is in a similar state... Their endurance is running out.”

It had been two days since they escaped Heraklion. The carriage shook and jolted as it moved, and it was taking its toll on General Albrecht’s wife and daughter. This was no sightseeing tour, after all. They fled Heraklion with their lives on the line, and it was a source of significant stress for these sheltered women. Still, they didn’t say a word of complaint as they were jolted by the carriage. They understood Albrecht’s position.

“Kael. I say we find a convenient place to set up camp, and stop to rest early. What say you?”

The sun was still out, but General Albrecht asked to set up camp early. His face was full of concern and affection for his wife’s and daughter’s health and wellbeing.

He could sense the two were approaching their limits. And he couldn’t afford for them to die here. His wife was needed to mediate his way into Tarja’s nobility, and he needed his daughter to get married to save his position.

“That’s a sound decision, milord... I’m sure the ladies are quite tired. I’ll have the knights set up camp once we enter the forest.”

Kael seemed to be well aware of the women’s condition. They weren’t far from Tarja’s border, and they hadn’t run into any enemies since they escaped Heraklion.

It should be fine... We’ve escaped the enemy’s pursuit... They likely sent their men in the opposite direction. What matters now is to make sure the ladies stay in good health... Their lives are our lives.

Carelessness and self-interest. Those two traits sealed their fate. Because they failed to notice the blade of vengeance, gradually bearing down on them...

Chapter 4: Helena's Revenge

That night, the moon illuminated the sky with its gentle light. They kept their campfires small, but thanks to the light of the moon, visibility was good enough.

"We truly are out of luck..."

"Yes, agreed... Getting a nightless vigil today, of all days, really is bad..."

Two knights mouthed their complaints as they looked over the dark forest. Both were clad in armor and held sharp spears. Both were the same age, but the one on the right was taller. That night, General Albrecht gave everyone permission to take off their armor and rest.

But a few unfortunate guards, these two included, were given guard duty that day, and weren't able to sleep without their armor. The march certainly strained their bodies. Of course, being professional soldiers, their stamina was impressive. Still, they were only human, and the strain was significant. It was only natural they would bemoan their misfortune.

"But we cross the border tomorrow. And once we do..." the taller knight whispered.

"Yes... After coming this far..." the other knight agreed.

"But leaving Rhoadseria behind, huh...?" The taller knight sighed.

He was born into a family of knights that had been loyal to the kingdom for generations. Or at least, that held true until his father's generation. This knight held no loyalty for the royal family, and that was why he obeyed General Albrecht, who helped him fulfill his aspirations and desires. Money, women, his position within the knight order... All the things loyalty to the royal family would never grant to him were granted to him by siding with the general.

But now, the gears had been completely unhinged.

Princess Lupis, who was nothing more than Albrecht's mouthpiece and marionette, broke free of his control. And now the country's nobles were abandoning General Albrecht and his faction. Now they had nowhere to live in Rhoadseria, and they had only two paths open to them. They either wander the

continent until they find a new master to serve, or stick to General Albrecht and wait for his resurgence.

Neither of those is a very good gamble...

Until just a few months ago, they were living their best lives. But now they were forced to flee their country, and the hardship of it all was hanging over their hearts.

“Don’t say that!” The knight scolded him.

“But...” The taller knight tried to cling onto his words.

“Shut up! I know that much without having to hear it from you!”

The other knight felt the same way, but hearing someone else say it annoyed him.

“Right... I’m sorry,” the taller knight apologized, overwhelmed by his friend’s outburst.

“Forget it, right now we gotta focus on keeping watch! And tomorrow we finally cross into Tarja—”

They suddenly heard something cut through the forest’s air, and the shorter knight’s words were cut off halfway through.

“What’s wrong...?” The taller knight eyed his friend suspiciously.

To him, it looked like his partner kept his gaze fixed on the forest, standing at attention as he always did. But something struck him as different.

What? What’s wrong with hi—

But his thoughts would freeze on that question forever, as yet another arrow shot through the forest...

Sakuya fixed her gaze on the two knights who were now reduced to silent corpses, and slackened her bow’s string. She had kept it primed to fire another arrow in case either of her targets still drew breath.

Fixed to the bow was a black-dyed arrow. It was black down to its arrowhead, and it was practically impossible to see or evade it under the darkness of night. And regardless, the smallest nick would be enough to make the poison smeared

over the arrowhead circulate within the victim's body and make them crumble to their feet, foaming at the mouth.

This was a special set of bow and arrows, made for assassinations and passed down in Sakuya's clan. As a clan of ninjas, they were adept at blending in with the dark.

"Master Ryoma... It is done. Those were the only guards."

As if prompted by Sakuya's words, a large-built man dressed in black appeared behind her.

"Yeah... Let's go." Ryoma nodded slightly.

He made a hand signal in the direction of Sara, who stood behind him.

"Then, everything is going according to schedule," Sara whispered to Ryoma, and turned her gaze to the mercenaries following her.

"Yeah, everything's looking good for now. Make sure to make lots of noise."

Sara nodded wordlessly at Ryoma's instructions and approached the camp while crouching. She was followed by Lione and twenty other mercenaries. Laura was likely finishing her preparations in a separate group, with Gennou.

"Milord! Preparations are complete!" one of their mercenaries reported.

"Begin!" Ryoma ordered his men.

Several of the mercenaries disappeared into the forest, and before long red lights started rising from the camp. At first they were small red sparks in the darkness, but within seconds they spread throughout the camp, lighting it up in luminescent red.

"Fiiiiiire! A fire broke ooooout! A fiiiiiiiiiiiiiire!"

"No, it's the enemy! We're under attack!"

Screams filled the camp, which was set up a short ways from the highway. Soon, the sounds of clashing metal mingled with the screams.

"What?! An enemy attack?!" General Albrecht sat up in his bed hurriedly. "Someone! Explain what's going on!"

Tearing off the blanket, General Albrecht rose to his feet and reached for his

personal sword.

“Beloved? What’s the matter?”

His wife, who was sleeping next to him, woke up.

“Father...” His daughter, who was sleeping a short distance away, also raised her voice in concern.

The racket likely woke them up.

“Everything will be fine,” General Albrecht gently told them. “You have me by your side. You’ve nothing to worry about!”

“Milord!” One of the knights called out from outside the tent.

Apparently he didn’t have the courage to barge into his lord’s tent without permission.

“Yes!” General Albrecht spoke to him through the tent’s entrance. “What’s going on out there? I heard one voice talking about a fire and another saying something about an enemy attack!”

“It’s all true, milord! Our apologies, we have failed you. Sir Kael is leading our men to mount a defense, and he’s making preparations for you to set out at once...”

The moment the knight said that, General Albrecht went pale.

I thought they’d have given up at this point, but apparently I was wrong...

“Understood... Did you hear him? You need to get away from here!”

General Albrecht didn’t hesitate one bit. If this was enough to make him lose his sense of judgment, he would never serve as a country’s general. His expression had already turned to that of a warrior who had lived through many battles.

“Beloved, we’re prepared.”

General Albrecht turned around to find his family was already dressed. They had apparently picked up on the situation quickly and prepared themselves accordingly.

“Good! Let’s go!”

General Albrecht took his family and headed for their carriage, accompanied by knights.

“Milord! You’re safe!”

“Kael! What is happening?!”

As General Albrecht hurried his family into the carriage, Kael approached him. He appeared clad in full armor and with sword in hand. Seeing that, General Albrecht’s expression softened. Seeing Kael predict the possibility of an enemy attack and remain in armor made the general look upon him as a dependable subordinate.

“Kael, do you know what’s happening? Are these pursuers sent by Lupis?” the general asked Kael questions in quick succession.

“They don’t carry a banner so it’s hard to say for certain, but...” Kael proceeded to give him an accurate report. “About twenty of the men we’ve set as guards are engaging the enemy in combat. The fire is the enemy’s doing!”

The guards had assumed they were pursuers sent by Princess Lupis, but given the darkness and their lack of banner, it was quite difficult to identify the enemy. But be they pursuers or just plain bandits, there were only two choices available upon being attacked. You either fight, or run.

“I see... How’s the outlook of the battle? Can you hold back the enemy’s attack?”

“I’m afraid not.” Kael shook his head. “But we can buy you as much time as possible, Milord... Take your family and run as fast as you can.”

Kael opened the carriage’s door, urging the general to get in.

“Hurry, Milord. You must make haste! We will hold them back here.”

“Hmm.” Albrecht regarded him with a swift nod. “I leave the rest to you... Kael! Let us meet again at Tarja’s capital.”

And with those words, Albrecht quickly boarded the carriage, leaving everything to Kael’s care. Honestly speaking, there was no meaning in the general staying behind. Albrecht had to survive this. So long as he lived, his subordinates would be repaid for their services. As haughty as General Albrecht

may have been, he wasn't foolish enough to think he could solve everything on his own.

"Now go on, hurry...! Hurry up his horse, you fool!" Watching as General Albrecht got inside the carriage, Kael shouted at the knight holding the reins.

The knight raised his voice in a shout as his whip cut through the air, striking the horse's behind and prompting it to gallop. The carriage began to gradually accelerate, rolling down the dark road ahead.

Standing around the vicinity were Kael's knights, whom he ordered to guard the vicinity. They held onto spears as they looked about cautiously, but weren't clad in armor. There were roughly thirty men present. Kael had sent the knights that remained vigilant and slept with their armor on to accompany General Albrecht.

Many of the knights obeyed General Albrecht's orders and took off their armor, but Kael, along with a select few, elected to not take any risks and kept their armor on.

"Milord... Stay safe!" Kael whispered as he looked around.

The knights had spears and swords in hand, but since they didn't have any armor on, they couldn't be depended on in a battle. They'd be lucky if the enemies were amateurs, but it was hard to believe any enemy who'd attack them during the night would be that weak.

Everyone present awaited Kael's command. They knew their only way out of this situation would be to listen to him.

"Listen to me. We must form a horizontal formation here. Gather into platoons, and form a horizontal column! You don't have your armor, and so your only chance of survival is to gradually edge back while warding off the enemy with the range of your spears! Don't let them get through that range!"

The knights nodded wordlessly at his order, and began getting into formation with their spears drawn. Still, a horizontal formation was one of the simplest ones employed in this world. The soldiers simply stood side by side, so there wasn't much preparation to speak of. But it was also the most effective formation for their goal, which was to help General Albrecht escape.

“They’re coming! At the ready!”

At Kael’s order, the knights prepared their spears. They were ready to fight for their lives.

Ryoma watched as Kael gathered what remained of his forces and arranged them in a horizontal formation. His lips curled up into a smile.

“Oh, not bad... He got them to assume defensive positions fairly quickly given the surprise attack.”

“That’s probably Kael Iruna,” Lione said, standing beside him.

“Yeah, I figured. We beat him once, but I guess him defeating Mikhail wasn’t a fluke. He’s a capable commander.”

A ruthless smile played on Ryoma’s lips, as if to say he’d just found prey that would put up a good chase.

“So what do we do, boy...? Charge right in? We’d take some losses, but we can break that formation no problem.”

The formation Kael chose was one of the simplest, most elementary formations possible. Knights prided themselves on individual skill. While they might be trained in martial arts and thaumaturgy, few of them spent time on tactical and formation training. Of course, some elite units pressed more importance on group battle, and studied tactics accordingly. Those depended entirely on the commander’s personality and choices, though.

What’s more, most of the knights here didn’t have a close relationship with Kael. And nothing mattered more when fighting in a group than how much trust the troops harbor toward their commander. That was why he chose such a simple formation.

Ryoma picked up on Kael’s true intention, though.

This Kael guy really is sharp. He’s not using a complicated formation like the crane wing here, but a simple horizontal one. It’s proof he knows just what each of his men is worth. And on top of that...

Even such a simple formation could be made into a formidable one with just a few tricks. Their front line held up large shields, and pointed their spears from

the gaps between them. The shields staved off the enemy attacks, while the spears would be used to whittle down the enemy's numbers. It ended up being a thorough defensive formation.

This is annoying... But still.

It was just a tough formation to break. Like Lione said, it may cost them some men, but a frontal assault would be able to brute force its way through it. Ryoma's victory remained solid. In terms of individual strength, both sides were about even, but Ryoma's men had the higher morale. And most of the enemy soldiers weren't wearing armor, either. In terms of fighting power, the enemy had an overwhelming disadvantage.

"No... We take them out with one blow! Have everyone hang back, and send a message to Laura's group. Have them circle around and attack the enemy from behind. We'll catch them in a pincer attack. First, we'll attack them from the front in full force and get them to focus on our direction."

Ryoma proposed a pincer attack using Laura's unit, which he had sent separately to hunt down any stragglers.

Ryoma intended to thoroughly hunt Kael's unit down. He had no intention of showing them any mercy. General Albrecht, as well as Kael and the knights who served under him, were existences that couldn't be permitted to remain alive. Both for the kingdom of Rhoadseria's sake, and for Ryoma's sake.

Or rather, sparing them would mean keeping a dangerous factor that could threaten them in the future alive.

"Roger that!" Lione said. "So we need to keep their attention on us, eh... Wouldn't thaumaturgy be more effective than arrows for that?"

Ryoma nodded.

"Then let's drop some lightning on them first! Ya ready, boys? Fire up a big one and make sure their eyes are fixed on us!"

Obeying Lione's order, the mercenaries turned their hands toward the enemy formation.

""""Spirits that govern over lightning! Manifest your powers before us, with

our blood as recompense! Abide by your oaths, and strike down our foes!”””

And at Lione’s signal, they started chanting at once. Small balls of crackling electricity formed in their hands. As their chant continued, the balls gradually got bigger.

“Fire it!”

“””Bolt Blitz!”””

And the bullets of lightning were launched from their hands, crashing into the enemy formation. Each of them was drawn together, eventually forming a single huge ball of lightning.

“Everyone, shift to thaumaturgic defensive positions! Hold up your shields!”

Kael shouted, and knights holding up the shields lowered their thighs, straining every muscle in their body to withstand the attack. The shrill sound of electrical discharge echoed through the forest, which shook as white light flashed through it intermittently. The ball of lightning splashed against the shields, raining the area with bolts of electricity.

“The shields have been granted thaumaturgic defensive enchantments! Do not let go of them, no matter what!” Kael shouted, squinting against the white flash. “Keep them up until the electricity dies down! Back row! Cast defensive thaumaturgy on the front row, at full force!”

If any one part of the formation were to break, the lightning would travel to the rest of the soldiers from there. Everyone was fighting desperately to hold back the ball of lightning, waiting for the menace to pass.

Their minds had completely forgotten defending their rear, as their attention was fixed entirely on the spell bearing down on them from the front. And that was Ryoma’s plan.

“Second row, begin chanting!” Lione ordered.

The mercenaries that hung back until now stepped forward, and began chanting at Kael’s formation.

“””Spirits governing the wind! Turbulent ones! Abide by your contract, and fulfill your mission! Become a storm at my order, and sweep away my foes!”””

“Fire!” Lione once again gave them the signal.

“““Charging Wind!”””

A gale of wind powerful enough to easily blow away an adult man blew from their hands, roaring as it clashed against Kael and his men.



“Tch, wasted effort. Keep your shields up!” Kael clicked his tongue, but at the same time was confident that their position was sound. “Their thaumaturgy can’t reach us! If they keep firing spells at us, they’ll just exhaust themselves! Just hold on until they do!”

Hmph! I suppose they really were just thieves... If they knew we were knights, they wouldn’t try this kind of attack! I thought they were pursuers from Rhoadseria, but apparently I was wrong... They can shoot all the spells they want at us. We have shields with thaumaturgic defensive enchantments. They can easily block low-level thaumaturgy. It’s just a matter of time until they run out of prana.

In this world, verbal thaumaturgy was seen as lacking in practicality as a weapon. That wasn’t to say it didn’t have its limited uses. There were some who made it their area of expertise, like the Empire of O’ltormea’s court thaumaturgist.

But it did come with its share of crippling disadvantages. Firstly, most verbal thaumaturgy manifested as long-range attacks. The problem was that prana diminished the farther the attack had to travel.

