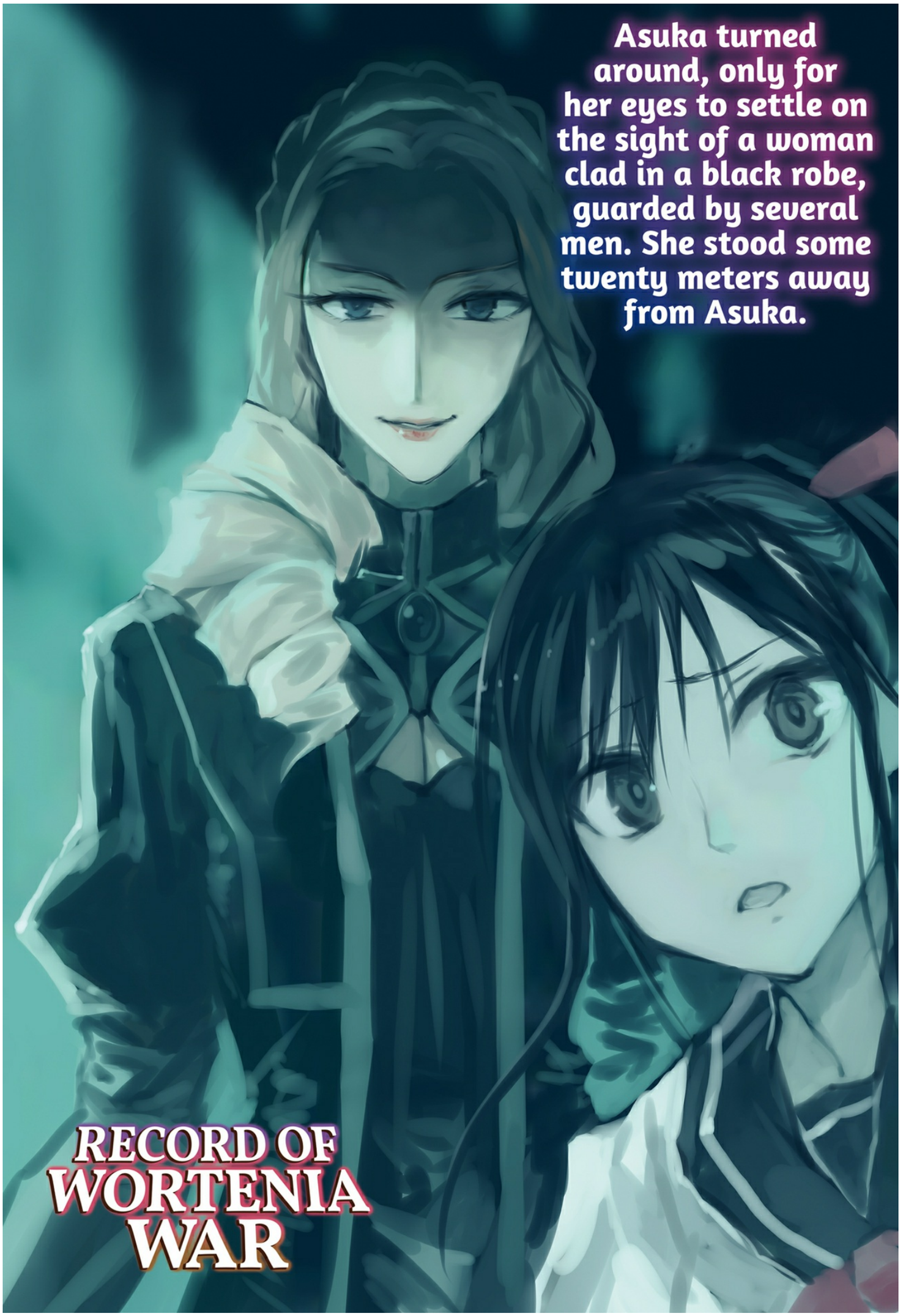
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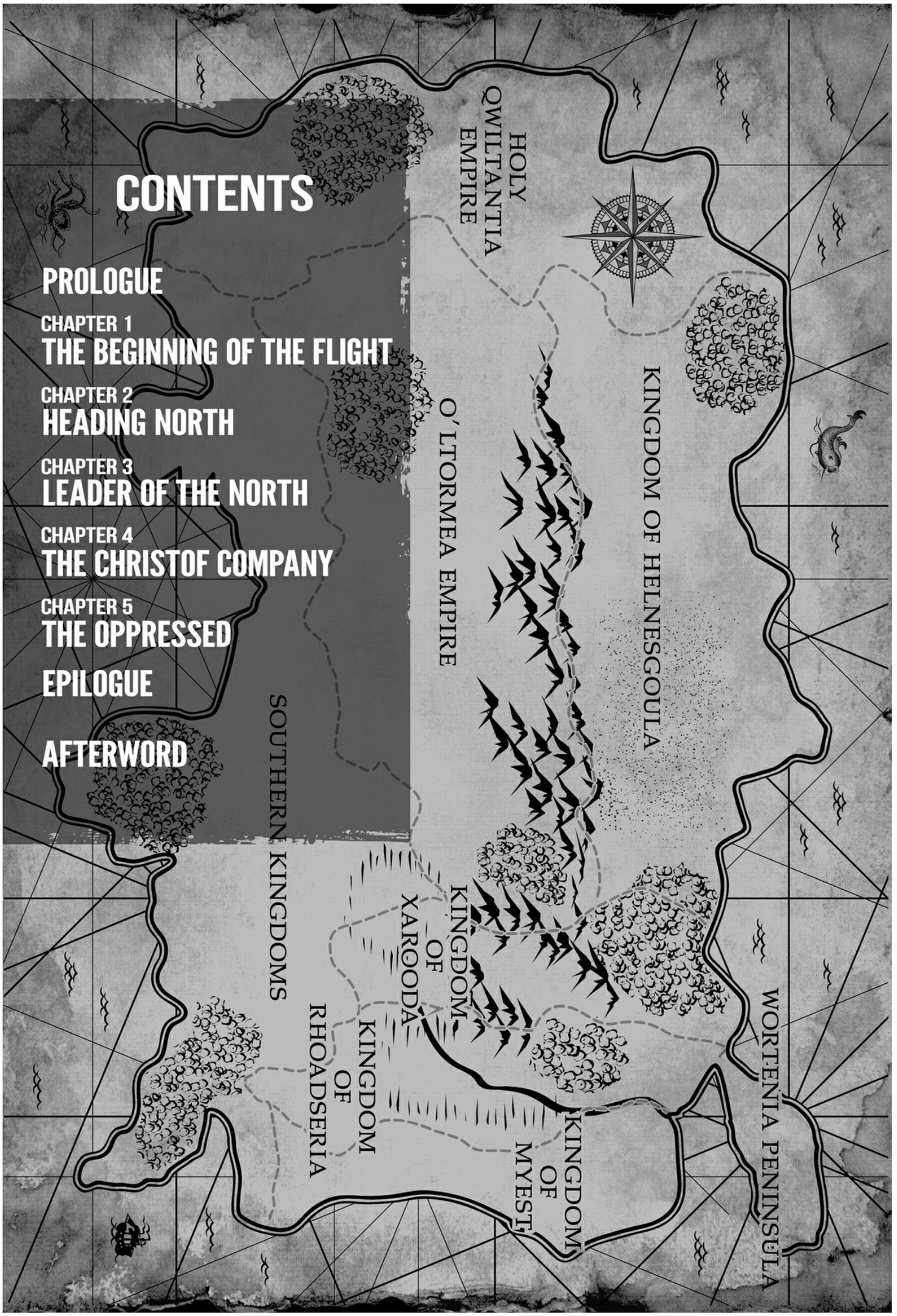


Author: **Ryota Hori**
Illustrator: **bob**


Asuka turned around, only for her eyes to settle on the sight of a woman clad in a black robe, guarded by several men. She stood some twenty meters away from Asuka.
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR


"Boy! We should be going over the ridge soon!"
"Well met, Baron Mikoshiba!"