With most verbal thaumaturgy spells, they grew weaker the further they had to travel from the caster. What this meant is that even if a caster were to fire an attack with a force of one hundred from a distance of ten meters, the attack would only deal ninety points because of the prana lost along the way. The greater the distance, the less potent the attack became.

On top of that, not just thaumaturgists, but all living beings unconsciously had prana in their bodies, which formed a protective layer around their body. This was true of everyone in this world, regardless of their ability to use thaumaturgy.

Of course, this protective layer was far more brittle than anything a thaumaturgist would create. For a simple commoner, it would grant the same level of defense as a thin piece of fabric. It was different with a thaumaturgist, though. Between two thaumaturgists of equal skill, the defending side would actually be at an advantage.

In addition, in cases like this where one knew to expect a thaumaturgic attack

coming from the enemy, they'd be able to use their prana to temporarily up their resistance, forming a powerful defense. And the armor knights wear is also enchanted to resist thaumaturgy.

All those techniques would allow one to stave off most verbal thaumaturgy attacks. Of course, it consumes prana, and can't be kept up indefinitely.

The same held true for the attacking side, except their attacks consumed significantly more prana. This was why battle in this world placed more importance on martial thaumaturgy compared to verbal thaumaturgy, with the exception of the most skilled of practitioners.

It all depends on how it's used, though.

Ryoma smiled to himself as he watched the mercenaries' verbal thaumaturgy being repeatedly blocked by the shields. Indeed, in games and other such fantasy settings, spellcasters were the ones packing the overwhelming firepower, but in this world, things were somewhat different. Ryoma himself could only imagine those kinds of flashy combat scenes when he thought of magic, so he was disappointed to learn about the restrictions on thaumaturgy.

But even if thaumaturgy didn't give the firepower one might expect, it still had its uses.

"""Oooooooh!"""

Suddenly, war cries erupted from the forest behind Kael's formation, and many shadows leaped out of the forest, pouncing on the knights.

"Kill them, kill them all!"

"Don't let a single one of them escape, you hear?!"

The men charged them with swords in hand and blatant bloodlust in their eyes, slashing into the knights' defenseless backs.

"What?! Enemies, there are enemies behind us!"

"Impossible! Where did they come from?! Isn't the enemy just in front of us?!"

"Who cares about that, you moron?! Defend against them, too!"

“That’s stupid! We can’t break formation now!”

“Shut up and stop whining! Do you want to die?!”

While they were focused on blocking the thaumaturgy attacks launched by Lione’s men, they were attacked from behind. Everyone was screaming whatever came to their minds. Some wanted to prioritize blocking the thaumaturgy. Others wanted to defend against the enemy attacks. A few waited for Kael to give them instructions.

None of those choices were wrong ones, but none of them were right, either. Because they made the fateful error of allowing Ryoma’s group to approach them from the front.

“Now! Charge ’em!”

At Lione’s order, the mercenaries drew their swords and pushed into the enemy formation ahead.

“Kuh! Front row, don’t let them break your stance!” Kael raised his voice desperately.

The battle wasn’t decided yet. If the knights would obey his orders, they still had a chance at winning. But Kael’s voice wasn’t reaching any of the knights by now. And that was only natural. In a situation where they were attacked concurrently from behind and from the front, it would take significant training and a great deal of trust between the commander and the knights for them to maintain the formation.

But Kael and his knights had neither of those things.

Caught in a pincer attack between Laura’s unit from behind and Lione’s assault from the front, their strong defensive formation was gradually losing its shape like a sand castle being beaten down by the waves.

“Sir Kael, we can’t last any longer!” One of the knights called out. “We should fall back!”

“That’s pointless... Where can we run in this situation...?” Kael shook his head in a resigned fashion.

There were less than twenty men left alive around him. The pincer attack

divided their forces, and now they were completely cut off from the rest of the knights. Some of them tried to flee into the forest, while others stayed where they were. A few tried to get back at Ryoma's forces. But whichever choice they made, they all met the same fate.

Death.

Blast! Why did this happen...? A pincer attack? So they're not just bandits... So are these pursuers from Princess Lupis's side...?

Kael held back his desire to curse out loud, since he knew no amount of complaining would change things. The moment he lost his temper, it would all truly be over.

So these are the only men I have left... Do we run into the forest...? Or try to cut through the enemy...? Which should it be? If we die here, then there would be no point in us taking the rear guard... I only took up this role because I thought I'd be able to block them with these forces...

Kael didn't let General Albrecht go ahead out of good will. He only let the general and his family get away out of calculated self-interest.

If we can block the enemy here, General Albrecht's opinion of me will only improve. It's because he's fallen so far that he'd be more desperate for reliable subordinates!

Kael had calculated as much. He thought that by making his loyalty clear to the general, it would help improve his standing when they reached Tarja. If it weren't for that, Kael would never have prioritized letting General Albrecht and his family get away first.

In addition, Kael only took on this risk because he thought he was up against mere bandits. Petty thieves would stand no chance against Kael and his knights. Even if they were taken by surprise and were initially on the back foot, they'd have the skill and equipment to emerge victorious. But if those were pursuers sent by Princess Lupis, things were different.

What do we do... How do I get out of this alive...?

Kael looked around desperately. The sounds of clashing metal were getting fewer and weaker. The divided knights were being finished off by the

mercenaries.

No good! At this rate, they'll cut off our path of escape! If the forest isn't a possibility... Then the only option is...!

Kael fixed his gaze ahead. Even if he tried to run, he'd just be chased down. He had to confuse the enemy if he was to shake them off.

There! That's the enemy's main force! My only way out is to strike there!

Standing ahead of Kael was one enemy formation that remained completely immobile. Kael discerned that was likely where the enemy commander was.

"Listen to me! Crush the enemy ahead, and kill their commander!"

"You're telling us to rush the enemy?!" The knights were shocked by Kael's order.

But their surprise soon died down. They couldn't see any way out of this situation, either.

"Focus on killing the enemies ahead of you and nothing else! Cut down anyone who stands in your way!"

Kael demanded only one thing out of his knights. To kill the enemy, and nothing else. This plain, simple order dragged the knights, who had been frozen still by the terror of death, back to reality.

That's right! Kill, kill, kill!

We have to kill them if we want to survive this!

Kill the enemy! Kill them!

The knights' desire to live and their hatred toward the enemy both flared up.

"""Ooooooh!"""

The knights' hearts once again flared up with fighting spirit.

"Chaaaaaarge!"

At Kael's orders, the knights attacked the mercenaries. Desperation made their fear into courage. Having fallen for Ryoma's tactics, Kael and his men were the very image of cornered animals. And right now, they were about to gamble

their lives to bite back against their predator, Ryoma.

“Ugh! What the hell?! Why are they gaining heart all of a sudden?!”

“Stay calm! This is just their last moment of resistance before the end!”

The mercenaries’ movements stopped as the knights rallied against them.

“Idiots! What are you doing?!” Lione raised her voice.

“It’s no good, Sis! The way it’s going now, they’ll break through the front!” Boltz said.

Lione clicked her tongue and drew her blade.

“Enough! I’m takin’ to the front!”

She was always a warrior, to begin with. She may have taken command of soldiers now, but her true value was at fighting directly on the battlefield. Lione’s eyes shined red with excitement for battle, but Boltz couldn’t afford to let her go.

“You can’t, Sis! Did you forget what the lad said?!”

“Idiot! Does that even matter right now?! At this rate, they’ll...!”

The goddess of battle turned her smile to Kael this time. While Lione and Boltz were arguing, Kael and his men broke through the front line.

“Sis, watch out!”

Boltz covered for Lione with his body, and a blade swept through the air above them.

“Tch! He got in the way...”

As Lione still scrambled to catch up to the situation, an unfamiliar man’s voice reached her ears. “You!” she said.

“Are you the commander here?! Why did you attack us...?! Well, it doesn’t matter if you’re bandits or Lupis’s men. You’re dying here either way...”

“Die!” Kael swung his sword over Lione’s head. He looked down on the two of them with muddled, and yet palpable bloodlust.

“Dammit! Sis!”

“Move away, Boltz! Dodge it!”

Boltz and Lione were prepared to die. But at that very moment, something cut through the wind and Kael’s blade was deflected with a shower of sparks.

“Who was that?! Who got in my way?!” Kael shouted, clenching his numbed hands.

Kael desperately knocked down the blade that was thrown at him from somewhere. Standing around him were five other knights that managed to break through. They looked around cautiously. And eventually, the single figure of a man stepped out of the woods.

“Boy...”

Ryoma’s large form reflected in Lione’s eyes.

“Are you all right, Lione?”

“Y-Yeah!” Lione said, grabbing Ryoma’s extended hand and finally rising to her feet. “I just hurt my legs a bit. Forget that, when did ya get here?!”

Ryoma should have been leading the group hunting down the soldiers that ran off, and Lione was shocked by his sudden appearance.

“They moved better than expected, so I left command to Sara and went back to the rear. Just leave this place to me... You and Boltz should regroup with Sara and help her command the hunt for survivors.”

“But!”

“It’s fine... I’ll finish him off.” Ryoma cut her off, a cold glint in his eyes.

His gaze stabbed into Kael and the knights surrounding him.

“So you’re the one who got in my way!” Kael barked.

Ryoma ignored him, however, calmly drawing his katana.



“I’m going to have you disappear here, Kael Iruna,” Ryoma said, hiding the blade behind his body in a flank stance.

“You won’t lay a hand on Sir Kael, you bastard!” Kael’s knights braced themselves, solidifying their defense around Kael.

But the next moment, red blood spurted from their necks.

“You shan’t get in milord’s way, younglings.” Gennou appeared behind their crumpled forms, his own katana dripping with blood.

His slash must have been unimaginably fast. It may have been amidst the chaos of the battlefield, but he still cut through the necks of five trained knights with a single slash. His skill was reminiscent of the grim reaper at work.

“Wha... Who are you?!” Kael’s eyes widened in terror.

“Who I am matters not. Your opponent is milord...” Gennou’s cold words rained down on Kael’s heart.

Come to think of it, his scheming was what started all of this.

Ryoma did think there was an odd twist of fate here. Ryoma Mikoshiba was unrelated to Rhoadseria’s internal strife, but what changed that was Kael’s scheme. And the bond between Ryoma and Kael was on the verge of reaching its conclusion. Everyone else on this battlefield could only swallow nervously as they watched over the two of them.

The shouting around them gradually died down, and a silence settled over the scene. The mercenaries hunting down the knights gradually gathered around, forming a large ring around the two.

“Sis... What do we do?” Boltz asked Lione, who remained still where she stood, with a voice that was half-resigned.

He’d known her for too many years, and could easily tell what was going through her mind. Lione didn’t even turn to look at him as she answered. Her gaze was fixed on Kael and Ryoma’s silent standoff. Her eyes refused to miss a glimpse of their battle.

“The shouting’s gone, so that probably means the enemies are pretty much all dead. In which case, we don’t have any stragglers left to hunt... And ’sides... You

don’t get to watch a fight like this often. Yer warrior’s blood is riled up too, ain’t it?”

Boltz could only nod with a wry smile. He, too, was a veteran of the battlefield. He’d avoided melee combat since he lost his left arm, but his skill as a warrior hadn’t rusted in the slightest. And just like Lione said, Boltz’s experienced eyes could see the transcendent skill these two fighters had. A battle between two men this skilled didn’t come often.

And warriors had a dignity they understood and abided by. Everyone present here felt the same way. No mercenary here would dare attack Kael from behind now. No... Perhaps it would be more accurate to say they were all bound by the bloodlust Kael gave off.

“Still, though...” Boltz said. “I heard this Kael person was skilled, but I didn’t think he’d be that good...”

“Yeah. If ya were to fight him with your one arm, it would be pretty much suicide. This guy... I don’t think even I could take him down in a one-on-one,” Lione murmured bitterly.

This meant Lione had discerned that Kael’s skill with a blade far exceeded her own. The most important asset on the battlefield was being able to discern the opponent’s own abilities. To tell if your opponent was stronger or weaker than you. If their gear was of better or lesser quality than your own. If the enemy was more skilled in one-on-one battles, or in large battles.

This power of observation was essential to surviving the battlefield. It didn’t matter how strong one might be if the enemy was stronger than they were. And veteran mercenaries like Lione and Boltz naturally had that insight. And that insight gave them a glimpse into Ryoma and Kael’s skill — a glimpse they were incapable of tearing their eyes away from.

“I guess we just can’t help that,” Boltz said. “None of us learned actual fencing... Our sword skills are the kind one learns on the battlefield. I think we’d have plenty of a chance to win if this was an all-out battle, though.”

A mercenary’s sword is honed in large-scale melee battles. It wasn’t stronger or weaker from traditional fencing, but its utility simply lay elsewhere. Mercenaries developed this style of fencing to survive on tumultuous

battlefields, while Kael's style of fencing was better suited for one-on-one engagements.

Lione nodded lightly at Boltz's words. She realized the truth they carried.

"Still, the lad is matching him... He isn't retreating a single step away from that bastard Kael... Just look at that vigor... Blast! Even I'm being overwhelmed here..."

The atmosphere had clearly changed. A sharp, cold air spread out from between the two.

"The boy isn't going to budge an inch, is he...?"

"They're both looking for an opening... And Kael has that shield and armor, too... It's gonna be hard to land a proper hit on him with those defenses..."

Kael was clad in full-body armor, with a sword in his right hand and a shield in his left. He was essentially a fully-armed knight. Ryoma, on the other hand, held the katana donated to him by Gennou in both hands, and his only form of defense was a suit of leather armor. It was a light, maneuverable outfit, but put him in an overwhelming disadvantage compared to Kael when it came to defenses.

"Kael's heavily armed... If they're playing by the book, they'll be fighting to exhaust each other's stamina."

"Yes, but since thaumaturgy can enhance one's body, it might not be an entirely reliable tactic..."

"Right... Even with that heavy armor on, Kael's agility isn't any worse for wear. And since the boy can't use thaumaturgy, he's at a disadvantage here... So how can he keep his vigor so high?"

Boltz had no response to Lione's question. Kael used martial thaumaturgy to reinforce his body, and was able to remain nimble even with his heavy armor. The Manipura chakra is located around the navel. By operating this third chakra, he'd already filled his body with prana, gaining superhuman strength and speed in the process.

It seemed he was Lione and Boltz's equal in terms of his skill with martial

thaumaturgy. Ryoma's physique was almost double his, but otherwise Kael had the advantage in almost every other way. He was capable of moving just as quickly while retaining the benefit of his armor's defenses.

Looking at it objectively, the odds were stacked despairingly high against Ryoma. And yet, the zeal and vigor emanating from Ryoma didn't waver in the slightest.

His heart was completely devoid of all obstructive thoughts. There was no fear or doubt. Did this stem from overwhelming confidence? Or was he yet another fool who overestimated his own abilities?

Sparks suddenly flew between the two. The distance between them was closed in the space of a moment as sword and katana clashed. The two blades rubbed against each other, giving off high-pitched, metallic screeches.

At first the two were equally matched, but the katana's blade gradually edged closer to the nape of Kael's neck. Ryoma was gripping his katana with both hands, while Kael held his sword with only one. The difference between a two-handed and one-handed grip created a gap between them.

The match was far from decided, though. The blunt sound of flesh being beaten rung out. Kael swiftly slid his shield between his body and sword, pushing with all his body's might to deflect Ryoma's charge. Both of their bodies pushed away from each other, once again creating a distance.

Dammit! Who the hell is this man...?! He's fighting me evenly! Against me, one of the most prominent knights in Rhoadseria...! And what is that weapon he's using...? A single-edged, curved sword? A weapon specialized for slashes...

Kael clicked his tongue in irritation inside his helmet and held up his shield to strengthen his defenses.

No... Stay calm. The enemy is lightly armed. My sword can cut through that leather armor like it's paper... I'll block his charge with my shield, and a single slash across his body will finish everything... He doesn't have a shield, and that alone puts me at an advantage... I just need to tighten my defenses and wait for an opening to present itself...

The sword in Kael's hands was a family heirloom passed down for

generations. The same held true for his armor and shield, dating back from when his ancestors served as knights of Rhoadseria. Unlike his armor, the sword wasn't imbued with any kind of endowed thaumaturgy, but it was still made by a master craftsman. Kael tightened his grip on its handle.