“A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Simone Christof, and I currently serve as the Christof Company’s acting president.”



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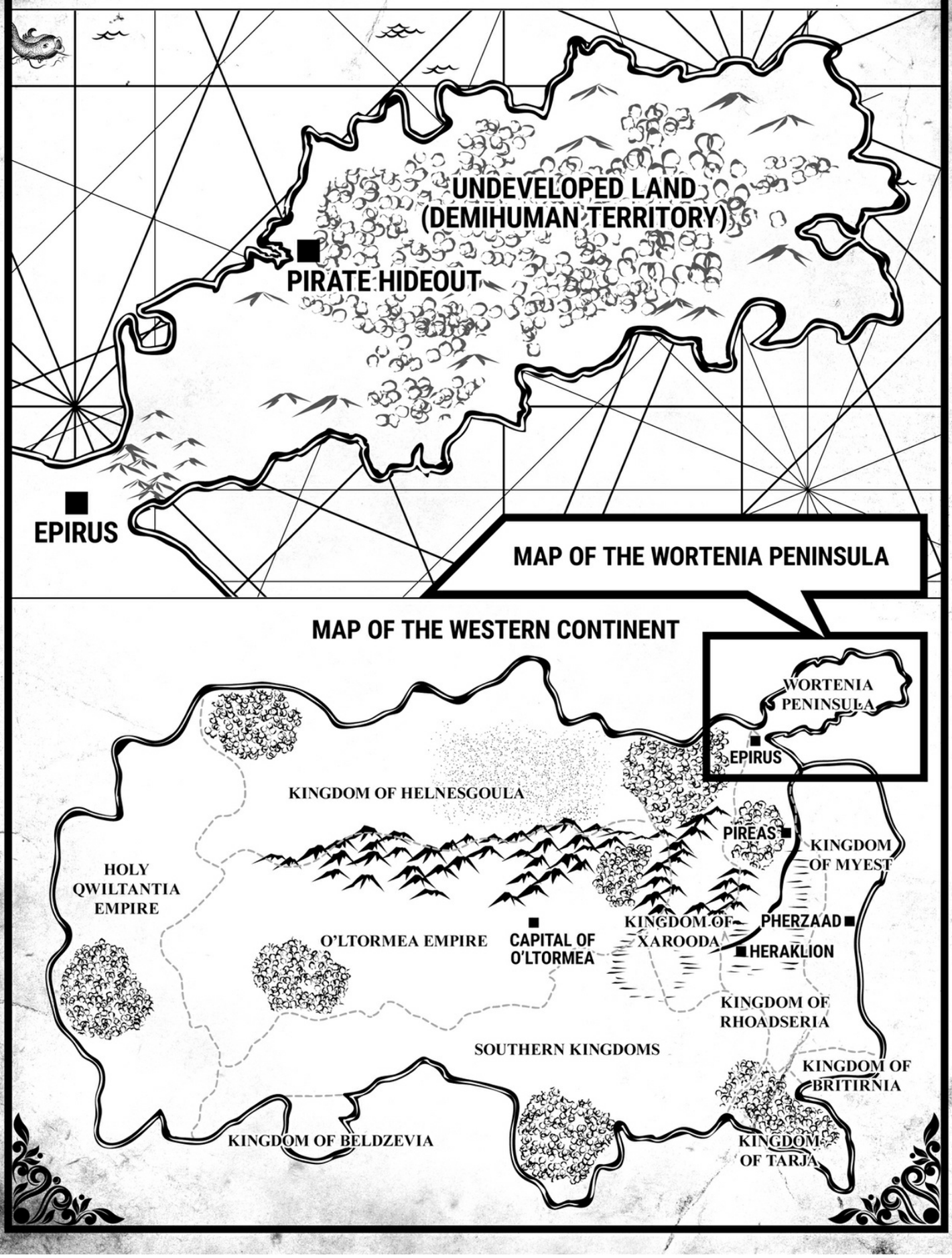
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Prologue

On that day, the life of Asuka Kiryuu, who was enjoying her youth as a normal high school student, reached a sudden and decisive turning point, and that point led in the worst direction possible.

It happened when she escorted two detectives in charge of investigating her beloved cousin's disappearance to the estate's entrance. Suddenly and without any warning signs, Asuka and the two detectives could no longer feel the ground beneath their feet.

"Huh?"

The sudden change made a truly stupefied, comical exclamation escape Asuka's lips. That was Asuka's true face showing as the responsible mask she usually wore slipped away. If Ryoma Mikoshiba were to see her face now, he'd likely point at her and erupt with laughter, as if to get back at her for one petty jab or another she once pulled on him.

But her surprise was perfectly natural. She lacked the practice and discipline to react to such an unexpected situation with quick-witted decisiveness. True, Ryoma and her grandfather did teach her a thing or two about martial arts, but her skill was strictly that of a run-of-the-mill person.

By comparison, Tachibana and Kusuda, being professional police officers, reacted far more quickly. They quickly regained balance of their bodies and tried to reach their hands out to the rim of the hole that swallowed them.

Their quick-wittedness, however, went unrewarded. The hole continued expanding, and grabbing onto its rim wasn't possible. Their hands simply cut through empty air.

"What the hell...?!"

"Tachibana!"

This phenomenon wasn't possible to begin with. It might have been possible, however unlikely, for the ground to cave in beneath them due to land subsidence, but this situation they were in right now clearly defied the laws of

physics.

There was no sound or sense of rumbling. The ground simply and quite literally disappeared from beneath their legs all of a sudden. Even if someone had set up a trap hole, there would have been some kind of sign that the fall was coming.

The sudden shift in the situation left Asuka completely helpless. All she could do was let out an ear-splitting screech as she fell and reached out for the moon above, as it grew ever distant.

“Where am I...?”

Asuka looked around, assailed by a sense of nausea and disgust that reminded her of motion sickness. The first thing that came into sight was a stone wall. Looking up at the ceiling, she saw a dome-shaped roof with a small window, from which moonlight poured into the room. It was only large enough to barely allow a baseball to pass through it. The room itself was fairly vast, and Asuka stood at its center.

What happened? Why am I...?

Asuka couldn’t fathom what happened that could have brought her to this place. Mere moments ago, she was at Kouichirou’s estate. That much was undeniable fact. But the scene before her eyes now was entirely different.

Asuka’s gaze fell forward, where she spotted Tachibana and Kusuda kneeling on the ground.

Thank God... It wasn’t just me...

She was in no way happy to see someone else fall into a plight like hers, but having been swept into this situation, Asuka was reassured to find two police officers were here with her.

“Kusuda, you all right?”

“My head hurts a lot, but... Yeah, I think I’m fine. But...” Kusuda said, looking around in shock as he cradled his head.

“You too, huh? I must have bumped my head at some point, because I have a terrible headache.”

“It feels like someone churned up the inside of my head...”

“Yeah, I’ve never felt anything like it...”

“Hmm, are you two all right...?” Asuka asked the two in concern as they squatted and held their heads in pain.

Her voice made Tachibana finally raise his face.

“O-Oh...” he said, slowly getting to his feet. “You’re the Mikoshiba’s girl... Still, I don’t get what’s going on... Weren’t we at Mr. Mikoshiba’s place? How did we get here...?”

“The floors and walls around here...” Kusuda replied, kneeling down and rubbing his hand against the floor. “They don’t look like they’re made from concrete or asphalt. It feels like actual rock...”

“You think so, too?” Tachibana replied, his face understandably filled with doubt.

If this was a case of the ground caving in beneath them, what should have been under their legs right now was earth, and the ceiling above them wouldn’t have a skylight. What they saw instead was a stone floor and walls. The hole they fell through was nowhere in sight. This situation was, for all intents and purposes, completely incomprehensible.

But as the three of them stood confused, a sudden voice greeted them from behind.

“Greetings, travelers who have passed the otherworldly gates. Misha Fontaine, assistant court thaumaturgist to the Kingdom of Beldzevia welcomes you with open arms... Indeed, with open, warm arms.”

It was a woman’s voice that was as fair as the chiming of a bell, but at the same time harbored a coldness that chilled anyone who heard it to the core. Asuka turned around, only for her eyes to settle on the sight of a woman clad in a black robe, guarded by several men. She stood some twenty meters away from Asuka.

Blond hair and white skin... She doesn’t look Japanese... Plus, her outfit is weird... But it does sound like she speaks Japanese...

As those thoughts crossed her mind, she was filled with incomprehensible anxiety. Finding more people here other than Tachibana and Kusuda was a positive development for her. They probably had more information on where this was than the three of them did. She called herself Misha Fontaine, which wasn't a Japanese name, but thankfully Asuka could understand this woman clearly.

But that didn't solve all the problems. No, if anything, there was an even bigger problem at play here. The Misha woman was still fine. The over-the-top decorations she had on were unusual to Asuka, who was a young woman of the modern age, but she did see some tribal outfits from other countries on the news here and there. If she assumed this woman was some kind of foreign priestess, her common sense could somehow fill in the gaps.

But the men surrounding Misha were dressed in a way that was too unusual. They were covered in full metal armor and gripped spears in hand, with swords sheathed at their waists. They were like knights taken straight out of a fantasy movie or TV show. And to top it off...

The way they shine... No way.

At first she couldn't believe it, but after looking at it again and again, she realized the weapons those knights were holding looked real. Asuka wasn't practiced in martial arts like Ryoma was, nor did she see every weapon in Kouichirou's collection. But she did have enough knowledge and experience to tell the weapons these men were holding were the genuine article.

Realizing how dangerous these people were, Asuka took a cautious step back. But in contrast to her caution, Tachibana walked up to Misha and the others, saying something Asuka didn't expect to hear.

"Hey now, what's with those outfits? Are you shooting a movie? And you don't look Japanese to me. What language was that just now? I can speak English, but... I've never heard anything like what you just said... Kusuda, did you recognize it?"

"No, doesn't sound like anything I've heard before. Judging from her skin she's white, but that didn't sound like French or Italian either. Maybe she's from a country in northern Europe? I think the symbol on their armor looks like

a national coat of arms, but I don't recognize that, either. I did pick up on what sounds like her name. Misha Fontaine."

Asuka furrowed her brows in bewilderment at their exchange.

They didn't understand what she just said...?

The woman's words were perfectly understandable to Asuka's ears, and undoubtedly so. But that wasn't the case for the detectives.

"My apologies, we're police... Japanese policemen," he said in English, mouthing the words loud and clear. "Do you understand?"

He took out his badge from his suit's inner pocket and brandished it. Of course, he also stood in a position that would let him pull out the extendable baton connected to his belt swiftly if need be, which was proof that he was being cautious. Tachibana couldn't tell the weapons the knights were holding were real, but as an officer, he had to be cautious since there was a civilian he had to protect present.

Those were only actions one would expect of him while adhering to his Earth's common sense, and namely Japan's, a small country that was peaceful compared to other developed countries. Most officers in other countries would draw their guns first and suppress the suspects.

"Mr. Tachibana, get away! Those weapons they're holding are real!" Asuka screamed as loud as she could.

Hearing her warning, Tachibana and Kusuda froze in place. It was proof they were both suspicious. That only served to provoke the knights, though. They took a step forward, their spears aimed at the two officers. Their formation was without flaw.

"So the girl's language unification is already finished," Misha said. "The men will take a while longer... I thought we could take this a bit slower, but no matter. Capture the three of them."

That moment, the five knights closed in on the two officers, surrounding them.

"Aah, what the hell is going on...?! Tch, fine. Kusuda!"

“We are police. Police. Stay back. Back! Do you think you’ll get away with this?”

Tachibana and Kusuda threw their badges aside and drew their extendable batons. The tip of the batons popped out with a light sound.

“I’m warning you again, stay back! We are police officers!” Tachibana said with a menacing growl in his voice, with his baton whistling as he swung it through the air.

Still, the baton was less than fifteen centimeters in length. It was more than enough to handle an opponent with a knife, but it was just barely more than nothing against a spear’s range. It wasn’t much of a menacing weapon.

And indeed, the knights were gradually closing the ring around Tachibana and Kusuda.

“Shit! Don’t underestimate the police!”

Losing his temper, Kusuda slammed his baton down on the spear closing in on him. A metallic clanging sound ran out, but even this blow that had all of Kusuda’s weight behind it didn’t budge the knights.

“What... How did you...?!”

Kusuda was the one who lost his balance instead, and one of the knights swooped down on him from the side.

“Kusuda! You sons of bitches!”

His blood boiling at the sight of Kusuda being slammed against the floor, Tachibana howled and swung his own baton.

This was something Tachibana wouldn’t normally do, but something about this unusual situation disturbed his sense of judgment. But he simply took a spear’s thrust to his exposed abdomen and sank to the ground.

“Mr. Tachibana!” Asuka’s scream echoed against the domed ceiling.

“Aren’t you two lively,” Misha said, nodding at the two appraisingly as they lay on the ground. “You’ll make for good pawns.”

Good pawns to send out to the battlefield.

A pawn's life is disposable, but since summoning and rearing them up took a great deal of expenses, she preferred it if they didn't break after a battle or two.

"That just leaves you..." Misha said, nudging her chin in Asuka's direction to signal to one of the knights to follow her as she walked up to her.

Misha then eyed Asuka fixedly, as if licking her up and down. Her eyes were full of pure appraisal. Like a housewife inspecting a vegetable for its freshness.

"You're young, and your physique isn't bad. Your language unification was completed as soon as you were summoned, so you should have a good head on your shoulders. I suppose your potential as a pawn is more than just sufficient, but..."

Misha then shook her head, as if regretful, but a contrasting, nasty smile played over her lips.

"I've summoned such a pretty girl. Using you as a disposable soldier would be a waste. I would love to use you, but I think you'd be better suited to serve as company for His Majesty. He's been asking me to bring him someone for a long while now, after all..."

With that said, Misha stuck her hand out toward Asuka.

"What are you...?" Asuka had no way of knowing what terrible fate was in store for her, but she could instinctively tell something bad was about to happen. "No... Stay back..."

She staggered back, feeling like a small animal being glared at by a predator. But after those few steps, her knees buckled and she fell on her backside. Misha approached her with a sneer on her lips.

"Oh, you don't need to be so afraid. Nothing bad will happen to you. No, compared to those men over there, you're much better off. You'll wear clothes painstakingly made by the finest artisans, have three meals a day, the likes of which most nobles don't even get to eat... And you'll never have to set foot on the battlefield. All you'll need to do is keep His Majesty company in bed during the nights. It's all right... You're young and pretty, so I'm sure his Majesty will adore you. At least until he finds a new toy... Of that I'm certain."

And with that, Misha quickly began chanting.

“God of Light Meneos, abide by the ancient oath and bind their souls in chains.”

After she concluded her short incantation, a glowing sigil of some sort appeared on Misha’s right palm and lit up dimly.

“Don’t worry, it’ll hurt for a bit when I brand you with this mark, but it’ll stop soon enough.” Misha smirked coldly, extending her palm to Asuka’s face.

Ryoma! Save me!

The boy’s mature face surfaced in Asuka’s mind, but of course, it was only an expression of a sort of resignation that overcame her. He disappeared months ago, so there was no chance he would appear now.

And yet, the heavens didn’t turn their back on her.

The sound of something hard and rod-shaped rolling over the ground reached her ears. And the next moment, a gust of wind brushed against Asuka’s skin from the side, accompanied by the sound of something heavy and full of liquid falling to the ground.

An animalistic howl erupted from Misha’s lips, echoing through the room, and something warm splashed over Asuka’s face.