But the shock that came over him next was the strongest he'd felt yet.

"Keeeeeeeeeeeeee!" A war cry erupted from Ryoma's mouth, and an intense shockwave ran through Kael's left hand.

His left hand, holding the shield, went completely numb, and his shield was pushed to his body's side.

What in the world was that blow...?! My arm's all numb... It was even heavier than his earlier slashes! No good...! It takes all my strength to hold onto the shield... I don't have time to look for an opening and attack... Damn it...! What a monster...

The blade that swung down on him at high speed carried all of Ryoma's weight of over one hundred kilograms. Every muscle in Ryoma's body acted, delivering a truly lethal slash. As proof, a deep mark was etched onto the shield where the blade bore down on it.

The shield's principal raw materials were wood and leather, with the surface being covered with a thin layer of steel; that surface was now cut through, exposing the wood underneath. Ryoma's eyes calmly picked up on that fact.

I cut through the surface... Guess it wasn't a steel shield, after all... Figures, since he can handle it with one hand, but what do I know? This world has monsters, after all...

Even Ryoma couldn't cut through steel that was several centimeters thick. But the crack in the shield wiped away one of Ryoma's doubts. In Earth's logic, it wouldn't be possible to hold onto a steel shield and fight properly at the same time, but this wasn't Earth. Thaumaturgy existed, and could augment the body, so the possibility existed.

It really is amazing enough that he can move so quickly with that heavy metal armor...

Ryoma calmly compared their combat potential. Armor was exceptionally

heavy and tended to inhibit one's movements, all the more so if iron was involved in its creation. But he was still keeping up with Ryoma, who was wearing leather armor, in terms of speed. The fact Kael blocked Ryoma's katana with his shield proved it.

He maintained his armor's defenses, while ignoring its weight and moving nimbly. It made it abundantly clear why knights were considered such an overwhelming presence on the battlefield.

While confirming the sensation of his katana's grip in both his hands, Ryoma cast a probing gaze in Kael's direction.

Martial thaumaturgy... An impressive skill... It's much harder to deal with than verbal thaumaturgy and its chanting...

Of course, verbal thaumaturgy wasn't to be trifled with, either. Shooting lightning and raining flames down from the sky or through one's hands with just a few words is a great threat. Compared to that, martial thaumaturgy was nowhere near as flashy. In fact, it would even seem plain.

But it was this simplicity that made it reliable and lacking in flaws. It required no chanting, and since it only affected one's body, it wasted significantly less prana. That was what made it the central technique used in this world's warfare. The capacity to use thaumaturgy was the wall that segregated the rulers from those dominated.

Three aspects were central to combat. Spirit, technique and body. And of those three, thaumaturgy augmented the body. In the face of overwhelming power, half-hearted technique and spirit meant little.

But... It's not an absolute skill... He's still human...

Ryoma's eyes were already fixed on Kael's weak point.

Kael... I'll kill you here, no matter what...! I'll show you just how potent the techniques Grandpa passed down to me can be...!

The atmosphere around Ryoma turned cold and sharp.

"Ryoma... A katana is like a part of your body. You swing not your katana, but your own limbs and skill... And you must never waver when you draw your

blade. Doubts will cloud your judgment and concentration, and it will transmit to your blade. Focus on one thing and one thing only — your slash! And believe. In your training, your skills... in the blade you wield!"

His grandfather's words surfaced in Ryoma's mind.

Concentrate only on the slash... And there's only one point I should aim at!

Ryoma raised his voice in yet another battlecry. He held his sword upright in what was known as the *hasso gamae* , and closed the distance between them with a single breath.

Come! I'll block your blow with my shield and cut you down!

Kael braced himself for the blow. But suddenly, Ryoma's sprint turned into a leap into the air.

What?! He jumped?! You panicked, fool!

In a split-second judgment, Kael raised his left hand over his head. Ryoma bent his body in mid-jump, holding his blade parallel to his back. And by focusing his consciousness on every single fiber of his body, he united them all under a single will, exhibiting superhuman strength in the process.

"Eat thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis!"

He focused all the strength stored in his body, which was bent like a bow, onto a single spot. All that might swung down over Kael, with all of Ryoma's weight to back it.

The sound of something cracking rung out. And then, Ryoma felt the dull sensation of cutting into something full of liquid.

"What...?"

Kael's face was contorted in shock as he looked down at his left hand. The first thing he saw was his shield, split cleanly in half right down the middle. And the next thing he saw was the katana, digging into his left arm. He could feel his arm gradually grow warmer, and something wet on his skin. A warm, slimy liquid flowed down his armor toward his elbow, dripping onto the ground in droplets.



A dark black puddle began forming on the ground.

“Damn it!”

Kael snapped out of his frozen thoughts and swung his sword in Ryoma’s direction. But it was nothing more than a desperate struggle. His posture was wrong and his swing had no strength behind it. Ryoma avoided it easily.

My left arm... No good... It won’t move! It’s all numb... Damn it! What kind of monster is he?! He cut into my arm, along with my shield?! My armored arm?! This man... What is he...?!

For Ryoma, knights who were capable of using thaumaturgy, a power completely foreign to the world he came from, were veritable monsters. But one such monster now looked upon Ryoma as if he was some unnatural threat, too. It was almost comical, really, how both of them saw each other as equally horrifying.

“With how much you’re bleeding... I cut into the bone and severed your artery. It’s over,” Ryoma declared mercilessly as Kael glared dangerously at him.

The fact he even spoke alone stood as proof the duel was over.

“Shut up, the battle isn’t over yet! I can still fight!” Kael held up his sword.

True, Kael could have kept on fighting. He was still alive, and his right arm was unharmed. But the duel had already been decided.

“It’s pointless... You couldn’t block my slash with a shield, so how do you expect to block it with just a sword? And look at how much you’re bleeding. You’ll bleed out soon if you’re not treated immediately. And there’s no one around to treat your wound... You lose.”

Kael’s expression contorted. Ryoma said the duel was already over. Kael’s left arm was cut to the bone and wouldn’t budge. Holding up his shield and having his armor on prevented it from being cut clean off, but it didn’t change the fact that his left arm was now effectively dead. Or at the very least, it was dead unless he was given immediate treatment and time to rest.

And the blood pouring out of his severed artery was mercilessly sapping away his strength. If nothing would be done to stop the bleeding soon, he would

surely bleed to death in a matter of minutes. But he was standing in the middle of the battlefield, face to face with the enemy and without a single living ally in sight. He could do nothing to stop the bleeding.

“So this is the end of the road...” Kael whispered.

“Yes... It’s over.” Ryoma nodded.

“I didn’t think I’d die here... It seems luck really has turned its back on me.”

Kael’s expression filled with a certain resigned understanding, typical of a warrior that realized their approaching death.

“You’re Ryoma Mikoshiba, yes?”

“That’s right...”

“I see... So you’re not just a wise tactician, you’re also a greater warrior than me... You really are a monster.”

Kael called Ryoma a monster, but that word didn’t carry any scorn. Quite the contrary, actually; his expression carried something like praise.

“I prided myself on the fact there was no knight greater than me... Both in swordplay, and in my wit! That I could see further than any knight in any country...! But I was no match for you in either of those things... Both as a commander and a swordsman... Why did I lose...? Was it that you had more talent than me...?”

“No... I’m not better than you... I don’t think I’m inferior to you, but I’m not superior to you, either.” Ryoma earnestly answered Kael’s question.

This was the dignity he would show to a man with one foot in the grave. And in truth, everything went wrong for Ryoma because of Kael Iruna’s unusual skills. As both a warrior and tactician, Kael’s talents were well above average.

“Then why did I lose?”

“You lost to your own heart. You believed in your strength so much, you drowned in conceit...”

Kael’s eyes widened at Ryoma’s words. In truth, there were two factors that contributed to Ryoma’s victory. The first was that Kael’s strategies all leaned on

brute force, and that dulled his swordplay.

His slashes were certainly swift and sharp. His skill was far more refined than the common knight's, too. But while he learned fencing from a legitimate school, his reliance on martial thaumaturgy still made him lean on brute strength too much. Ryoma's gaze, which was honed from years of training with his grandfather, could discern how his range and breathing had a great deal of coarseness to them.

And the other factor. That was the fact that Kael covered his body in full armor, just as he did on the battlefield. Armor weighed roughly thirty to forty kilograms on average. Knights wore this armor along with a helmet, a shield and a sword. The total weight amounted to nearly fifty kilograms.

It limited the mobility of one's joints, but one could move as if they were lightly armored by using thaumaturgy to handle the weight. That, in and of itself, was extremely impressive. One could liken it a vehicle having a tank's armor along with the speed and engine of a Ferrari. One could easily realize why martial thaumaturgy became the symbol of the ruling class in this world.

But impressive as it was, it still sacrificed mobility. Using the car analogy, Kael was only moving as fast as a passenger vehicle traveling at max speed. Indeed, considering how armored he was, maintaining that speed was astounding. However, if he didn't have that armor, he would surely be capable of moving as fast as a race car.

Which way would the battle have tilted if that was the case? No one could tell. Blocking a slash delivered with superhuman speed by sheer skill would still be difficult. But in the end, Kael owed his defeat to his over-reliance on the power of martial thaumaturgy, and to his own ability to use it. The conceited belief that his being a knight made him stronger.

"Conceit... Conceit, you say... Heheh. To think it would be exactly what Mikhail said... Let me ask you one thing. Why do you side with Princess Lupis? Is it money? Power? Those are just empty promises... The wall of social status is thick in this country. Even if the princess were to repay you, the nobles around her would never allow it!"

"I don't intend to ask the princess for money or power." Ryoma shook his

head.

“Impossible... Then why did you fight? Why did you stand in our way?!” Kael’s tone became rougher.

He had to know why the enemy that drove him to death’s door chose to fight.

“It’s simple, really... Your meddling made us side with Princess Lupis.”

“My meddling...?” Kael’s expression contorted with surprise.

“Yeah... Remember how you set Mikhail up?”

After thinking for a moment, Kael nodded as if remembering.

“You mean when we smuggled Princess Radine into Rhoadseria?”

“Right... We accepted a request from the guild, and were attacked on the way there. We took the blow for Princess Radine.”

“Yes, I leaked the information about the fake princess to Mikhail and had him attack her. And while he did that, we moved the real princess into the country... That went well, indeed... And it was thanks to that that Duke Gelhart accepted my defection to his side!”

Kael’s words had a tinge of pride at the success of his own ploy.

“Yeah, it went well, all right,” Ryoma said with a bitter smile. “Except for the fact that it involved us in this whole mess!”

Perhaps one couldn’t say this was truly Kael’s fault. Laura’s hair just happened to be the right shade of silver. She just happened to be the only silver-haired mercenary in Pherzaad at the time. A lot of little coincidences piled on top of each other led up to Ryoma facing Kael in the present. And if even one of those coincidences wouldn’t have taken place, Kael’s fate may have been different.

“Aaah. I thought I saw you somewhere, but it was you back then...” Kael’s face twisted bitterly.

Anyone would curse their fate if they just heard Ryoma’s explanation. What started as his own ploy became the noose tightening around his neck.

“So it was just rotten luck...” The words slipped from Kael’s lips.

Such was the remorse of the man betrayed by the goddess of fortune and her

whims.

“Yeah. You were just out of luck...” Ryoma nodded silently.

And in truth, had the wires crossed in any other way, Ryoma may have been the one lying dead here. The only difference between them really was just a matter of luck.

“I have one last request,” Kael said.

Ryoma nodded silently. Kael’s face was already pale from the blood loss, and the only thing ahead of him was death. And Ryoma wasn’t cold-hearted enough to ignore the words of a dying man.

“I wanted to die fighting... as a knight. Will you be my opponent?”

Ryoma gave another silent nod, and propped up his katana.

“You have my gratitude... Thank you.”

Ryoma lifted up his blade. The stance of fire. The optimal form for Ryoma to land a blow. Kael held up his sword at his flank, and burst into a jog, swinging at Ryoma with what strength remained in him.

This is the final battle I will ever...

The moment Kael made to slash at Ryoma’s abdomen, a battlecry erupted from Ryoma’s lips. The next moment, the blade swung up over his head bashed down into Kael’s helmet. Kael’s body ran past Ryoma’s side, and took two more steps... a third... a fourth...

Kael’s running speed gradually grew slower, and he eventually pitched forward, falling headfirst to the ground.

By the time Kael was beaten to the ground by Ryoma’s blade, Helena’s revenge was approaching its climax in the forest’s depths.

“Shit! We have to protect the General and his family!”

“Follow me! We’re breaking through the encirclement!”

Conflicting orders flew past each other from every direction, complicating the battle further. Some knights said they had to protect Albrecht’s person, while others tried to gather the remaining knights and attempted to break through

their pursuers' enclosure. They all desperately avoided the enemy's blades, their armor creaking as they moved.

Reality was ruthless, however. Their desperate efforts would go unrewarded. They held up their shields and swung their swords in an attempt to cut a way through the enemy's ring, but they all sank to the ground dead, one after another.

Thirty guards set out from the camp with Albrecht, but now less than twenty remained. Helena's unit, by contrast, numbered over two hundred. Both sides were fully armed knights, but the difference in numbers was clear and absolute.

After being ambushed in his camp by Ryoma, Albrecht fell to Helena's trap next. And that was how their snare was planned, to begin with. Ryoma would be the hunting hound to scare him out of the camp, so that the hunter, Helena, could finish him off. A lethal ploy, indeed.



“Lady Helena... Everything is moving along as you’ve ordered,” one of the knights reported. “All that remains is to take the heads of Albrecht and his family.”

“Yes, I think the end is in sight. Ryoma has done well.” Helena nodded with a dark smile.

“Still... To see things carried out so well... That boy, he’s... terrifying,” Chris whispered as he watched the fighting... or rather, the slaughter carried out before him.

Of course, Helena and her forces were the ones stomping out the enemy. Each enemy knight was beaten down by four or five of Helena’s knights, and anyone but the mightiest of warriors would fall to those odds. They were also surrounded by a multitude of other knights that stood in the way of any attempt to escape. The only future Albrecht’s knights had ahead of them was death.

And what created this situation was Ryoma Mikoshiba’s plan. Chris’s eyes were full of fear toward Ryoma.

“Yes, he’s certainly impressive,” Helena complimented Ryoma’s plan, and then turned to face Chris. “Does he scare you?”

There weren’t any traces of her earlier smile in her expression. Chris simply held his tongue, which expressed his feelings all on its own. If nothing else, the fact remained Ryoma hadn’t done anything that didn’t benefit the kingdom of Rhoadseria. It wouldn’t be odd to praise him as a reliable ally. But Chris couldn’t shake off a certain concern.

He has gained some impressive accomplishments. He’s capable at coming up with and executing plans and he’s a skilled commander... But he’s not a man of this country. He’s a stranger, a wanderer... If a tactician like him were to join in with an enemy country, and then try to invade Rhoadseria...

Chris openly acknowledged Ryoma’s skills, and he also understood his imagination was quite baseless. But even knowing all that, Chris was terrified of Ryoma, and that stemmed from the fact Ryoma had absolutely no ties to Rhoadseria as a country. He hadn’t sworn allegiance to Princess Lupis, nor did

he feel much affinity to the kingdom, either.

The only thing that bound Ryoma to Princess Lupis was a series of coincidences stacked together, and that was an opinion shared by many of Princess Lupis's lieutenants. That was why Chris feared Ryoma.

Helena and Chris exchanged gazes in silence for a long moment.

"I thought so..." Helena eventually whispered sadly. "I understand why you're anxious, Chris... Several others have already come to me with similar doubts."

Chris's expression changed at her words. There was only one type of plot employed against dangerous characters. That choice crossed Chris's mind. The dangerous choice of assassination...

"I did tell them all to not plan anything needless... So as to not stir up any hornet nests," Helena said with a shrug.

"Do you mean... assassinating Ryoma Mikoshiba?"

Helena didn't answer Chris's question. If nothing else, people seem to have proposed it.

Hammering down the nail that sticks out, eh...?