“Would you kindly get your filthy hands off my granddaughter?”

That voice sounded too peaceful for this gruesome scene, but the moment she heard it, Asuka raised her head.

“G-Grandpa?! The way you look, that’s...”

Her gaze fell on Kouichirou Mikoshiba — a man who shouldn’t have been here. But he didn’t look the same as he always was. He held katanas in both hands, which were dripping with blood that formed a puddle on the floor under him. Seeing her grandfather’s face smeared with blood, Asuka’s hands jumped to her own face.

She felt the unique texture of blood on her fingers. And the fact it wasn’t dry yet made it clear what had just happened in front of her.

“Grandpa... Why are you here...? And what...”

Asuka's shaking fingers pointed at the figure of Misha, who was sneering coldly but moments ago, crouching in pain.

"You! Who are you?!"

The knights were slow to react to the sudden development. Still, the knight escorting Misha drew his sword and raised his voice. That brandished sword would not be swung down, though. Not ever.

"Using an overhead position in this situation, when you haven't gauged the opponent's skill... Idiot... I swear, we're lucky to have not run into anyone truly strong, but downing the enemy that easily is rather anticlimactic..."

The overhead stance, otherwise called the stance of fire. A well known, offensive stance as menacing as the raging of a flame. But conversely, if it cannot menace and overwhelm the opponent, it cannot truly be called the stance of fire. All it would do is expose one's abdomen to the enemy.

Sighing with exasperation, Kouichirou casually swept his right hand to the side. The blade cut through the man's stomach — which should have been protected by his armor — cutting him in half through his spine.

"No way..."

Asuka couldn't believe what she was seeing. The knight crumbled backwards, his dark red blood and viscera spilling to the floor. Misha's face was contorted in agony, dripping with blood and saliva. The thing she cradled to her chest was her own severed right arm.

It was a reality she didn't want to accept. But as her mind regained its composure, she had to analyze the situation, whether she liked it or not.

He cut her... He cut her, cut her, cut her... He really cut a person down...?

Asuka knew very well that Kouichirou was skilled at martial arts, but that didn't mean she could imagine he was capable of mercilessly cutting down another human being.

"Hmm, judging by the crest on their armor, this is the Kingdom of Beldzevia... I suppose it's better than being summoned by Helnesgoula or the Church of the God of Light..." Kouichirou whispered as he reached a hand out to Asuka. "Are

you all right, Asuka?”

His voice was gentle. It harbored a gentleness and affection that didn’t fit this brutal place. But that was only his voice. The knights that kept Tachibana and Kusuda pinned to the ground forgot their original role of protecting Misha, simply watching this gruesome spectacle with their eyes open wide. Of course, since they were busy keeping the two men bound, there wasn’t much they could do.

The detectives were nothing but weaklings in the face of knights skilled with thaumaturgy, but the problem was that the knights were instructed to keep them alive. If they were allowed to kill them, they’d lop the men’s heads off no problem, but keeping them alive, unharmed and bound, was much more difficult even with the knights’ overwhelming advantage.

Weak as they were, Tachibana and Kusuda were resisting desperately. From Beldzevia’s point of view, keeping the two of them alive and whole was important, considering what was to come. If they were injured and useless on arrival perhaps they’d have given up on them, but they only summoned people from Rearth for the sake of bolstering their ranks.

It took considerable preparations and expenses to do so, and even with the situation being as unexpected as it was, they couldn’t afford to kill them off and remain with nothing to show for all their efforts. That was obvious from the fact that they had two men pinning each of the men down.

But what kept these knights stunned and aghast was the sudden appearance of Kouichirou Mikoshiba. He lorded over the scene with an overwhelming air of oppression.

“What’s wrong, Asuka? Did your knees buckle...? You’re not hurt, are you?”

Looking back at Asuka, who was gazing up at him with shock, Kouichirou spoke with the same flippant tone he often had. Looking at her grandfather and silent at his attitude, Asuka simply nodded.



“Good, that’s wonderful. Then I’ll just finish up around here and let’s go back. We don’t want to stick around here for too long, do we...?” he said, narrowing his eyes.

That gesture displayed no sign of the warmth and kindness he often showed Asuka. An artificial gaze, as cold as steel. It was fixed, of course, on Misha, who was squatting on the floor while holding her severed arm close to her chest.

The sight of a person weeping bitterly at such a severe injury would usually be enough to spur pity in anyone. Asuka herself forgot the relief of being rescued, and was instead flooded with guilt at seeing this person maimed so severely by her own flesh and blood.

But from Kouichirou’s perspective, Misha was the source of all evil, the one who summoned Asuka, who he held dear to his heart as a granddaughter, to this hellish world. He knew just how harsh this world truly was, and so he held absolutely no mercy toward this woman.

There was a discrepancy in what both of them knew and felt. The difference being that one of them understood what kind of hell this world really was.

It was then that Misha suddenly raised her face and glared at Kouichirou. Her eyes burned with dark flames of smoldering hatred. Words of malevolent agony escaped her lips with a voice so vicious that it struck fear into the heart of anyone who heard them.

“I won’t forgive you! I’ll never, ever forgive you! You mere pawn of Rearth, how dare you take my arm... The arm of the one who carries the fate of Beldzevia! How dare you, how dare you... I won’t rest until you’re cut to ribbons and fed to the pigs!”

She wasn’t shouting. But to Asuka’s ears, Misha’s words rang all too clearly. They were thick and rippling with pure, unadulterated hatred. What pangs of guilt and mercy she felt toward Misha were pushed aside by her words and the terrifying glint in her eyes. Even the knights who kept the detectives pinned down seemed to feel the same way, since their grip slackened somewhat.

But one man was unmoved by Misha’s words. To Kouichirou, feeling a hateful gaze directed at him by another didn’t even elicit a response. Not after all he’d

been through. If something like that were enough to draw a pause out of him, Kouichirou would not have survived the battlefields he once ran through.

The next moment, Kouichirou's right hand mercilessly swept through the air.

"You fool... If you have the time to utter curses, use it to chant an actual spell."

Misha's hung head tilted sideways, and after a short moment rolled down to the ground. Kouichirou knew one always had to kill the enemy swiftly. And he also knew just how important it was not to hesitate to kill when given the chance.

Chapter 1: The Beginning of the Flight

Tachibana couldn’t believe the sight that just unfolded before his eyes. Tachibana was a hard-faced detective who once worked under the Organized Crime Division. He’d faced off against professional criminals more times than he cared for. He’d even caught and arrested some criminals red-handed.

But when he looked at Kouichirou now, he felt something fundamentally different.

What the hell... Why is he so calm...?

Assuming she wasn’t going to suddenly exhibit some capacity for living without her head attached, there could be no doubting that the woman who called herself Misha Fontaine was lying dead now. Of course, having been their attacker, she wasn’t a normal person. She and her men didn’t show any reaction to Tachibana and Kusuda identifying themselves as police officers.

Normally, one would show some kind of reaction in that situation, be it surprise or enmity... And given the outfit she was wearing, she probably wasn’t a normal person.

Both of the detectives could no longer assume that the people pinning them down were normal civilians anymore. But even if it was committed against a group of suspicious criminals, even an officer like Tachibana couldn’t imagine someone killing another person so readily. Despite all the things he saw in his career, this was still hard to digest.

Especially considering the man who committed this atrocity was someone who had sat across from him and held a conversation just minutes ago. His shock couldn’t be adequately described with words.

But I guess he did save us...

In truth, having seen the man's capacity for murder, he'd grown to fear Kouichirou Mikoshiba. But at the same time, he acknowledged that there was likely more chance for negotiation and understanding with him. At least, compared to the armored men pinning him down.

The problem was whether Tachibana could, as an officer, tolerate the murder he just saw Kouichirou commit.

Would that really be right...?

Relief, guilt, and the sense of professional duty years of police work had cultivated struggled within Tachibana's heart. He may not have understood the situation they'd found themselves in, but he was no fool. He understood vaguely that they weren't in Japan anymore.

The fact that those people didn't react to Tachibana's status as a police officer proved that much. If this was Japan, those people would react in some way to the presence of a cop, no matter what kind of professional criminals they were. Even if they didn't know Japanese, very few people wouldn't understand the meaning of the words 'Japanese Policeman.' This was an age where one had access to internet chats and blogs even on the battlefield, after all.

That left two options. The first was that they knew they were up against the police, but were part of a crime organization so vast and powerful that they knew they had nothing to fear. The other was that this was some kind of other country, where the Japanese police force had no influence.

If it was the former, they would have to be members of some South American drug cartel or a Russian mafia like the Bratva. Those groups employed submarines to smuggle drugs and used the profits to buy enough arms from other countries to keep a small army supplied. They had tens of thousands of operatives spread out across the globe.

To them, the police may have been a nuisance, but not a threat. At worst they could kill any policeman that got in their way and be done with it. In the end, the police needed firepower to back its authority, which was something Tachibana knew all too well from his time in the Organized Crime Division.

But this did raise a question. Assuming a crime organization of that caliber were to expand to Japan, would they really wear these old suits of armor and arm themselves with swords and spears?

The Chinese Mafia does use swords and katanas during internal feuds... I suppose it isn't entirely impossible...

But Tachibana had to deny that option. Any such crime organization would use small automatic firearms and submachine guns. True, firearms were hard to come by in Japan, but that was just a circumstantial factor, and they'd likely still choose to use them.

So they might use knives, but suits of armor, swords and spears were still out of the question. That made the possibility of this not being Japan all the more plausible.

Absurd... This isn't a cartoon or a comic... There's no way that's possible.

Stories of being spirited away or even the trend of otherworld stories which had grown in popularity recently surfaced in Tachibana's mind. He could only scoff at his imagination choosing to be overactive in a situation as strained as this. It may have been the most fitting explanation to this situation, but it did make a certain problem rear its head.

Well, no, that wasn't apt. It wasn't so much a problem as it was that Tachibana simply didn't want to believe it. The chains of the common sense that dictated his life up to this day kept his thoughts tightly shackled, as they naturally would.

Tachibana could hear the knights whispering among themselves. Sadly, he couldn't understand the language they spoke, but given the situation, he could imagine what they might be saying.

It feels like they're debating if they should run or fight...

Even Tachibana could tell that the dead woman held some kind of high position, which meant those knights were guards meant to protect her.

And this isn't a decision to make lightly... They still have us to consider.

The person they were meant to protect was killed so easily right in front of

their eyes, which meant they would definitely be persecuted for their failure. True, they were ordered to keep the officers pinned down, which left the woman with fewer men to protect her. Even without understanding their language, Tachibana did realize she verbally gave them the order to keep them pinned down. But sadly, this excuse simply wouldn't hold any water. Not with the person they were meant to protect lying dead...

I guess that's the same no matter what organization you're in...

For a moment, Tachibana thought back to his own superior, and how he kept pressing his subordinates for achievements. What superiors like him said wasn't entirely unreasonable in most cases. Their ways of dealing with a situation were often apt and fitting.

But that was only logical in hindsight. A countermeasure pieced together after the fact, with all the results lined up and clear to see, was different from a countermeasure that one had to think of on the spot when faced with a situation. It was only natural, but most people wouldn't forgive the discrepancy. They'd simply cut down those responsible with the blade of sound judgment, with no consideration for the situation or environment.

Anyway, I should watch things play out for the time being...

He wasn't pinned down as tightly as before, but the knights were still larger than he was, so trying to face both of them would've been reckless. He sent an eye signal to Kusuda, who was being pressed on the floor next to him. Kusuda wasn't his partner for nothing, and a single glance was all it took to convey his intentions to Kusuda, who mouthed the words "roger that" silently in response.

All right, all that's left is...

As a human being, Tachibana couldn't accept the murder that took place before his eyes. But his sense of justice and morals could only be maintained assuming his life wasn't in danger. Biting his lips, Tachibana cast a sharp glance in Kouichirou's direction.

"Now, then..." Kouichirou curled his lips up into a smile as he helped Asuka to her feet.

"Grandpa?" Asuka furrowed her brows at that smile.

Few people would smile in such an unusual situation. Perhaps things were different for madmen without distinctions of good and evil, but as far as Asuka knew, Kouichirou's personality was that of a rational, if a bit unconventional, old man. He might have something of a mocking smile every now and then, and was idiosyncratic enough to tease people at times. But generally speaking, he was a good person who loathed injustice.

Right now, however, he was being overly suspicious. Glances of doubt and reproach were being turned toward him, but his smile didn't diminish in the slightest.

"I've kept up my training, but it's been some time since I drew Ouka last... It's a relief to see my skill hadn't dwindled."

Those words made Asuka realize what sword was gripped in his hand.

"Isn't that one of the swords in the alcove...? The ones you wouldn't let Ryoma touch?"

It was still dripping with blood, but it was definitely one of Kouichirou's beloved swords. She'd never seen it drawn, but having visited the estate many times to help with the cleaning and cooking, she'd seen this sword plenty of times. She wouldn't mistake it.

"But... Why?"

What was his personal, beloved katana doing here? The obvious answer was that Kouichirou brought it over, but that wasn't what Asuka was doubting.

Why? Why did he bring a sword sitting in the alcove? And two of them, at that...

True, Asuka did scream when everything started, so it wouldn't be surprising if her scream reached Kouichirou's ears. He may have realized something was wrong and grabbed a nearby katana as he sprung up to help her. But if that's the case, why choose to bring two heavy, unwieldy swords?

It's like he knew we'd end up here from the start...

In Asuka's mind, the realistic scenario would be that he'd been confused by Asuka's scream and grabbed whatever was at arm's reach. But the less

believable scenario was that he already knew this would happen ahead of time.

“Take this... Keep it for now, for self-defense.” Kouichirou handed Ouka over to Asuka.

“Huh? Wait just a second... What is this?” Asuka reacted with confusion as she took the sword with both hands.

“Don’t worry, I just need to deal with the other people here.” Kouichirou shrugged. “And if I use Ouka all the time, this one might become moody.”

With that said, Kouichirou picked up Kikka, which lay on the floor, and gently stroked its scabbard with his finger.

“My apologies, dear. Asuka was in danger so I had to... All right?” He whispered like a man trying to calm down a disgruntled woman, and drew Kikka from its scabbard. “There’s still four left. That’s twice as many as Ouka cut. Let that encourage you, yes?”

Kikka’s blade seemed to shiver slightly, as if to deny Kouichirou’s words...

“Oh... So twice as many won’t satisfy you... I understand, dear... But things won’t end just by cutting our way out of this place... You’ll have your share later on.”

Kikka’s blade stopped shivering at those words.

“Then let us begin.”

With those words leaving his lips, Kouichirou stepped forward. His hands hung down in a relaxed manner as he walked in a natural, calm stride. Kikka was gripped lightly in his right hand, its tip turned down toward the floor.

It was like he was taking a walk near the estate.

“H-Huh? Grandpa!” Asuka couldn’t help but raise her voice in surprise.

She knew very well how skilled he was, but he was still up against four knights, clad in armor and twice his size. Perhaps things would be different if this were a surprise attack, but the knights would hold the advantage in a straight-on fight.

The knights, on the other hand, had an entirely different impression of the

situation.

“S-Stay back! Don’t come any closer!”

Perhaps losing his nerve at the atmosphere, one of the knights holding Kusuda down grabbed his spear and got to his feet.

“You monster!”

Perhaps taking after his comrade, one of the knights holding Tachibana down drew his sword in fear. His sword was held in a middle-level posture, but its tip shook nervously. Kouichirou sneered as he watched them get up.

“Are you this terrified of a decrepit old man?”