Chris's heart wavered in something like a mix of loneliness and frustration. True, he feared Ryoma, but he didn't consider assassinating him to remove him as a threat.

No one's earned as much merit in this civil war as he did. It was thanks to him that Princess Lupis managed to remove General Albrecht and Duke Gelhart... Even if he isn't a citizen of Rhoadseria and merely some vagabond, repaying the greatest contributor to this war's conclusion with assassination would be...

One couldn't maintain a country without dirtying their hands somewhat. Chris understood that perfectly well. But he still wasn't comfortable with the idea of assassinating Ryoma, and that wasn't even a problem of his own sentiments. Even if the situation called for his assassination, it still required a certain condition could be met.

The condition being that they could actually assassinate him.

There could be no failing that. Because if he were to survive, the kingdom

Rhoadseria would have created a far more dangerous enemy for itself than General Albrecht or Duke Gelhart ever were with its own two hands. That was why Chris felt no urge to assassinate Ryoma despite his fears.

The best possible solution is to have him serve the kingdom... That way, Rhoadseria would flourish alongside him...

But of course, that was far easier said than done. The wall of social status in Rhoadseria was too high, and so Ryoma, who wasn't even a citizen of the kingdom, would run into too many problems.

"What's your opinion on it, Lady Helena?" Chris suddenly asked Helena.

"Me...? I'm against it, of course... It's only thanks to that boy that I can kill Albrecht. And if someone were to try to kill him and fail, this country would be faced with a far greater threat..." Helena answered ambiguously.

Anyone would reach this conclusion with a bit of thought.

His skill as a warrior is exceptionally high, and he's a first-rate tactician and commander. And there are always people around him, drawn to his charisma...

Lione the Crimson Lion and her lieutenant, Boltz. Their names as mercenaries were well-known throughout the western continent. Using their connections, Ryoma was able to hire the services of many skilled mercenaries. But the problem was that their relationship with Ryoma felt more like the relationship between master and servant.

The mercenaries had looked down on him due to his low rank and youth, but following his defeat of Branzo the Black Spider and his success at the river Thebes, everyone's opinions on him had turned over to complete praise.

At this point, one could say Lione the Crimson Lion was sitting as the leader of Ryoma's bodyguards. This was extremely unusual behavior for mercenaries, who had always survived on the battlefield by their own strength.

It wasn't for nothing that mercenaries were said to hold loyalty for no one, and that was why their employment terms and pay demands were as severe as they were. Their employers could cut them off at any time for any reason, and so mercenaries never worked any more than they were paid to. They could appear earnest about doing their job, of course, but put conversely, they kept a

businesslike approach for anything that extended beyond their contract.

For mercenaries, an employer was a temporary existence, and not someone they would serve forever. If put in the terms of Ryoma's world, it was like the difference between temporary and full-time employees.

And so, if those mercenaries obeyed the command of a young, inexperienced person like Ryoma, it could only be because he had managed to win over their hearts.

He must have the caliber of a general.

Ryoma Mikoshiba possessed something Helena must have had in her youth.

An assassination is a poor idea. Even if it succeeds, Lione's group would strike back and it would lead to further bloodshed... And who's to say if we can even kill him...

That concern shook Helena's heart. She had no intention of assassinating him, nor any intention of admitting to considering it. If any of her subordinates were to suggest it, she would simply reject the idea.

But the problem was that someone might decide to do so without her knowing it. In that case, everything would be all right if the assassination went smoothly. If it would remove Rhoadseria's concerns, Helena would simply have to swallow her own apprehensions and feelings on the matter.

But what if the assassination were to fail?

If that were to happen, Ryoma Mikoshiba would never forgive the kingdom of Rhoadseria. He would see it as the kingdom betraying him. Even still, Helena was a knight of Rhoadseria. She would have to fight anyone seeking to harm her country.

"But if he were to bare his fangs against Rhoadseria... Then..."

It was a terribly bitter decision for Helena to make, and a future she didn't wish to see come to pass.

But Chris didn't get to hear Helena finish that sentence.

""""Oooooooh!""""

“““We caught them! We have them!”””

The cheering rising from the battlefield drowned out her words...

“You’re not hurt, right? We’re gonna break through the encirclement here... Don’t let go of my hands, understand? Don’t look back, and keep your eyes on me!”

Albrecht ran in an attempt to break the encirclement, with his wife and daughter behind his back. Their carriage’s horses were promptly killed, reducing the vehicle into an immobile lump of wood. Albrecht swiftly helped his family off the carriage and attempted to flee into the forest.

However, by this point, Helena’s encirclement wasn’t a net spread out around them - it was a cage, closing them in and blocking their path of escape. He had no choice but to force his way from the knights closing on him. The world wasn’t kind enough to allow such a reckless tactic to succeed. His repeated attempts at escape claimed the lives of a few of the knights he still had on his side, and by now he was completely surrounded by foes.

“Father...” His daughter looked at him with a pale expression, feeling the bloodlust directed at them from all around.

Just a few weeks ago, she was one of the most prominent young ladies of the country. She was by no means hardened enough to withstand the bloodthirsty savagery of the battlefield. The journey to Tarja had also depleted her stamina.

“It’ll be fine, just follow me! You need only run and keep your eyes on my back!” Albrecht raised his voice to encourage the two.

He could tell that him showing any sign of weakness would probably make their hearts snap.

“You’ll be fine. Believe in your father,” His wife said, to which his daughter nodded.

Though she didn’t have much of a choice.

“Let’s go!” Albrecht said.

The knights accompanying him nodded. Only four of them remained out of the thirty dispatched with his carriage.

“““““Ooooooooh!”””””

All four of them charged at the wall of soldiers blocking their path. They swung their swords, held up their shields, forcing their bodies through. The sight of them waving their swords and screaming was reminiscent of a group of rabid dogs. They’d completely cast aside the idea of defense, knowing that General Albrecht’s end would spell their own end anyway. That knowledge reduced them into rash daredevils.

“Milord, now! Over there!”

The defending soldiers were overwhelmed by their reckless charge, crumbling the encirclement for a moment.

“Let’s go! Keep your eyes forward and head right into the forest!”

Albrecht’s wife and daughter nodded, and upon his confirming that, the three of them broke into a run.

“Hurry, milord!”

With their knights’ screams spurring them forward the three rushed onward without looking back. They were only a few meters away from the woods.

Just a little more! If we can run into the forest, we can probably manage to get away! We just have to keep going!

Of course, getting into the forest didn’t guarantee their safety. But their chances of survival were that much higher so long as they could break this blockade.

“Aaaaaaaah!” His daughter screamed behind his back.

“How dare you! Unhand me! Let go of...!” His wife’s voice also called out, but was cut off by the blunt sound of flesh being beaten.

“Mother...! Stop! Don’t hit her!”

General Albrecht turned around, only to be faced with the sight of his wife crouching and his daughter being tormented by the soldiers. His wife’s mouth was dripping with saliva and vomit. She was likely punched. Raising a hand on a woman was despicable from the standpoint of chivalry, but there was rarely any place for such idealism on the battlefield. General Albrecht hesitated.

Dammit! We were so close...! What do I do, do I save them...? No, I'll never make it. Do I head back in this situation...? But I can't abandon my daughter here...

General Albrecht's gaze crossed with his daughter's. Her eyes implored him to save her and her mother. But General Albrecht stayed still. He was this close, this close to getting away with his life...!

Saving his wife and daughter here was realistically impossible. His cold-hearted side prompted him to prioritize pragmatism. But that was impossible, too. He couldn't abandon them and run either. Doing so would take away his chance at making a comeback.

Abandon them and run on my own? What would that give me? I doubt Tarja would even give me refuge in that case...

The only reason the kingdom of Tarja would give him asylum was because his wife was daughter to a family of Tarjan nobles. If he were to abandon his wife and flee, her family would never forgive him. Self-preservation bound his body. No matter which choice he made, they would all lead him to doom.

"Cast aside your weapons, General Albrecht!" One of the knights stepped forward. "Do so, or choose death!"

General Albrecht's hesitation gave Helena's knights the chance to surround him, rendering his situation completely hopeless.

Dammit!

The knights stood in his way to the forest, and it didn't seem he'd be capable of breaking through. Any chance he had to either save his family or flee to safety has passed him by.

"What will you do? Will you stand by and watch us behead your wife and daughter?!"

Heartless words were once again thrust at General Albrecht. His wife and daughter had their hands pinned behind their backs, with swords aimed in their direction.

"Beloved..."

“Father...”

Both of their eyes appealed to him as a husband and father. This battle was already all but decided.

Making a riot here would give me nothing. Any attempt to resist would just give them an excuse to execute us. Vindication... So long as I get a chance to clear my name, I can manage something! If nothing else, Lupis won’t execute my wife and daughter!

Albrecht threw his sword to the ground.

“Very well.” Albrecht squeezed the words out from the bottom of his heart. “I... I submit.”

But as he said those words, his mind clung to his one remaining hope.

“Very good!” The knights gave a slight nod and raised their hands.

Several knights swiftly pounced on General Albrecht, and bound his hands with chains.

“““Oooooooh!”””

“““We caught them! We have them!”””

The cheers echoed through the forest. Everyone raised their swords in the air in celebration.

“It’s finally over! A new age for the Kingdom of Rhoadseria begins!”

“Glory to Her Highness! Eternal prosperity to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria!”

The knights raised their voices in enthusiastic cheers.

“What will become of me now?” General Albrecht asked a nearby knight. “Where will my trial be held? Do you guarantee my safety until the verdict is handed down?”

“A trial?” the knight replied with a chillingly cold glare. “You think you’re in a position to demand a trial?”

“What? What are you saying?!” General Albrecht forgot he had just been arrested and tried to grab the knight. “I surrendered! I have a right to a fair trial!”

He only surrendered because he thought doing so would make Princess Lupis put him on trial. He wouldn't be killed with no questions asked, and his safety would be guaranteed until the trial is decided. He counted on the princess's kindness and gullibility, believing that, if nothing else, at least his family would be spared.

But this was all completely overturned.

"What is the meaning of this?! Did the princess— did Princess Lupis order this?!"

If that was the case, then General Albrecht had completely misjudged Lupis Rhoadserians as a person.

That's impossible, that woman doesn't have the capacity to order something like that...!

When taken too far, mercy was nothing more than naivete, and that was why General Albrecht only ever saw Lupis as a puppet to manipulate. If she really was capable of this, then General Albrecht had voluntarily walked into his own shameful, infuriating death.

Reality was even more heartless than he had imagined, though.

"No, that's wrong!"

The knights surrounding Albrecht stepped aside, clearing the way. And down the path they opened walked a knight in white, clad in ebony armor, helmet and cape, in a composed step.

"You seem to be misunderstanding things... General Albrecht."

"That voice... And that armor!" General Albrecht turned pale. "You're Helena... Helena Steiner! How can you be here...?! You should be in the attack on Heraklion!"

The knight removed her helmet, indeed revealing herself to be Helena Steiner.

"Lady Helena Steiner? Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War?"

"Is this... really Lady Helena?"

Albrecht's wife and daughter blurted out in surprise at Helena's sudden appearance. They didn't expect to meet a national hero here. Helena gave a gentle nod at the two women's direction and raised a finger to her lips to hush them. She then returned her gaze to General Albrecht.

"Did you think I could not predict what you'll be thinking?"

"You're saying you anticipated what I'd do?! That's impossible...! You could never do that!" Albrecht raised his voice angrily.

For many years, Albrecht had looked down on Helena as a lowly peasant, so he could never admit she saw through him so thoroughly.

"My... You're as blind to reality as ever, I see. You overestimate your own abilities and look down on the skill of others... You haven't changed one bit since the day we first met. But in reality, I have you captured and pinned down here. Isn't that all that matters?"

"Shut up, you filthy plebe! I am... I am a descendant to house Albrecht! I cannot lose to the likes of you!"

Helena met Albrecht's shout with a bitter smile.

You stupid man... You have ambition, wits, power and pedigree... How can someone blessed with so much talent be so foolish...?

"Not by you! Not by a plebeian like you...! You can never and will never be better than me!"

"You pathetic man... That's why the former general nominated me as his successor over you. He knew your belief that you're privileged, and that your conceit would eat away at this country... And he was right! Look around you! Look at how every knight standing here looks upon you!"

"Shut up! The former general had no eye for people! If he did, he never would have chosen a commoner like you over an heir to house Albrecht...! All of you! Don't you think this is wrong?! That proud knights of Rhoadseria like you should have to be bossed around by a plebeian woman?!" Albrecht shouted and looked around.

But none of the knights agreed with him. If anything, they all eyed him with

cold loathing.

“Wh-What’s gotten into all of you? Why are you looking at me like that?!”

The way the knights looked at Albrecht... It was the same gaze with which he looked down on the commoners. The only difference is that they were also thick with the hatred and scorn of the oppressed.

“You stupid, pitiful excuse of a man... They’re all low-ranking knights, of common descent. The very people you and the noble knights oppressed and extorted... You think they’re going to sympathize with you? In the end, you really can’t see past anything. You simply sit crossed-legged on your throne of status and pedigree, and never once stop to think of the people supporting your weight!”

Even among knights, some were children of longstanding houses of knights, while others were commoners who worked their way up to knighthood with sheer effort. However, the commoner knights had to pass through a gate of entry with a far, far smaller threshold. And that still required back-breaking effort to achieve.

But in Rhoadseria, even those who put in all that effort are faced with a distinct wall separating them from knights of noble birth. Seeing those of common birth struggle to finally attain some merit to their name, only to have it snatched away by a knight of noble birth, was an everyday occurrence.

The ones chosen to stand proudly in marching parades were always knights of noble descent. Meanwhile, those of common birth were left behind to do the chores backstage. Some of the knights present even had their lovers forcibly snatched away by a colleague.

Any attempt to report this corruption was only met with the guilt being pinned on them instead. Some were even outright court martialed for their trouble. The noble knights were always the ones to take the credit, while the commoner knights handled all the dirty work and took all the blame.

And all of that was because the general standing at the top, Hodram Albrecht, was a privileged, prejudiced, hard-headed knight of noble birth. The man in charge being corrupted meant his subordinates would inevitably be just as rotten.

“Shut up! We are not equal!” Albrecht’s emotions were getting the better of him, and his face was turning red with anger. “You commoners being allowed to become knights was a mistake to begin with! We merely let you become knights out of pity, so shut up, keep your heads down and do as we say!”

The things he was saying were growing incoherent, but everyone present understood what he was trying to say. That commoner knights should obey noble knights, like him.

“You really are an infuriating fool...” Helena said. “But, well, so be it... Today is the last time we’ll need to put up with your unpleasant attitudes...”

“You idiot! Do you intend to break national law...?!” Albrecht was unable to withhold his shock. “I have a right to stand trial!”

He himself had broken multiple rules until now. He unjustly distributed his human resources, sending people he didn’t like to guard remote regions. He embezzled military funds and took bribes from his personal merchants. He set up colleagues who got in the way of his promotions and pinned all the blame on them.

But when his life was approaching its end, he depended on the law. It didn’t matter how unreasonable of an act it was, because that was the only thing he had left to cling to.

“Oh, make no mistake,” Helena said with a smile outright dripping with irony. “It will go down in the records that Hodram Albrecht pretended to surrender, only to attempt murder on Helena Steiner. Left with no choice, she had to kill him in self-defense. And his family was cut down by the knights who assisted in his escape. And all of this is done... by the methods you were always so skilled at using... See?”

“That’s insane! Y-You call that justice?!”

“Justice? No, this isn’t justice... This is revenge... For the husband and daughter you took from me.”

Albrecht’s expression froze over at those words. His wife and daughter reacted with horrified shock.

“What are you saying?! I have no idea what you mean! I know nothing about

your family!”

“Don’t try it... Five years ago, I beat it out of the slave merchant you hired, Heinz. And I have the witness who helped question him back then.”

One of Helena’s aides, standing at her side, nodded.

“I know nothing! I don’t know any Heinz! He was executed already, anyway! How can you prove it?! This testimony isn’t worth anything!”

“Beloved... What is she saying? Did you really... do that to Lady Helena’s family...?”

“Father...?”

Albrecht’s family looked at him with gazes of indignant doubt.