“Stop screwing around... No one’s afraid of you!”

But of course they were. They already saw for themselves how transcendent his skill was. The man cut a knight in half through his armor. But they couldn’t afford to admit their fear, even if they knew how obvious their bluffing was.

“There’s plenty of men of your level in our country!”

“Oh, is that so...? My, my...” Kouichirou nodded grandly. “You must be extremely skilled, then... I’m looking forward to this.”

The way he nodded and spoke seemed to imply the opposite of what his words were saying, though. The way he spoke could only be described as provocative and irritating.

“You dare look down on us?!”

Their hearts, shivering with terror, were now also filled with scorn. That stirred the knights’ emotions, which were already far from calm. Still, they had some intelligence. The two exchanged nods and moved in two different directions.

“Oh...”

Watching the knights spread out so as to close in on him from both directions, Kouichirou raised his brows as if pleasantly surprised. It was a tactic that made utmost use of their two on one advantage. It was an orthodox, inflexible sort of tactic, but it was the most optimal answer they could employ in this situation.

But against Kouichirou and his experience of many battles, it was an extremely bad idea.

““Die!””

The tip of the spear thrust forward, aiming at Kouichirou’s throat, while the other knight slashed horizontally toward him. At that moment, Kouichirou turned his body toward the knight with the spear as his free, loose right hand moved like thunder. It was like a leaf fluttering through a stream. He easily avoided the powerful spear thrust and slashed his opponent in one go, from his left leg up to his right shoulder.

He cut through the knight’s arm even as he held the spear aloft, after which Kouichirou switched Kikka to an upward stance in one fluid motion. The following moment, the loud sound of metal clashing rang out and red sparks filled Asuka’s field of vision. The other knight crumbled to the floor with an animalistic howl.

“Hmph. You’ve at least put a bit of thought into your tactics, but that was still child’s play... All you people seem to talk a big game, but are amateurs when it comes to real combat... I suppose that would work on the average person since you can use martial thaumaturgy... I suppose that’s that, though...”

A splitting blow from the top of the knight’s head down to his chest, while he still had his helmet on. Having completed this astounding feat, Kouichirou scoffed with displeasure.

“Shit! He’s making fools of us!”

Losing his nerve at the fact that his allies were falling one after the other, the knight holding Tachibana down panicked and changed his position to draw his sword. The knight’s hold on Tachibana slackened as he made to get to his feet.

That was the golden opportunity Tachibana had been waiting for.

Now!

Tachibana swiftly turned his body and grabbed the knight’s arm with all his might. At the same time, he kicked his left knee, which was propped against the floor, forward and coiled both legs around the knight’s neck.

A forward triangle choke hold. Before the war, the education system in high schools, universities, and technical schools had judo lessons that focused on pinning techniques. This became known as ‘technical school judo,’ and this technique was one variant of the triangle hold used in the consummate art of judo.

If this technique was performed perfectly, the victim couldn’t escape it. Regardless of any attempts to escape, they would soon faint due to the blood to their brain being cut off. For Tachibana, this technique was something of his own ultimate attack, which he had developed through years of training and mastered with much sweat and blood.

However, Tachibana made one critical miscalculation. He didn’t account for what his opponent was wearing.

Damnit! His helmet’s in the way!

Normally, Tachibana would have won the moment he forced the opponent into this position. But right now, he was facing a knight clad in full armor, and his coiled legs did nothing to constrict the knight with his helmet on.

Still, his counterattack wasn’t in vain.

“Ugh, you slippery bastard, what are you doing?!”

The knight cussed angrily, sinking his gauntleted fist into Tachibana’s face. It was a fist delivered from a man with his body augmented by martial thaumaturgy and wearing heavy gauntlets. Had it been delivered from a proper stance, the punch would have packed the same force as an iron hammer being swung at full force.

Had he taken such an attack straight on, Tachibana’s head would have been crushed like a pomegranate. But since he extended his hand with his body bent, even with martial thaumaturgy augmenting his fist, the blow wouldn’t be enough to kill Tachibana outright. With the intense sound of the blow ringing out in the room, a red flower of blood bloomed over Tachibana’s face.

Damnit! I don’t care if I have to use an arm lock. I have to lock his joints somehow... I’m not letting go, no matter what!

Blood dripped down freely from Tachibana’s split forehead, seeping into his

eyes and dyeing his vision red. With his eyelids adhering to each other and his consciousness gradually fading, Tachibana used every bit of force he could muster to keep his opponent's elbow joint locked. He knew the moment he let go would also be the one when the candle of his life would be blown out all too easily.

He didn't know how long it took, but Tachibana eventually felt the knight's body go limp.

Wait, what? Did he just go limp...?

The next moment, his suspicious thoughts were disturbed by the sensation of a warm fluid spreading out against his stomach.

"You can't see because of all the blood, can you...?" Kouichirou said calmly, as Tachibana scrambled to get the knight's body off of him.

"Y-You...! That voice, you're Mr. Mikoshiba!"

"Mr. Tachibana... Sorry, but would you mind staying down just like that for a bit longer? It'd get troublesome if you started thrashing around in that position. Don't worry, I'm just going to save your young friend who's struggling over there. It won't take long."

Mere seconds later, Tachibana heard the last remaining knight scream in pain.

"I sprayed some perfume on it, so it might sting. I'm sorry I can't do any more... Just try to bear with it."

Asuka took her personal face sheet out of her pocket and applied it to Tachibana's face. It was the kind one could find in any convenience store, and Asuka carried it with her at all times in case she didn't have time to shower after morning practice at school.

"Ugh..."

"I'm sorry... Does it sting?"

She tried to wipe around the wound without touching it, but noticing him wince despite that, Asuka lowered her head apologetically. She wanted to ensure she got the same refreshing feeling one has after wiping their sweat away, so she got a skincare sheet that was particularly thick with menthol.

That wouldn’t normally matter much, but that did make it ill-suited for wiping around an open wound. The usually pleasant stimulus of the menthol made the wound burn with pain regardless of whether it made direct contact.

But of course, expecting a more reliable method of treatment given the situation was asking for the moon. There wasn’t a drop of water to be found in the room, and still, they couldn’t leave Tachibana as he was. He’d have to at least be capable of protecting himself.

“It doesn’t look like you took any damage to your bones...” Asuka whispered with concern in her voice as she tied her handkerchief to his head as a makeshift bandage. “Still, we need to stitch it as far as possible... And you should probably get a CT scan of your head...”

For the time being, the only visible problem was that his wound was still open and bleeding. Still, it was a blow to the head, so it would obviously be best for him to go get checked at a hospital.

However...

“Believe me, there’s nothing I’d want more right now...” Tachibana said, regarding Asuka with a wry smirk.

“Yeah...” Kusuda returned after looking around the area and heaved a heavy sigh. “I’d love to take Mr. Tachibana to the hospital too, but... We don’t even know where we are right now.”

“Any luck with your cell phone?”

“Nada. I’ve tried walking around, but I’m still not getting any bars. I don’t think this place has any reception at all.”

“Tch. Figures...”

He’d suspected as much, but Tachibana couldn’t help but click his tongue at Kusuda’s answer. Not getting reception was a fatal blow in a society where mobile phones were indispensable. They were even used for navigation in extreme situations like mountain climbing. Even in a place like Mt. Fuji, which was registered as a world heritage site, cell phone reception was available in all but the remotest of routes.

Of course, nature could interfere with things, and depending on the situation, there might not be reception atop mountains. But compared to the time before cell phones became commonplace appliances, it was a night and day difference.

Phones enabled one to relay messages to others regardless of time and place, making it an undoubtedly wonderful invention. Still, it was hard to deny that modern people were constantly bound to their cell phones.

Regardless of the pros and cons, though, a functional cell phone would very much help save them from this particular predicament.

“How’s your wound looking?”

While Tachibana was trying to think of a way out of this situation, Kouichirou spoke up. That made Tachibana jolt up. The man standing before him was a murderer, and Tachibana couldn’t help but fear him.

He understood, of course, that given the situation, Kouichirou had saved his life. But speaking to a man who slew six human beings with a katana before his very eyes still strained his nerves. Even Asuka, who was related to him, seemed to clearly fear him.

It’s like she’s torn between relief at being saved and guilt at seeing him kill six people... I can’t blame her.

What would have happened if Kouichirou hadn’t shown up when he did? There was no way of knowing for certain, but it wasn’t hard to imagine that it wouldn’t be anything good. But at what cost did they avoid that tragic future? They were people of the modern age and members of a developed society, where the value of life was treasured above all else. This situation weighed on them heavily.

“I gave him some first aid, but... Grandpa, what were you doing just now?” Asuka replied faintly, her gaze falling on the objects gripped in his hands.

“Oh, not much... Just gathering some things we’ll need going forward...”

With that said, Kouichirou threw the two swords he was holding over to Tachibana and Kusuda.

“Mr. Mikoshiba, are these...?”

The weight of the weapons felt real in their arms. The reality of it all filled Tachibana with doubt.

“Don’t worry, they probably won’t sell for much, but they’ll do for self-defense. At worst, you can use it as a staff to help you walk around.”

“A staff...?”

Kouichirou shrugged his shoulders in a tired fashion at Tachibana’s confusion.

“Don’t tell me you’re planning on just sitting here and waiting for someone to rescue you, Mr. Tachibana. Your cell phones aren’t working, after all.”

Tachibana fell silent. He couldn’t come up with a response to that.

He’s right... We have to run away from here...

They were long past the stage where they could expect to negotiate. Wherever they were, there were six people lying dead here. True, it was Kouichirou who did the deed, but they had no way of proving it. And even if they did, who was to say the comrades of these six dead people would believe them? No one would easily believe the excuses of someone who potentially killed a friend of theirs. Young Kusuda, however, hadn’t quite realized it, though.

“No, first we need to have Mr. Tachibana treated. This situation is really bad, yes, but there must be someone outside that door. We can ask them for details and for directions to a hospital.”

“No, Kusuda!” Tachibana forbade Kusuda from acting on his intentions to negotiate with the nearby people, his tone rough.

“But... Mr. Tachibana...”

Kusuda’s idea was valid, if one were to consider the situation rationally. Tachibana’s bleeding was only barely treated, and the wound wasn’t stitched. A blow to the head could cause epidural hematoma. Just because Tachibana was all right now didn’t mean he wasn’t in dire need of treatment.

But all of that was assuming they were in Japan, or in any country they knew, for that matter.

I always thought this kid was only pushing for promotion, but I guess I

misjudged him...

Tachibana could tell from the expression in Kusuda's eyes that the man was seriously worried for him. Tachibana could only smile, half honestly at seeing this unexpected side of his partner, and half bitterly at his own lack of judgment.

A colder, more rational person would leave Tachibana behind, deeming him a burden. But Kusuda's kindness only made Tachibana more hesitant to have him face danger.

"You understand it now too, don't you? This isn't Japan."

Tachibana's words made Kusuda hold his breath for a moment, before putting on a fake smile on his lips.

"What are you saying, Mr. Tachibana? If this isn't Japan, then where are we? I know those people weren't Japanese, but that doesn't mean we're somewhere else. I hear we've had a lot of people overstaying their visas, so they're probably from some dangerous country in Europe."

"You think someone in the mafia would use swords and spears?" Tachibana shook his head wearily.

"W-Well... I mean, firearms are heavily regulated... Plus, I hear the Chinese mafia uses swords during internal feuds, and..."

"Yes, but do they prance around in medieval armor?" Tachibana bitterly laughed off his explanation. "Wake up and smell the coffee, Kusuda... We have to. I don't really know what's going on, either. But..."

"Mr. Tachibana... Don't..." Realizing what his partner was about to say, Kusuda shook his head in childish denial. His eyes were welling up with bitter tears.

He understands... But his reasoning and common sense are getting in the way... And he's willfully ignoring the fact that there's only one person who really knows what's going on...

This was an answer anyone would come to after giving it enough thought. The answer to all of their questions was in one man's hands. And so Tachibana

steeled his resolve and turned to face Kouichirou.

“Still, I’ll have to just accept it... This isn’t Japan. And you’re the only one who can explain what’s really going on here, Mr. Kouichirou Mikoshiba.”

The moment his words echoed in the room, Asuka’s and Kusuda’s gazes focused on Kouichirou.

“Oooh, am I?” Kouichirou said, shrugging his soldiers in an exaggeratedly surprised manner.

But Tachibana didn’t say that without any basis.

“Yes, you are.”

The two locked gazes. It felt like a defendant awaiting the judge to sentence them to death. But still, the eyes of the three were full of suspicion and doubt. Kouichirou knew that as long as the issue wasn’t addressed, Asuka wouldn’t trust him. Their doubts were natural, after all.

“Well, of course...” Kouichirou sighed after a long silence. “But we haven’t much time at the moment. Sit down, you three.”

He then sat down on the floor, prompting the others to sit in a circle with him.

“So, what do you want to know first?”

“There’s a lot I’d like to ask, but... First, where are we?” Tachibana gathered his courage to mouth that question. “I can tell that this isn’t Japan, but...”

Seeing that Tachibana was struggling to finish the question, Kouichirou did so for him.

“There’s also the question of why we’ve found ourselves here, right?”

“Y-Yes... That’s right.”

This was the question on everyone else’s minds. But his initial response went on to betray everyone’s expectations.

“If you’ll let me deny something, I’d like to say I didn’t know where we were at first.”

That left everyone slightly confused.

At first? So does that mean that now *he knows where we are?*

From a context standpoint Tachibana's interpretation was correct, but the problem was the meaning behind those words.

"Just... What do you mean by that?"

"I can indeed tell you where we are, but that doesn't mean I was the one who brought you here."

"Stop screwing around..." Tachibana's expression changed, feeling his initial suspicion being popped like a balloon.

He did indeed suspect that possibility. If Kouichirou took them here, it could explain things. If anything, this was the easiest explanation to swallow. But its biggest problem was that it was extremely unlikely that this was the case. Still, he couldn't help but feel guilty at having the person he suspected point out the fact he doubted them. That was simple human nature.

"To answer your first question, this is a country called the Kingdom of Beldzevia, located in a world called Earth," Kouichirou said, eyeing Tachibana with a sidelong glance as the man tried to come up with an excuse.

The words rang vividly in their ears.

"Beldzevia..." Tachibana repeated the name blankly, to which Kouichirou nodded.

"Assuming my memory isn't betraying me. It's on the south end of the western continent... A kingdom belonging to a cluster of small nations collectively called the Southern Countries."

Honestly, everything he said sounded like rambling to them. Neither of the detectives had ever heard of a country by that name. Plus, "a world called Earth" and "Southern Countries" all rang oddly in their ears. While Tachibana now knew he wasn't in Japan, that didn't mean he could swallow this story so easily.

"But... Why are we in this Kingdom of Beldzevia? We were in Japan at least until we visited your estate, right?" Tachibana asked.

"Of course." Kouichirou affirmed his claim.

“Then why? How?”

Kouichirou dropped his gaze to Misha Fontaine’s severed head, which was lying on the floor.

“This woman who called herself Misha called us here.”

“Called us?” Tachibana tilted his head at that word.

“Perhaps that was a bit hard to understand... Right, then perhaps saying that we were summoned into another world be more clear?”

It was hard to believe that sentence had left the lips of an adult man. It would feel apt to tease him for what he’d just said, but Tachibana didn’t feel inclined to laugh him off. He instinctively knew that this was the undeniable truth.

A long silence fell over them. The words they wanted to hear, and the truth they demanded be shared with them. Those were about to wash away the notions of common sense Tachibana cultivated throughout the entirety of his life.