“Why are you looking at me like that?! I said I don’t know anything! Do you not believe your own father?!”

But the more he tried to make excuses, the colder their gazes became. It was obvious to everyone that Albrecht did it.

“You’re right. It can’t serve as proof... But you see, I don’t need proof. I just want to kill you...”

“You...” Albrecht finally noticed the madness in Helena’s eyes.

And at that moment he realized. Nothing he will do or say will help him escape her blade.

“Don’t worry... We’ll give your wife and daughter a quick death...” Helena said and drew her sword. “My daughter had to be raped to death by a slave merchant, but... That’s fine. I’ll forgive them with this.”

She then walked over to his wife and daughter.

“Wait! They have nothing to do with this!”

Albrecht tried to jump and stand in her way, but the knights pinned him down.

“Oh, I’d say they have everything to do with this. They’re your family.”

“Wait, someone! Anyone!” Albrecht cried out desperately for help. “Stop her!

Sh-She can’t get away with this!”

But none of the two hundred people present would lend him an ear. They all wanted him and his family dead.

“No... Please... Help me...” Tears welled up in his daughter’s eyes.

She realized the severity of her father’s sin, and just how hated he was by everyone else. The fact that none of the knights present showed her any mercy was proof of that.

“Goodbye... You’ve done nothing wrong, but... Luck wasn’t on your side. I’ll at least make sure you don’t suffer...”

“Stooooooooooop!”

Albrecht’s scream echoed in vain. Helena brandished her sword up grandly, and then swung it down at the girl’s neck. The daughter’s body grew limp at once, falling backwards to the ground, smearing it with crimson blood. Helena then swung her blade back, this time cutting his wife through the heart.

“You bitch! My wife! My daughter! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill youuuu!” Albrecht hollered, his eyes wide with rage and saliva frothing from his mouth.

But several knights held him down, and he couldn’t budge at all. His eyes alone burned with black, raging flames of anger.

“Yes! Those are the words I wanted to hear! This is why I clung to life until now!” Helena said with an innocent smile as she walked up to Albrecht.

Now... It’s over... It’s finally over... Beloved... Salia... You can rest in peace now, right...? Your grudges are finally repaid...

She was finally about to be set free of the regrets and resentment she had to carry for a decade. She could see her husband and daughter in her mind’s eye.

“This is how it all ends... Hodram Albrecht!” Helena held up her sword.

“Damn it! Not to you! Not to a commoner!”

This was how Hodram Albrecht, general of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria and ringleader of the rebellion, met his end. And this was also how the civil war that tormented Rhoadseria for months came to a close.

Chapter 5: A New Battlefield

“...What am I to do...?”

Princess Lupis turned her gaze outside the window of her room in the capital of Pireas. She was dressed in a pure white dress with a deep cleavage, which accentuated her feminine beauty. Her ladylike grace was such that one wouldn’t believe that just a few days earlier, she was the same princess general who strode through the battlefield in full armor.

However, the sorrow in her eyes deprived her beauty of any brightness. A deep sigh escaped her lips. Outside the window, the tumult of the cheering townsfolk reached as far as the castle. They all rejoiced, filled with hope at the end of the rebellion and the beginning of Princess Lupis’s rule.

With Helena’s sword claiming the lives of General Albrecht and his family, Rhoadseria’s civil war ended. Having joined the rebels halfway through the conflict, General Albrecht was killed, and the true ringleader, Duke Gelhart survived. There were certainly some parts to the story Princess Lupis wasn’t quite satisfied with.

But she couldn’t deny that with Albrecht’s death, Rhoadseria managed to preserve its dignity. All that mattered for the majority of the citizens was that the villain of the conflict was brought to justice by their new queen, and that the fighting had come to an end.

A month had passed since the rebellion ended. But rather than being as hopeful as the people around her, Princess Lupis’s heart was tormented by anxiety.

“Father... am I truly a rightful ruler for this country...? Am I truly, when every action that man takes makes me waver so much...?” Lupis asked her father, time and time again.

A dead man, however, couldn’t offer her any answers. She asked her father, knowing he couldn’t answer. That alone displayed how wrought with concern her heart was.

Another sigh escaped her lips.

“Your Highness...” Meltina watched her sorrowfully.

With Lupis’s coming coronation, Meltina would be inaugurated as captain of the royal guard. Normally, she would have to attend to the duties of that role, but she remained at Lupis’s side all the same. She served as her aide, doubling as her personal secretary and escort, and so taking over the role of captain of the royal guard wasn’t all that difficult for her.

But right now, Meltina cared more for Lupis’s anxieties and how to dispel them even a little bit.

Sentencing Sir Mikhail to house arrest was a painful blow, indeed... I’m not sure that I alone can support her... But...

In terms of smarts, Meltina wasn’t much different from Mikhail, but he was ten years her elder, and that wasn’t an age difference one could simply disregard. Meltina was quite the prominent knight, but Mikhail also had more influence over the knights, too.

The civil war ended, and Lupis was about to be made into Rhoadseria’s new sovereign. But that didn’t mean the foundation of her administration was solidified. She needed trustworthy people to make her rule firm. But Mikhail was under indefinite house arrest in his estate in the capital.

When the rebellion came to a close, Duke Gelhart abided by his promise and released Mikhail from his custody. Lupis and Meltina had considered returning him to his former station, of course, but those around them didn’t approve of that.

Ryoma hadn’t done anything wrong in particular here. Mikhail’s punishment was postponed to begin with, anyway. He was only spared with the expectation that his future accomplishments would offset his failures. But he failed a second time, breaking orders and acting on his own authority in an impatient scramble to gain merit.

Try as they might to protect him, Lupis and Meltina couldn’t spare Mikhail from Count Bergstone and the rest of the neutral faction’s questioning.

“Meltina, is it really impossible to reinstate Mikhail...?” Lupis asked for what

was probably the dozenth time. “We can demote him if need be, but perhaps we should undo his house arrest...”

It had been half a month since Mikhail was sentenced to house arrest, and she’d asked that question time and again since. Meltina held back a sigh as she shook her head silently.

“Even your word cannot allow it... I would personally love to do so, of course, but...”

Meltina truly wished to grant Lupis’s desire here. She doubted his being here would help that much to solving any problems, but he could at least serve as emotional support for Lupis. To that end, Meltina wanted him restored to his position just the same.

But that wasn’t something she could approve of given the circumstances. In truth, Princess Lupis’s actions here were quite problematic. As trusted of a knight as he may be, she couldn’t allow him to evade punishment after failing twice.

His first blunder of falling for Kael’s ploy may have been pardoned yet. But his second failure was a fatal one. Worse yet, in so doing he broke away from their original plan and consequently cost them their chance to crush Duke Gelhart.

Some among the top brass even called for him to be executed. So lifting his house arrest was impossible, even with Princess Lupis’s authority. The foundation of her administration wasn’t solid yet, so she couldn’t afford to do anything that would shake the validity of her rule.

“Yes... You’re right... I’m sorry, Meltina. I shouldn’t have said that...”

Lupis understood that perfectly well. The problem was that even if her mind understood that, her emotions weren’t satisfied with this situation. Meltina sighed internally.

“But enough about Mikhail for now... What of that other matter I mentioned?” Lupis asked Meltina, actively trying to shift her emotions.

Mikhail wasn’t her only problem, after all.

“You mean Ryoma Mikoshiba...? Well, it isn’t going well... We could easily

make him a knight on a commanding officer's level, but when it comes to a posting that would truly suit his achievements..."

"I see..." Lupis frowned at Meltina's answer.

The problem at hand was how they were to handle Ryoma going forward. Princess Lupis has already helped him with his initial problem. Using the kingdom as her backing, she proved his innocence. But following that, he planned to leave the country.

Soon after the rebellion ended, Lupis used her position as princess to send messengers to the many guilds' offices, so they could clarify his situation. With that, Ryoma Mikoshiba and his allies were admitted to not be guilty. Their only complaint was that there was no evidence of foul play on the side of Wallace Heinkel, guildmaster of the town of Pherzaad. It was seen as a procedural error, and he wasn't punished in any way. With Kael dying in battle against Ryoma, finding a testimony that would prove it was difficult.

The other guildmasters weren't keen on condemning one of their own without any evidence. There was no way of punishing him in reality. Still, Ryoma's innocence was proven, and so Lupis had completed her promise.

And that was why Ryoma and his allies had no reason to stay in the kingdom for long, and they could leave the country at any time. No one would have the right to stop them, either. And yet, Ryoma was still in the castle, here in the city of Pireas.

That was because Lupis insisted that he stay until her coronation.

"The knights are not seeing it favorably... Both the commoner and noble-born knights regard the idea negatively..."

"Right..."

"Giving a person who isn't even a citizen of the kingdom an important post in national defense is probably unacceptable to too many people... At least, so I'd assume, but it's reasoning that's hard to refute. Still, letting a man of his caliber into the knights would result in one important post being manned. He'd only stand in the way of those aiming to climb up the ranks, so that's probably part of the reason they're refusing..."

Lupis's expression clouded over at Meltina's explanation. Lupis feared Ryoma greatly, and that fear surged up all the more fiercely. At this moment, when she was before her coronation despite having been in a position of total inferiority, she was more terrified than ever before.

"Were it up to me, I would have that man serve as knight by your side, Your Highness... But that man has no respect or loyalty towards you or Rhoadseria. He only acts in the service of his own ends... I've observed him over the last few months, and that is my impression of him. If nothing else, I think having him serve as a knight for the royal house is dangerous... But all the same..."

She held Ryoma Mikoshiba's abilities in high regard, and even those who were against his appointment agreed with that. In terms of skill alone, he was more than good enough to serve as a knight, or even more than that.

But the fact he wasn't trustworthy lowered their overall appraisal of him. Knights were the sword and shield of the kingdom, a crucial fighting force to ensure the ruler can keep the country under his control. But what if that force were controlled by someone who cannot be trusted? They'd simply relapse to the way things were during General Albrecht's tenure. The king would become a puppet to the military and the country would be cast into disorder.

Lupis needed to rearrange how the country worked from now on, and to that end, a person who cannot be trusted could not be promoted to the rank of knight. This was both her opinion, and the opinion of all of Rhoadseria's leading figures.

"But... The one thing we can't let him do is leave the country like this!" Lupis raised her shaking voice in denial. "We absolutely can't...! If he takes the side of another country..."

In the end, this was what her fear boiled down to. He couldn't be trusted to an important position under her, but at the same time letting him out of Rhoadseria was dangerous.

"I know... And I agree with you, Your Highness..." Meltina parted her lips with hesitation. "But I believe that if this is the case, we must... Hmm..."

Lupis deftly picked up on what Meltina was trying to say.

“No... That alone is something I can’t approve of.” She shook her head in denial, which made Meltina fall quiet.

Silence settled over the two. The measure Meltina didn’t quite put into words was one which the other leading figures of Rhoadseria had already proposed before.

Assassination.

Indeed, if they killed Ryoma, they wouldn’t have to worry about him joining another country and would be able to sleep soundly at night.

That much is obvious... But he hasn’t turned against us yet, and he’s kept his promise to me. So can I really reward him for that not with gratitude, but with his death? And besides...

Lupis was kind, for better and for worse. But most of all, she was intelligent enough. If she were foolish, she would simply fulfill her promise to Ryoma and send him on his way. If she were a viler person, she would have disregarded it and ordered his assassination.

Her intelligence prevented her from sending him away from the country, but her being kind forbade her from having him assassinated. And at the same time, they couldn’t let this vagabond be appointed to the position of a knight.

But there was another reason Princess Lupis didn’t choose the option of assassination. A reason she kept hidden in her heart at all costs...

If we choose to have him assassinated, can our knights truly kill him? What if... What if they fail, and he realizes I was the one who ordered it...?

Of course, the kingdom’s army put together would easily defeat Ryoma Mikoshiba as an individual. One man can’t stand up to a country. But he could escape. If one were to think of it rationally, the probability of him successfully escaping was below one in ten thousand.

But it wasn’t zero.

And she could feel Ryoma Mikoshiba had something that would reel that probability in. Same as how he made Lupis the queen of this country...

That man... He’d never forgive me...

That fear bound Lupis's heart like a chain.

"My apologies, Your Highness... Sir Sudou wishes to speak with you. Should I show him in?"

The silence hanging between Lupis and Meltina was disturbed by a maid knocking on the door. Meltina confirmed that Lupis nodded in affirmation.

"Let him through." Meltina said.

The door then opened, and Sudou entered, clad in a noble's tunic.

"My apologies, Your Highness... Oh? You look quite concerned," Sudou said upon entering. "That simply won't do... You'll cloud over your fair face. It may be presumptuous of me, but I could give you my counsel, should you wish for it, Your Highness... No, pardon. Your Majesty."

He never was one for manners, but this time he went too far.

"How dare you speak to Her Highness so rudely?!" Meltina drew her sword.

Few people would blame her for her short temper given the situation. Sudou's attitude was far too impolite to be used before royalty.

"Put your sword away, Meltina... Sudou. You should learn some proper etiquette. I'll overlook it this time, but next time you won't be so lucky," Lupis said menacingly.

Sudou bowed his head respectfully at her words, though both of them understood it was only for form's sake.

"Fine... So, to what do I owe your visit? I'm quite busy, so do make it brief."

Lupis granted Sudou permission to take a seat, and cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"Not to worry, I won't take much of your time. I simply thought you seemed to be troubled over dealing with the aftermath of the war and thought I could do away with some of your concerns, assuming you would grant me the time to do so."

Lupis exchanged a glance with Meltina. She didn't quite understand what Sudou was saying. Meltina was caught off guard too, however, and couldn't find

the right words.

“I see... That’s very encouraging...” Lupis said suspiciously. “But do you even know what’s bothering me, Sudou?”

“Certainly. Or rather, I’m sure any person with a bit of observation would come to this conclusion... You’re worried over how to deal with Ryoma Mikoshiba, yes?”

Lupis desperately suppressed the shudder that ran through her. As the ruler of a kingdom, she couldn’t make her anxieties so clear.

Don’t, Lupis! You can’t let this man see through you. Calm down... Stay calm!

“Whatever do you mean, Sudou?” Lupis cocked her head questioningly, as if asking why he would say that.

Of course, from Sudou’s perspective, her acting was on par with third rate theater.

“My... So I was wrong... Then I apologize to have taken up this moment of your precious time.”

Sudou said and rose to his feet.

Lupis and Meltina went pale.

“Wait, Sir Sudou...” Meltina aptly stopped Sudou. “Her Highness has given up time out of her busy schedule to hear what you have to say. How dare you leave of your own accord?!”

Meltina’s wit was like a child’s prank to Sudou.

“Pardon? But if Her Highness’ concerns don’t have to do with Ryoma Mikoshiba and his treatment... Then my being here is meaningless. I can’t take any more of her precious time. I will have to beg your pardon, in that case.”

On the surface, his words seemed quite modest, but a single look at Sudou’s eyes made it clear this wasn’t his true intent. He was teasing Lupis and Meltina. Lupis was quite interested in what he had to say, as it could lead to her finding a way out of this stalemate. But she couldn’t let slip the fact that she was wavering over how to answer the question of Ryoma Mikoshiba’s treatment.

“That’s right... Sudou, I’ll hear you out, since I’ve already given up some of my time for you. Speak,” Lupis ordered Sudou, putting up airs to the best of her ability.

“I see. Well, since I’m already here...”

Sudou decided now was the right time and sat back down on the sofa, sneering as he parted his lips to speak.

“Well, I think it’s quite clear that the question of how to handle Ryoma Mikoshiba is a complicated one given the situation. Were he loyal to the kingdom, you could make him a knight, but he’s a mercenary, so that complicates things. But that said, letting him leave the country is a risk on its own, since he might join another country’s side, just as he joined yours... There’s no telling when he might turn against Rhoadseria.”

As he spoke, the two’s eyes widened with surprise. He had guessed at their concerns with pinpoint precision.

“You can’t make him a knight, but you can’t send him away either. But you can’t have him killed, too... Killing a man with so many merits to his name may help you for a time, but would spell trouble in the future.”

Sudou cut off his words, and examined Lupis’s expression with an upturned gaze.

Hmm... It really is too much for her, just as I thought. Well, a man who can fight Shardina equally is indeed beyond this woman’s ability to control... However...

Sudou’s eyes coldly gauged Lupis’s abilities.

“Hmm... And? How do you intend to resolve that?” Lupis said, feigning disinterest.

She knew there was little point to hiding it, but clung to it.

“You cannot make him a knight, and you cannot let him leave for another country.” Sudou smiled. “Then simply make him a noble.”

Lupis was dumbstruck by his words, as was Meltina, who was standing at her side.

“Impossible...” Meltina was struggling to even put what he just said into words. “What are you saying, fool? Make a commoner... A vagabond mercenary... into a noble?”

Sudou nodded.

“Do you take us for fools?!” Meltina’s shout echoed in the room. “We can’t possibly do that! No... Even if we could, the nobles would never accept that! Who would acknowledge a commoner being made noble?! Making him a knight is more realistic than that!”

Lupis could only nod in agreement.

“And what of his territory?! Do you intend to give him one of the royal house’s territories?!”

Nobles needed territory to govern. Of course, it was possible to give some of the land under the royal house’s direct control and the ones obtained in the civil war. But that would mean the royal house wouldn’t grow stronger that way. Lupis intended to use the civil war as a chance to unify the country entirely under her sovereignty, and she needed land to do that.

With more land under its control, the royal house would grow financially and in terms of population. It would give it the strength to fight back with the knights by its side should the nobles unite against it again.

But between those aspirations and the nobles’ sentiments toward commoners, making Ryoma a new noble was impossible.

Sudou had already predicted these apprehensions. He took out a map from his pocket and spread it over the table.

“What’s this? A map of the western continent’s eastern side?” Lupis asked.

Sudou nodded and placed his finger on a single point on the map.

“Let us make Sir Mikoshiba governor of this territory. What say you? If it’s here, it won’t take away from the royal house’s territories, and none of the nobles should object... On top of that, there’s a low chance of a rebellion breaking out there. As for his title... Hmm. How about we give him the lowest title possible and make him a baron? Though in terms of the size of his territory,

he’d probably need to be a duke, but the place being what it is...”

Sudou’s proposal left Lupis and Meltina without words. The territory he specified was a massive strip of land, approximately an eighth of Rhoadseria’s total territory. Giving so much land to a commoner who was just made noble would be insanity in any other situation. But like Sudou said, there was no chance of the nobles objecting to this. After all, absolutely no one was interested in governing this land...

“The Wortenia peninsula...” The words slithered from Lupis’s lips.

The wheel of fate once again began to turn for Ryoma Mikoshiba...

Lying on his bed in Pireas’s castle, Ryoma stared up into thin air.

So this is how it ends, huh... Guess I ended up being naive after all...

Princess Lupis’s stiff facial expression surfaced in Ryoma’s mind.

That morning, he was summoned for an audience with Princess Lupis. There, he was bestowed the title of baron and the right to govern over the Wortenia peninsula. This was something Ryoma didn’t anticipate whatsoever. He was, in fact, on the cusp of proposing to the Malfist sisters that they pack up and leave the country already.



All the same, he didn’t refuse the reward. And that was because Ryoma had realized it. The fear hidden behind Lupis’s eyes...

If Ryoma were to refuse the reward, Meltina would immediately order the room’s guards to attack him. They feared Ryoma that much. And having picked up on that, Ryoma avoided giving an immediate answer. His first priority was to figure out just what the catch here was.

Even if I can’t say no, there are ways of dealing with this... First, I need to figure out what their angle is.

Ryoma suppressed the doubts rising up in him, and expressed his gratitude to Princess Lupis. He had to do so, if he was to leave the audience alive...

The Wortenia peninsula, eh...? That’s quite the funny trick that little bitch pulled on me...

Recalling the events of that morning, Ryoma cursed Lupis in his heart. There was no one in this room but him. He drove even the Malfist sisters, who were always waiting on him, out of the room, and took the time to contemplate things.

The red sunlight of dusk poured in from the window, painting Ryoma red. His expression was as cold as ice, but his eyes burned with dark flames of anger.

He was enraged at being bitterly betrayed by a person he trusted. He kept his heart in check, but hatred for Lupis kept bubbling up within him, alongside self-deprecation. He couldn’t help but be mad at himself for being dumb enough to believe someone as stupid as her.

Those two emotions mixed together, raging inside Ryoma’s heart. How easy it would be if he could simply put those emotions into voice and scream. But Ryoma couldn’t afford to let those feelings show. At least for now... After all, the owner of this castle, and the future queen of this country, had betrayed him.

The walls have ears, after all... I can’t be too cautious here... And there’s no telling if there are any peepholes into this room. It’d be bad news if they notice I’m displeased here. And this situation is far worse compared to when I killed that geezer, Gaius...

The cold facts surfaced in Ryoma's mind one after another. Escaping the O'ltormea Empire was hard, but he'd had a lot of things go in his favor. This time wasn't like that, though. The conditions were all too different. There was no realistic way for him to escape.

For starters, my face and name are too well known... And even if I escape this place, Lupis will just reach for the guild, and that'll screw me over in its own way... If nothing else, I won't be able to take any work through the guild.

Lupis's letter was what made the guild pardon Ryoma's group, proving their innocence. But put another way, if Lupis were to say 'I know nothing of this letter' or 'I was asked to write a fallacious letter,' everything could be turned on its head. Any innocence they gained through Lupis's words could lose its credibility with a single contrasting testimony from her.

Shit... The royals having all this power just complicates everything...

Recalling how he rejoiced at having their innocence proven made him sick to his stomach. Maybe that was his just desserts for looking down on the authority of royalty. For better or worse, the strength of a country is vast. It was a power that could just as well allow one to say the sky is green and that grass is blue.

I should have just bailed from this country as soon as I could... But no, that wouldn't have been possible. They have knights watching over me 24/7, ready to kill me if I even try to escape... Dammit! I really am one oblivious idiot... I shouldn't have swallowed Lupis's stupid words. "I want you to see the moment I'm coronated," she said! That cheeky, condescending bitch...

He'd intended to leave the country as soon as the rebellion ended, and that was why Ryoma took every means possible to win. He avoided making any needless connections with the nobles, and admonished anything that went against Lupis's will without any hesitation. He literally cared nothing for how he looked to everyone around him.

But the debt for those actions was now hanging over him, and it was a heavy debt indeed. It had now been over a month since the civil war came to an end, and Ryoma remained in the castle even with his vindication to the guild complete. That was all because Queen Lupis pressed him to do so.

Ryoma's first hint was just a sign of anxiety, of fear at having to carry the

responsibilities of a country. With Mikhail, her confidant, now forced to house arrest, Ryoma thought his staying in the country might alleviate some of her stress. And that small hint of sympathy had come back to bite him viciously.

It's been over a month since the rebellion ended... And now I'm entirely on the back foot.

Ryoma spent most of this month in his room in the castle. He'd feast himself on lavish food, and then work up a sweat by practicing martial arts against Lione or the Malfist sisters. If he was truly left with too much free time, he'd talk to Boltz or Gennou about some trifling topic or another.

Those were the first days he'd spent since being summoned to this world when his heart was truly at peace.

But all of that was based on his planning to eventually leave the country. Had Ryoma taken into account he would have to stay in Rhoadseria, he wouldn't have spent those days so idly.

Right now, Ryoma needed silence to confront his own heart. Ryoma silently but surely analyzed the situation.

I never thought she'd break her promise... No, I deliberately ignored that possibility... I guess I underestimated her... Or put another way, overestimated her kindness...

He could faintly tell that she was scared of him, and that was part of why Ryoma didn't intend to stay. But that wasn't enough to do away with Lupis's fear.

The Wortenia peninsula... Honestly speaking, it's one hell of a promotion. But I don't see Lupis doing that for me right now... After all, making a commoner into a noble would cause a lot of resistance. And Lupis's right to the throne is unstable, so there's no way she'd make me a noble now... Unless there was a catch.

Ryoma was given a noble title and territory. Normally, this would be a great honor, but Ryoma wasn't foolish enough to simply accept it at face value. Without any warning, Queen Lupis went against her promise and pushed a title and territory onto him. Had she truly wanted Ryoma Mikoshiba to lend her his

strength, she wouldn't have gone about it like this.

It would have been reasonable to tell him directly that she wanted his strength going forward. But between his own situation, the kingdom of Rhoadseria's current status and Queen Lupis's attitude and the way she looked at him, Ryoma could piece together her true intent.

I get it... She wants to keep me pinned down, to seal me.

It made no sense for someone who was so afraid of him to make him a noble. In which case, if she were to make him a noble, it was likely she'd place some kind of limitation on him.

The first thing that comes to mind is the Wortenia peninsula itself... There's a good chance the place itself is problematic, somehow. Like, it could be bordering another country, so it's in constant strife, or something like that... But since they want to push it onto me, I can't just say no. I'll need a reason to refuse... A legitimate reason... So how do I find one?

He'd need a very good reason to refuse a title and plot of land given to him by a queen in a way that wouldn't tarnish her honor. Refusing for no reason would drag her name through the mud. Naturally, Ryoma didn't care in the slightest for Lupis's dignity at this point, but what would happen if he did that anyway? Lupis would simply have him killed out of spite.

Whether he accepted the offer or rejected it, all that awaited Ryoma would be hell.

"In the end, I'm just... weak." Words of self-derision escaped Ryoma's lips.

Ryoma was being crushed by the overwhelming authority of a country. He could beat her as an individual, but he couldn't defy her orders. Even if he were to try, it wouldn't do him any good. And that just meant Ryoma was weaker than Lupis.

What was he to do, then?

The only thing that can match a country... is another country.

An idea popped up in Ryoma's mind.

"You seem concerned, milord." Someone's voice drew Ryoma from his

thoughts.

Ryoma rose from his bed swiftly and glared at the voice's owner.

"How did you get in here, Gennou?"

"From that door over yonder..." Gennou replied calmly. "I suppose I did neglect to knock first."

"What's the big idea? I didn't call for you."

"Come now, no need to be like that, milord." Shrugging away Ryoma's words, Gennou sat on a chair. "I've taken the liberty of confirming the situation for myself. The Wortenia peninsula... You've had quite the troublesome plot of land forced upon you..."

"How do you know that?" Ryoma's eyes narrowed.

He hadn't even told the sisters about it, and yet this old man knew.

"The cloak and dagger are my livelihood, milord. Seeking out information like this is child's play for me."

"Yeah... I suppose that's right." Ryoma nodded.

They were a clan of shinobi. Spying out information was second nature to them.

"Do not dwell on it... The twin lasses asked this of me. Said that your demeanor today is odd, they did, and asked that Sakuya and I look into it."

"The twins asked you to do that?"

Gennou nodded deeply. In all likelihood, the Malfist sisters had picked up on the change in Ryoma's expression and asked Gennou for help. Their attention and consideration were praiseworthy.

"Then you understand the situation?" Ryoma asked, sighing all the while.

"Aye..." Gennou stroked his mustache. "'Tis a bothersome conundrum, indeed. But in a way, it is also a stroke of luck."

"Luck? You call this luck?!" Ryoma raised his voice despite himself.

Lupis's plot here was obvious, and he was anxious about the land he was

being forced to accept. Every single factor in this entire business was shrouded in uncertainty. But Gennou shook his head silently.

“Milord... Take Lupis up on her offer, ulterior motives and all. And then use it to build up your strength.”

Ryoma couldn’t easily accept Gennou’s words. He himself considered that idea, but there was one factor Ryoma had absolutely no control over on his own.

“Do you not trust us?” Gennou’s words cut to the heart of the matter, as if he’d read Ryoma’s feelings from his expression. “Our wills are already decided. Lione and Boltz, and of course the lasses and us...”

With those words, the room’s door swung open, and Lione, Boltz, Sakuya and the twins entered the room.

“Ya heard him... Why didn’t you ask me to come along, boy?”

“We’ll follow you through thick and thin, lad!”

Like Gennou said, it seemed that they had already steeled their collective resolve. Ryoma felt his expression slacken.

“I mean, I can’t promise anything... I’m just a commoner who doesn’t have the first idea about how to govern a province.”

Gennou nodded silently. They still believed in Ryoma Mikoshiba in spite of that.

“Still! To think she’s treating ya like this after all the help you gave her...” Lione said, reflecting the thoughts of everyone present. “I swear, nobles are all a bunch of real shitheads!”

They then all huddled around the table, beginning to plan their next step. The highest priority at the moment was the answer to Lupis tomorrow. The deadline was tomorrow at noon. Until then, Ryoma would need to decide if he were to accept the title and land. They would probably need to stay up all night to come up with a countermeasure.

“I guess she has her position to consider,” Ryoma said with a certain coldness to his voice.

He could afford to let his anger show a little more.

“Doesn’t it piss ya off?” Lione turned a probing glance at Ryoma.

“Well, yeah... I was pissed at first. But if they’re going to be like this, I don’t have to show them any mercy, either,” Ryoma smirked.

The moment Lione saw that smile, she felt something cold slither down her spine. That was a demon’s smile. A smile of malice and hatred... Born of a deep darkness, full of ambition.

I get where you’re coming from, Lupis... But you betrayed me... So I’ll make sure you pay the price! And then...

In this world, only the strong survived. And countries were one of the strongest forces in this world. One could be as skilled and witty as they wished, but there was no opposing the might of a country. Only a country could defeat another country, but making another country like the ones that already exist in this world would be meaningless.

Ryoma’s image of what an ideal country would be was still hazy, and its form was far from fleshed out.

But with these guys by my side...

On that night, the lantern lighting up the room wasn’t put out until the break of dawn.

“And that’s all... Do you understand, Your Highness?” Sudou asked Princess Shardina, who sat in the chair opposite his.

The place was Shardina’s office in O’ltormea’s capital. Placed on her desk was Sudou’s interim report detailing his infiltration of Rhoadseria.

“I see, so everything is going smoothly overall for now... There have been quite a few unpredictable factors, but it looks like weakening Rhoadseria won’t be a problem... Did anything stand out to you in this conversation, Saitou?”

Shardina turned to Saitou, who stood at her side.

“Well, thanks to Mr. Sudou we managed to move along with minimal revisions to the plan. Had Duke Gelhart died, Princess Radine, whom he backed, would also be disposed of as a rebel. So the fact that you managed to get out of

that situation with both of them alive... I can only applaud you, as always. Gelhart aside, Radine was one marionette that cost us a good deal of money."

"No, no, it wasn't all my efforts." Sudou smiled at the praise he'd just received. "That princess... Well, I suppose she's a queen now. It all comes down to her being foolish. As close an aide as he may be, placing that much value on the life of a single knight is truly an act of stupidity."

Sudou spoke modestly, but his eyes glinted with confidence at the effectiveness of his ploys. Perhaps this was a show of that particular form of restraint so characteristic of the Japanese, even if it was only a surface-level facade.

Shardina knew full well that Sudou was a confident and haughty man. His arrogant attitude right now stood as a symbol of that.

"She's intelligent enough, but lacking in decisiveness... Put simply, she's a kind, foolish person."

Sudou's appraisal of Lupis was merciless. He scorned her from the bottom of his heart.

"Yes, I've looked over the report... Really, what was she thinking...? Though I suppose the enemy being foolish is good for us." Shardina shrugged with a smirk. "Though if she becomes too stupid, facing her would become boring."

Sudou nodded at Shardina's words, while Saitou grimaced before parting his lips to speak.

"I would think an opponent that resists too much is troublesome in its own way, no?"

"You mean him... Yes... I swear! That man always finds a way of meddling in our plans. I'm getting sick of him!" Recalling that largish, mature-faced man, Shardina shook her head in annoyance.

She could hardly be faulted for it. That man was the one topic she wished would never be brought up before her.

"Judging by Mr. Sudou's report, that man was mixed up in this whole incident by coincidence..." Saitou said. "He didn't take part in it with the intent of

meddling in the Empire's plans..."

"And that's what irritates me all the more!" Shardina raised her voice. "I was wondering where he'd run off to, only to find out he's taking part in the Rhoadserian civil war! And by coincidence, at that! He almost tore our plans into shambles without even knowing it! What is that man, some kind of curse cast against us?!"

"Perhaps you could call it fate..." Sudou said with a meaningful smile. "The man who killed Gaius ended up getting in the way of the plan Gaius proposed..."

"Fate, eh..." Shardina heaved a sigh.

The Rhoadserian Civil War was part of O'ltormea's plan to conquer the eastern regions, originally planned by the late Gaius. The Empire governed over the central regions of the western continent, and the north was under the control of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula. The west was under the control of the Holy Qwiltantia Empire. Currently, O'ltormea was plotting to invade the east while facing pressure from the two other countries.

This three-way war had lasted for some twenty years by now, and when two countries broke into a state of war, the remaining one would surely profit. That much was obvious to all, and so the tension between the three knew no end. They glared at each other from across their border, vigilantly waiting for an opening to present itself. It was obvious that a third country could possibly interfere.

And so Gaius, who was court thaumaturgist and a strategist for the empire, proposed a certain plot to break through this situation. Neither of the two other countries had the power to defeat O'ltormea, but allying with one of them to attack the other wasn't realistic. The three countries had long-standing grudges and complicated webs of vested interests to hold any chance of an alliance back.

And so, Gaius turned his gaze to the eastern regions of the continent. Whoever invaded and conquered the east would gain a lead in national power over the other two countries. So Gaius used his intelligence network to set his sights on the eastern regions. The southern regions were hotly contested, and

divided between fifteen small countries. Those countries' soldiers were well-trained and organized thanks to constant, repeating skirmishes.

But compared to that, the eastern regions were ruled by the three countries of Myest, Rhoadseria and Xarooda. All three had long rules, but relatively little experience in war.

To top it off, the class system was especially harsh in those countries, and the nobles' influence reached far. They tended to exploit the commoners. This meant that upon occupying their lands, a tax reduction would be all that would be necessary to satisfy the commoners.

Gaius's plan was immediately approved and ordered by the emperor. And the first step toward it was this strategy employed against Rhoadseria, which bordered on Xarooda. The fact they didn't begin immediately acting against their direct number, Xarooda, was a stroke of brilliance on Gaius's behalf.

Each of the three eastern countries' strength was insignificant compared to O'ltormea, but if they were to join forces, even the empire wouldn't be able to easily beat them. And so, to keep the countries divided, they decided to spark the rebellion in Rhoadseria.

"It was two years ago that Sudou found Radine on Gaius's order," Shardina said. "We then gradually weakened the last king, Pharst II, with poison, making it seem like he was dying out of illness. And then that man showed up, just as we were ready... Thanks to him, Gaius died and this plot was nearly driven into the ground... I suppose you could call that fate..."

Gaius summoning Ryoma Mikoshiba threw all their plans out of order.

"Indeed..." Saitou nodded deeply.

"And? What became of him?"

"Ryoma Mikoshiba, yes... That man is a real tricky one... Looking at it from just the conclusion, you could say everything turned out as we planned, but..." Sudou's words trailed off.

His expression made it clear he was doubting the choices he made.

"What? You forced the Wortenia peninsula onto him, right?"

“I did... That much went as I intended, but that man... He began bringing up extra conditions at the eleventh hour.”

“What do you mean?” Shardina asked with surprise. “He received the title of baron and the land of the Wortenia peninsula... What other conditions did he attach?”

“That was another display of his abilities.” Sudou nodded with a serious expression. “The way he spoke truly gouged at her weaknesses, leaving Lupis with no choice but to agree...”

And with that introduction, Sudou began relaying what happened during that fateful audience...

That day, Ryoma had promptly accepted the summons he’d received to Lupis’s audience chamber.

“Quite early, aren’t you, Mikoshiba... Do you have your answer?” Lupis asked, her expression stiff.

“Yes, Your Majesty... I was quite happy to receive your offer, and if it were possible, I’d be happy to oblige, but...”

Ryoma’s words trailed off, and he directed his gaze at Lupis. His eyes didn’t contain a trace of the rage they had yesterday, instead filled with pure respect for the queen.

“Should I take it that you refuse, Mikoshiba?” Lupis’s voice grew low and cold.

A queen had offered to make a commoner into a noble. He should be groveling on the ground in gratitude, but the man before her was implying he wanted to refuse. She said nothing, but her attitude made her heart clear to Ryoma.

Hmph... Stupid bitch.

Ryoma held back the desire to curse at her and continued his words, feigning sorrow.

“No, perish the thought... I’m quite overcome by your generosity, Your Majesty, but...”

“But what?”

“Before I can accept your gracious proposal, I’d like to confirm a few things with you... And until I can hear your answers, I’m afraid I can’t very well make a decision...”

Ryoma’s evasive words flared up Lupis’s irritation.

“Your Majesty...” Meltina, who stood next to the throne, whispered into Lupis’s ears. “I think you should at least hear what this man has to say... It would be better than him dancing around the issue like this...”

“Very well... What do you wish to know, Mikoshiba?”

Ryoma bowed his head with dignified gratitude at having received permission.

“I’d like to verify something first... How aware are you of the current condition of the Wortenia peninsula?”

“What do you mean?” Lupis’s expression clouded over.

Meltina, who stood beside her, grimaced as well.

“Of course, I can’t claim I know very much about it myself, but this Wortenia peninsula... is a rather problematic region.”

“My... Is it?” Lupis asked, giving the impression that this was the first she’d heard of it.

She wasn’t foolish enough to answer Ryoma’s question honestly, but then again, Ryoma fully assumed she would play dumb here.

“Unfortunately, yes... Upon receiving your proposal, I looked into the place as quickly as I could, but...” Ryoma turned a probing glance at Lupis. “The Wortenia peninsula is located on the northernmost tip of Rhoadseria, and it’s roughly one-eighth the total size of the kingdom... As territories go, its size is excessive... But there are quite a few issues here...”

Ryoma then began listing the peninsula’s problems, as follows.

First, it was used as a no-man’s land where Rhoadseria’s criminals were exiled. As such, it had absolutely zero citizens to claim taxes from.

Second, the Wortenia peninsula was a breeding ground for multiple strains of powerful monsters, making it extremely hard for ordinary people to live there.

Third, there were constant rumors of tribes of demi-humans living in the peninsula, who were antagonistic to humans.

Fourth, its coastal regions served as a stronghold for pirates.

Fifth, it bordered the neighboring country of Xarooda, which made it a site of incessant skirmishes.

Those were the five problems Ryoma mentioned. Each of them was a difficult issue that was quite hard to resolve, with the first and the second being particularly fatal. It meant that Lupis wanted to grant him a land where he couldn't collect any taxes.

Considering a noble's income came from the taxes he gathered from his people, it was clear just how much of a raw deal this was. This land wasn't really part of Rhoadseria's territory to begin with. On paper, the Wortenia peninsula was part of the kingdom of Rhoadseria, but it didn't rule over it in practice. It had no citizens, after all, so there was no one to govern over.

When Ryoma learned about it after a night of scanning over documents from the library, his expression was like that of an enraged demon. This was, in a way, tangible proof of Lupis's malice. Ryoma didn't display those emotions in front of her, though. The time to display his anger and hatred would come when he became stronger than her.

"I see. I'd expect as much from you, Sir Mikoshiba..." Meltina said in place of Lupis, who had fallen silent. "You've done well to grasp the peninsula's circumstances so quickly. So... You intend to use that as a reason to refuse Her Majesty's offer? To betray her expectations?!" Meltina then raised her voice. "Sir Mikoshiba, you've earned great merit to your name by defeating Duke Gelhart and slaying General Albrecht. And so, Her Majesty broke the kingdom's customs to make you a noble as a reward... True, the Wortenia peninsula cannot be called bountiful, but it is still part of Rhoadseria's territory! Vast enough to match the royal family's territory! Discarding it would be a wasted opportunity! Do you not agree?"

"I see... So you're saying Her Majesty kindly bequeathed the Wortenia peninsula to me, so I would develop it into habitable land?"

"Precisely! True, it is a difficult land, but a man of your resourcefulness can

surely succeed in this task... What say you?”

That was quite the clever little way of putting it, considering it came from Meltina. They were only granting this difficult land to Ryoma because they believed in his skill. It was an attempt to stroke Ryoma’s ego. He wasn’t falling for it, though.

“Should I interpret what Lady Meltina just said to be Her Majesty’s intentions?” Ryoma moved his gaze from Meltina to Lupis, sitting on her throne.

Lupis responded with a curt, silent nod. She couldn’t, under any circumstances, tell him to his face that she was sending him to a backwater region to keep him contained there.

“Oh, I see...! Then that makes my request much easier, Your Majesty.”

“...What do you mean?” Lupis’s expression twitched. “You only said you wanted to confirm my intentions.”

She thought Ryoma’s wish here was to hear her intentions, but of course, Ryoma didn’t want anything so simple as that. Everything so far was just him laying the groundwork, so he would be able to corner Lupis and Meltina...

“Not at all, Your Majesty! My request is a fairly simple one... But I was quite hesitant to speak it before confirming your wishes... But if you truly wish for me to develop the Wortenia peninsula...”

“What... is it?” The two of them had a bad feeling about what Ryoma was about to say.

“Well, you see... I’d like for you to lend me funds to develop the peninsula... But with the sum being as high as it is, I couldn’t bring myself to ask without making absolutely sure what your intentions were... But, since you place so much trust in me, Your Majesty, I’m quite honored. I’ll have to exert my best efforts and answer your high expectations of me!”

Ryoma bowed his head before Lupis earnestly.

“Wait! You want us to provide you with funds? What are you saying?!” Meltina raised her voice angrily. “The Wortenia peninsula is your territory! Why

should the royal house provide you with funds for it?!”

Ryoma’s expression, however, didn’t budge.

“Huh? That’s quite an odd thing to say. I was under the impression that Her Majesty was aware of the peninsula’s condition, and asked me to develop it into a flourishing territory.”

“Exactly! And that’s why you need to develop it using your own resourcefulness!”

Meltina’s claims here would normally be reasonable, but in this particular case they were lacking in legitimacy.

“But as you know, I’m a commoner. I don’t have any fortune or assets to my name. I’m sure you both understand this, yes?”

Ryoma lied brazenly, keeping the fact that the fortune he’d stolen from Azoth the slave merchant had remained untouched to himself.

“We do, but...”

“And since I don’t have any money, I’d need someone to provide me with funds so I can meet Her Majesty’s expectations... But no merchant on the continent would lend me money to develop that peninsula.”

Merchants loathed risks. Of course, if one were to present enough merit to offset that risk, things were different, but a peninsula infested with demi-humans and monsters wouldn’t offer anything of the sort. No merchant would back something that risky.

“Then you should use your own wit to...” Meltina hung on desperately.

Losing this argument would make everything come to nothing. They would fail to contain Ryoma, and Lupis would suffer a blow to her dignity. That was the one thing they had to avoid.

“Of course! I intend to do my utmost, but I am not a god! I can’t develop that land without any funds...! Which I’m sure Her Majesty, with her wisdom and sagacity, understands perfectly well?”

Ryoma steered the conversation back to Lupis, who went pale at the sharpness of his gaze. She had pushed this entire business onto him while

knowing full well how absurd it was. And now when it was clear he'd seen through it all, she had no more cards to play. In the end, Lupis could only mouth the words Ryoma wanted to hear.

"How much?"

"Your Majesty!"

Lupis ignored Meltina's exclamation. They weren't the only ones present. The neutral faction's nobles and knights serving as guards were here as well. She couldn't afford to shame herself any more before their eyes. She needed to present herself as a wise ruler appointing a commoner to noble status.

"I knew I could trust in your tolerance and wisdom, Your Majesty...! Well, I've only managed to come up with a rough, initial estimate so far, but when converted to coins, it comes down to one million golds at least!"



When Sudou mentioned the amount Ryoma specified, Saitou exclaimed out loud. It was quite unusual, given how collected and polite he usually was. Shardina couldn't fault him for it, though. She herself was awfully shocked.

The cost of staying the night at an inn was between fifty coppers to one silver. A meal at an average eatery at town was between five to ten coppers. Of course, there were more expensive places one could go, but one silver was enough for most people to get through the day.

If roughly compared to Japanese currency, a copper was like a 100 yen coin, a silver was a 10,000 yen bill and a gold was roughly one million yen. This very much placed the sum Ryoma requested into perspective; he had asked her for the equivalent of one trillion Japanese yen.

"That's absurd... They'd have to loan out almost all the assets the Kingdom of Rhoadseria has for that!" Saitou said.

"Even the Empire would have trouble paying that much at once..." Shardina said with a stunned expression.

That meant the sum wasn't theoretically impossible, but no country in the western continent would agree to pay that much. Countries decided how to spend their income ahead of time. Officials needed to have their wages paid, the army had capital expenditures to consider, and plenty of other important matters could not be neglected.

Any country that decided to pay that kind of sum would have to spend years scraping by its budget. Even the Empire would struggle to come up with the sum immediately. Rhoadseria, a country which couldn't match it in either size or economy, wouldn't be able to, either.

"Quite so." Sudou nodded. "However, if he were to seriously develop that peninsula, he would actually need to invest that much to pull it off. That much is true."

Forests would need to be cut down. Roads would have to be paved. Reserve soldiers needed to be hired and equipped in case of pirate or demi-human attacks. Not to mention costs for migrating citizens. All of those sucked up money like bottomless marshes, but if they truly intended to develop that

accursed land, that much would be necessary.

“That might be, but such a sum is...” Shardina said, and then exclaimed, “Ah! I see... So that was his angle!”

“I see you’ve figured it out. As wise as ever, Your Highness.” Sudou smiled, narrowing his eyes.

“He didn’t intend to have that much lent to him to begin with, did he...? He prepared some other conditions to compensate for being refused! Right?”

Sudou nodded at Sardina, and took out a sheet of paper from his inner pocket.

“What’s this?”

“A list of the conditions Mr. Mikoshiba gave to Queen Lupis... From what I’ve seen, the contents are quite problematic... He’s effectively completely independent from the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.”

The paper had a detailed list of clauses, and there were quite a few items listed there. Shardina scanned the page over from top to bottom, her grimace deepening the more she read. Ryoma essentially sought two things.

The first was that legislation, military affairs, external affairs and economics would all be entrusted to him. And the second was an exemption from taxes and military service that nobles were supposed to provide to the kingdom.

Were those terms to be accepted, he would be able to create a country which, while belonging to Rhoadseria on paper, would be completely beyond its control. In other words, while he was given only the title of baron, Ryoma Mikoshiba would be granted more power and authority over his territory than the ruler of the kingdom had.

“And Queen Lupis... seriously accepted this...?” Shardina asked, her expression absolutely stunned.

Sudou nodded silently.

“I heard that woman was stupid, but this takes the cake. She let that viper have free rein...”

“She was so blinded by the sheer sum he initially proposed she ended up

accepting without properly thinking it through, it seems.”

“But still, what a thing to do... And besides, this says he’s also demanding five thousand gold coins in development costs for the present time.”

Lupis basically gave this menacing man carte blanche, with land to call his own and funds to build it up to boot.

“Well, I do think that aside from the feeling of debt at refusing his request for funds, Lupis had her own thoughts on the matter. She likely rationalized that he wouldn’t be able to do that much with just five thousand golds. And no matter how many rights he’s given, that peninsula is an undeveloped frontier with no taxes to collect. Even that man can’t produce things out of the ether...”

Five thousand gold coins was certainly a large sum of money, but it wasn’t enough to actually change that no-man’s land. However...

“Saitou... Do you really think so?”

Saitou fell silent at Shardina’s question.

A land one couldn’t collect taxes from, swarming with monsters, with little to no assistance from Rhoadseria... Could he really do anything in those conditions? Saitou was hesitant to say that, though. He himself was terrified by something Ryoma Mikoshiba possessed.

Shardina averted her gaze from Saitou. Everyone present harbored the same sense of dread.

“Sudou... This little ploy of yours... won’t come back to haunt us, will it?”

Sudou could only answer her with silence. He was the one who had pressed on Lupis’s anxieties and proposed she make Ryoma a noble, after all. This was a play to ensure they kept a grasp on Ryoma’s position. Shardina was just as anxious about the idea of Ryoma joining forces with another country, especially the countries to the north and west. But if their attempt to stop that were to only make things worse somehow...

That fear had snared all three of them.

“Fine... Sudou... You can’t let him out of your sight, though,” Shardina said briefly.

Sudou nodded.

“In that case, Your Highness... I will deliver my next report after we begin the invasion of Xarooda. Will that do?”

“Yes... We strike next month, according to schedule... Sudou! Preparations are complete, yes?”

“Rest assured.” Sudou and Saitou both nodded. “The civil war has kept the nobles and knights both quite shaken. We have plenty of chances to take advantage of... Rhoadseria won’t be sending any reinforcements to Xarooda.”

At that moment, the Empire of O’ltormea was preparing to bare its sharp fangs.

Epilogue

A single estate stood on the outskirts of the capital of O'ltormea. It was surrounded by a thick strip of woods a ways off from the highway, and so even most of those living in the area weren't aware of the estate's existence. It was built long ago as a noble's retirement villa, but it changed owners frequently before falling into the possession of a certain company as a piece of real estate for sale.

At least, that was the surface-level story.

While it was true that on paper, the estate was a property for sale, it was effectively never sold to anyone, and likely never would be. If that ever were to happen, it would only be in the event of the enemy discovering its existence.

After all, this was the primary base of the Organization, which brewed in the darkness of the Empire of O'ltormea.

The security is as strict as ever... This place is more fortified than O'ltormea's palace...

Looking out the window, Saitou's breath stuck in his throat at the sight of the tight security outside. That said, it wasn't patrolled by guards armed with guns, like in some mafia movie he once saw. From an outside glance, it would seem like a completely ordinary estate. The front door was one of the few places that visibly had guards.

That wasn't to say the Organization was lax when it came to defending the estate. The surrounding woods had a security net consisting of dozens of watchmen deployed within it, ready to stealthily eliminate anyone who dared wander too close.

It was likely that even the imperial guard tasked with defending the Emperor's person or Princess Shardina's prided Succubus Knights would struggle to defeat these forces, given equal numbers.

They weren't quite up to the level of the Organization's elite task force, the Hunting Dogs, but they were still overwhelmingly powerful by the standards of

this world.

In addition, the window panes were made of materials unique to this world, reinforced with thaumaturgy, putting it on par with bulletproof glass. It would likely withstand even a full-force blast from Celia Volkland, Gaius's heir to the position of court thaumaturgist.

The Organization's technological development is going smoothly... All that remains is to keep it hidden... And that's where the problem lies.

The Organization had far fewer members than this world's residents. That much was to be expected, since its operatives were all humans who were summoned or mixed up in a summoning from Rearth. If the Organization was to rule over the citizens of this world despite being outnumbered, it would need an overwhelming edge in fighting power and technology.

In terms of image, it would perhaps be similar to Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors' rule over Central America in the sixteenth century. With just a few hundred, they would beat an entire country.

And the secret to their success lay in the technological superiority the European countries held at the time. In the modernity of Earth, information is circulated freely through the internet, which was a wonderful thing from the perspective of technological development. However...

Our objective isn't to develop peace in this world.

Every member of the Organization harbored deep hatred and resentment toward this Earth. And the Organization would only reach its hand out in salvation for those kinds of people.

What the Organization feared more than anything was that this hidden technology might leak out due to some odd ideal of humanism and equality.

"Phew, pardon the wait."

A sudden voice calling out from the door, without any knock to accompany out, jolted Saitou out of his contemplation.

"Mr. Sudou... At least knock, if you would. Why go to the effort of hiding your presence...? You startled me out of my skin."

He wasn't up to any shady business, and with how secured the estate was there was little fear of an assassination. But being approached by someone who had obfuscated their presence left even Saitou shocked. Sudou only seemed amused by his reaction, though.

"Ah, a blunder on my side, a blunder." Sudou smirked and scratched his head as he took a seat on a sofa. "I simply enjoy seeing your surprised expression, Mr. Saitou..."

"I swear, you are always so..." Saitou sighed at Sudou's unapologetic response.

Sudou's behavior was nothing new, though, and he acted this way even in front of Kikukawa, his supervisor. Saying anything on the matter would hardly change this man's behavior at this point. Now was hardly the time for such trifling matters, anyway.

"It took you quite some time, but what did Supervisor Kikukawa say?"

"Complaints about me, for the most part," Sudou said, reaching for an alcohol bottle on the table. "Though I suppose it's only natural, given how risky everything was this time."

"True... Any changes to the plan going forward?"

That was what Saitou wanted to know the most. A change in the plan might mean he would have to change his approach toward Shardina. Sudou, however, simply tipped his glass without regard for Saitou's concerns.

"None in particular. You are to remain as is, aiding Princess Shardina and keeping her under control. After all, the upcoming invasion to Xarooda is a crucial battle for the Organization."

"We can't lose, but our victory cannot be too one-sided... Correct?"

Sudou answered with a satisfied nod.

"Yes, quite so. That said, Xarooda does have quite the troublesome general on their side, so I don't see it being all that simple."

"General Belphares..." Mouthing the name of the man known as Xarooda's living God of War, Saitou felt a current of dread run down his spine.

“Yes, the veteran general said to be a match for Rhoadseria’s Ivory Goddess of War, Helena Steiner. Though, unlike her, he has the army firmly under his control and is greatly trusted by the king. Defeating him won’t be easy.”

O’ltormea’s numerical advantage was a solid fact, but war didn’t always boil down to numbers. Especially given the precipitous mountains that stood as impregnable fortresses surrounding the Kingdom of Xarooda. Since there were few ways into the country, the mountains and forests made marching an army exceedingly difficult. The terrain didn’t allow for the passage of great numbers.

“I suppose we’ll simply have to witness Princess Shardina’s skills at work.” Sudou downed another glass, speaking as if it were someone else’s business.

“You make everything sound so simple, Mr. Sudou...” Saitou cracked a bitter smile. “Also, if I may change the subject here, are you sure that was a good idea?”

Saitou directed a probing glance at Sudou as he escaped this vague question. Vague as it was, though, it was enough to make its subject clear for both of them.

“You mean Ryoma Mikoshiba?”

Saitou nodded.

“He really does bother you, doesn’t he...?”

“I think we would do well not to underestimate him.”

Saitou already had quite the painful experience with Ryoma. He had pursued Ryoma, who had attempted to escape the Empire’s borders after slaying Gaius Valkland. Ryoma’s counterattack, however, nearly cost the life of Shardina, a precious pawn for the Organization.

The end result was that she walked away alive, and the Organization’s plans remained undisturbed. But still, Saitou had years’ worth of experience spinning plots as an operative, and he still nearly had the rug pulled from under his feet by a novice youth who had only just been summoned to this world. That fact lingered in his heart like a bone stuck in his throat.

“I perfectly understand your doubts, Mr. Saitou. I recall how your prior report

specified how dangerous he was, but this debacle made me feel it on my own skin. He truly is abnormal. We cannot see him as an ordinary threat."

The terror of being involved in a country's civil war could be likened to being faced with a natural disaster, like a typhoon. Most people would be blown to and fro by the raging winds, with no regard for their wills.

But not Ryoma Mikoshiba. He supported Lupis Rhoadserians, who had the weakest position of all the players in this war, and emerged victorious despite the despairing state of the war. It went without saying just how unusual of a feat that was.

"You've done well to make sure we don't lose Princess Radine or Duke Gelhart, but are you sure giving him the Wortenia peninsula was the right thing to do?"

"Are you saying that, in doing so, I set a viper free on us?" Sudou said, smirking as he cited the same wording Shardina used.

"I think it's an apt way of putting it, yes." Saitou nodded grimly.

He understood the problems surrounding the Wortenia peninsula, but that only meant that if they were dealt with, it would become a treasure trove.

"Princess Shardina has a certain premonition on the matter, but I'm sure he only accepted because he'd seen that far ahead."

The Wortenia peninsula was a den for pirates ransacking the northern shores of the western continent, and so that sea route was extremely limited. But if the threat of those pirates could be removed, the peninsula would be able to flourish as a supply port.

In addition, Wortenia was a habitat for assorted rare items that could be sold. Even now, adventurers cross into it to collect such items and sell them for a high price.

"At worst... this could cause irreparable damage to the Organization." Saitou's eyes glinted dangerously.

At present, Ryoma wasn't that problematic of a presence. Of course, he was seen as pesky to an extent, but his interferences were all within an acceptable

margin of error. But that would all change if his governance of Wortenia ended up being successful. It would become a problem that couldn't be fixed with just a slight change of plans.

Sudou only answered Saitou's doubts with a smile, though.

"This is just as exciting as the story of Xiang Yu and Liu Bang, isn't it?"

Xiang Yu and Liu Bang... That was the story of a great Chinese hero. The moment Sudou said those words, Saitou's expression clouded over. *Yes, a demotion...*

After Emperor Qui Shi Huang's demise, Xiang Yu, who had brought the Qin Dynasty to ruin, feared the strength of his comrade Liu Bang and sent him to govern the then-backwater land of Hanzhong.

But using Hanzhong as a foundation, and with the help of officers such as Zhang Liang and Xiao He, Liu Bang mustered his strength, and by taking the unmatched general Han Xin under his command, finally defeated Xiang Yu in the battle of Gaixia. In so doing, he united China into a great empire.

This act of sending Liu Bang away from the capital of Qin, Xianyang, to the eastern city of Hanzhong went down in history as an exemplary case of rising to power through a demotion.

True... His position is similar to Liu Bang's. But does that mean Sudou wants him to conquer the continent, just as Liu Bang conquered China?

Ryoma may have been Japanese, just as they were, but this would in no way be a favorable development for the Organization.

"Don't worry, I don't want him to conquer the continent or anything of the sort." Sudou's expression didn't change, even when exposed to Saitou's criticizing gaze. "I won't betray the Organization. I'm simply excited."

"Excited?"

Sudou simply shook his head silently.

That one is probably his...

Ryoma Mikoshiba's face surfaced in Sudou's mind. Something in his style of fighting reminded him of someone he once knew, that had long since left. But

that was something Sudou kept to himself, secret from Kikukawa, his supervisor.

“Yes. Excited to see just how far that man can rise up in this world.” Sudou said and raised his voice.

As if to offer that toast to the ironic, fickle goddess of fate...

Afterword I doubt there are many new readers left, but I'd like to greet everyone who picked up *Record of Wortenia War* with this volume. And to all returning readers from volumes 1-3, it's a pleasure to see you again.

This is Ryota Hori, the author.

To those of you who start reading from the afterword, here's a short explanation regarding volume 4's content and why I chose to write it in this particular manner. Firstly, the basic concept was the climactic conclusion to Helena's revenge. The moment the years-long grudge of a woman who had her family murdered finally reaches its breaking point.

And in the meantime, our protagonist finally obtains his own territory. However, this land is rife with problems, making it something of an unorthodox case. In *Record of Wortenia War* , the protagonist is fundamentally strong, and so these kinds of limitations are necessary in order to keep the story balanced, but...

At long last, the series is approaching the titular "Wortenia war," and so this is something of a relief for me, as the author. Volume 4 is also where the series starts making large departures from the web novel. But if I could be allowed to make a few excuses, this entire plotline was supposed to show up around chapter 6 of the web novel. There was foreshadowing for it in previous volumes, so observant readers may have picked up on what's to come.

But in terms of the work's chronology, I figured the preface would do for the time being and decided to move things along a little faster.

Lastly, I would like to offer my utmost gratitude to everyone who helped in the publishing of this novel, as well as to all the readers that decided to pick it up. We are now well beyond the point the previous publication reached, and the sales haven't diminished.

Nowadays, we live in an age where they say books don't sell. My fellow

authors say that given the current state of the industry, this is quite an achievement, and as the author, I would very much like to see the series be successful.

But, author's wishes aside, all of this is only possible thanks to the readers' passionate support. I will do my best to bring you the next volume as soon as possible, so do continue supporting *Record of Wortenia War* .

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: Inescapable Sin

Chapter 2: An Unexpected Messenger

Chapter 3: Clash

Chapter 4: Helena’s Revenge

Chapter 5: A New Battlefield

Epilogue

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 5 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Record of Wortenia War: Volume 4

by Ryota Hori

Translated by ZackZeal

Edited by Nathan Redmond

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2016 Ryota Hori

Illustrations Copyright © 2016 bob

Cover illustration by bob

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2016 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

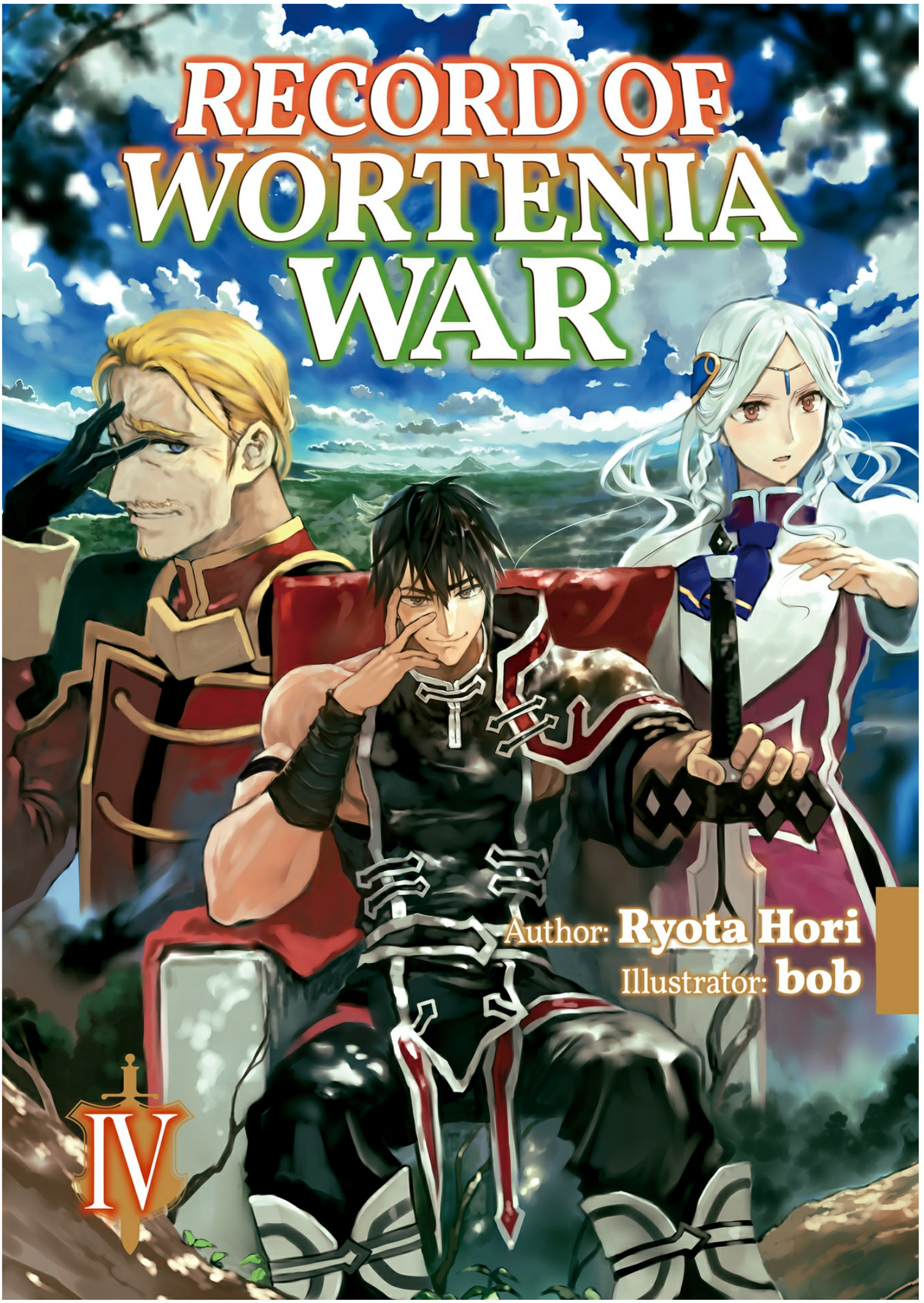
All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: January 2020


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