“Wait a second! Assuming... Assuming this really is where you say we are, why did it have to be us? Why are we here?”

“Why they summoned you, eh...? In a word, they wanted slaves. And as for why it was you they summoned... Well, to put it bluntly, you were unlucky.”

That was a precise way of putting it. Putting aside Kouichirou, who was supposedly the cause of this incident, and Asuka who shouldered his fate, Tachibana and Kusuda were simply unlucky. After all, the chance of being summoned to this Earth from their world was effectively six billion to one or two. It was astronomically slimmer than the thousand to one chance of winning the lottery. Put more poetically, the goddess of fate must have truly hated these men.

But as precise a description as it was, it didn’t mean it was any easier for them to accept. When faced with misfortune, people reacted badly to being told they were simply unlucky. As the three of them couldn’t digest what Kouichirou said, Kusuda’s face turned visibly red.

“Bullshit! You really expect me to believe that?!”

His suppressed emotions burst out. Red flames of anger burned in Kusuda's eyes. It was his rage at the inexplicable situation that befell him, and his anger at Kouichirou who explained it all too calmly. In truth, he was just venting his anger, but it was hard to fault him for it. No one could simply accept that they were in this situation out of bad luck and nothing else.

"Sit down. Mr. Mikoshiba isn't finished yet." Tachibana stopped Kusuda, who looked to be on the verge of lunging at Kouichirou.

"But!" Kusuda tried to argue.

"Sit down!" Tachibana cut him off, repeating himself.

Tachibana wasn't going to take Kouichirou's claims at face value either, but there was something he had to ask the man at all costs. And that took priority over everything else.

"I apologize."

"I don't mind."

This was of course only a token apology, but Kouichirou didn't intend to rile up the situation any further.

"So, was that all you wanted to ask?" Kouichirou asked.

"There's one last thing I want to ask..." Tachibana remarked. "Can we go back to Japan?"

That was the single most important question. They were obviously anxious to return to Japan. Kouichirou, however, shook his head slowly.

"Hmm... It will be difficult."

"Do you mean it'll take time to do that?"

Kouichirou shook his head again.

"That's part of it, of course, but even if you resolve all the problems perfectly, and sacrifice much to do so, whether you'll be able to go home is still dependent on luck."

His answer was very much a death sentence, and what Tachibana hoped he wouldn't have to hear. But on the other hand, they did contain a sliver of hope.

“Grandpa, there’s something else I need to ask.” Asuka, who held her tongue so far, whispered. “How... How do you know so much about this?”

“Asuka...”

And this was the one question Kouichirou wanted to hear the least.

“Tell me, Grandpa... Why?”

Asuka was torn between desire to believe her family on one hand and overwhelming doubts on the other. Crushed between those two conflicting emotions, large tears gathered in her eyes.

Asuka and Kouichirou looked at each other, their gazes locked. He didn’t want to tell her, but he knew she had a right to know.

I have no choice...

Kouichirou steeled his resolve, but in the end he never did bring himself to speak. He was cut off by the sudden sound of the room’s door being battered violently.

“Blast, they’re on to us!”

It seemed Beldzevia’s people had finally realized something was wrong. Kouichirou clicked his tongue, taking out a small leather rucksack and pushing it into Asuka’s arms.

“You have Ouka, right? Good. Keep it for self-defense. The money in this sack should help you stay fed for a time. And remember! This isn’t Japan, or our world. Don’t trust others too easily, and never beg your enemies for mercy!”

“Huh? Wait, what do you mean?!”

Asuka couldn’t keep up with the changing situation, but Kouichirou spurred her forward.

“I’d love to explain, but we’re out of time. The people out there know something’s wrong, and they’ll be breaking through the door soon... I’ll keep them occupied, so you run off with Mr. Tachibana and Mr. Kusuda.”

Kouichirou drew Kikka from its scabbard. His expression looked resolved to defend them to the death. Even with his skill, fighting in the middle of enemy

territory while protecting Asuka was a tall order. The plan with the highest chance of all of them leaving alive would be for the other three to run to safety while he kept their pursuers occupied.

I thought I might be better off getting rid of them at first, but I suppose I'll end up leaving Asuka in their care... That young one, Kusuda, doesn't seem to understand the situation quite yet, but Tachibana's coming around... It's better than sending Asuka out into this world alone...

He'd considered cutting the detectives down, but upon seeing Asuka interact with them, he changed his mind.

Asuka was shocked to see him kill people in cold blood, even if it was to keep her safe, and hearing his explanation only made her suspicious as to how he knew so much about this place. Perhaps he would eventually be able to explain everything and clear her suspicions, but now wasn't the time.

Had he slain Tachibana and Kusuda in that situation, deeming them to be obstacles, Asuka would have forever lost her trust in him. She would oppose his instructions and at worst run off on her own. And that would defeat the whole purpose of him returning to this world to protect her.

"But... But!" Asuka said, her words clinging to him.

"Enough, just be quiet and do as I say!" Kouichirou cut her off.

True enough, time was against them.

"Mr. Tachibana, Mr. Kusuda! Keep Asuka safe!"

Confirming the two nodded in agreement, Kouichirou held his sword up, facing the stone wall opposite the door.

"Forgive me, Kikka, but I must borrow your power."

The moment that whisper left Kouichirou's lips, Kikka's blade lit up with an odd, purplish glow. Feeling his prana surge up, Kouichirou opened all seven of his body's chakras.

The next moment, a shout rose up from the bottom of his stomach, echoing through the room.

"Hurry, over here!"

Having spoken, Kouichirou rammed himself against the wall.

“Huh? No way... How is this...?”

The wall caved in against his body. Where once was rock, there now remained a square hole, large enough for a person to fit into. Kouichirou’s slash, delivered from the stance of eight directions, tore through the stone wall as if it were made of paper. The cross-section was as smooth as a mirror’s surface, making it clear that his slash was delivered with perfect precision.

Asuka was rendered speechless by the sight before her eyes. Indeed, merely describing what had just happened as the work of a master swordsman wouldn’t be enough to explain this. True, some ancient sword masters were said to be capable of cutting not just through armor and splitting helmets, but even to slash through thick Go boards made of wood from the nutmeg tree. But what Kouichirou just did exceeded even those legends.

Perhaps the truly frightening thing here wasn’t just his own skill, but rather the sharpness of Kikka’s blade. It slashed through a stone wall that was several centimeters thick without so much as chipping in the process.

“Miss Kiryuu! We have to hurry!” Kusuda swiftly stooped by the hole in the wall, a sword in hand.

He looked outside, and then motioned with his hand for them to come.

“It’s all right. The coast is clear!”

“Mr. Tachibana, go ahead.” Asuka said.

“Miss Kiryuu... I’m sorry.” Tachibana apologized.

In this situation, it would make sense to let Asuka go first, but right now, Tachibana was injured. They couldn’t let him go at the back of the line. He likely sensed her consideration and went into the hole without any further argument.

“Grandpa...”

Asuka looked at Kouichirou’s face. There was so much she wanted to say, and plenty she needed to ask. And she wanted to apologize for suspecting him...

“Do not let it torment you. It is my fault for not telling you anything.”

“But...”

“It is fine. Ouka and Kikka are drawn to one another. So long as you hold onto that sword, we will meet again. I will catch up to you... Aah, do not look so concerned, child. No knight that shuts themselves in the castle with their king, never knowing the field of battle, shall match me.”

Kouichirou cracked a smile and placed a hand over Asuka’s head, patting it gently.

“Listen to me. Once you leave this country, head north. Head for the company of a country called Helnesgoula. That place should be relatively safer than the other countries.”

“All right. I will...” Asuka nodded weakly.

“Good... In that case... Go!” Kouichirou gently pushed her back. “It will be alright. I will find you later on. We will regroup.”

So much was still left unsaid. But right now there was no time to exchange words with Kouichirou anymore.

“Now... This is for the best.”

Kouichirou stood still silently, watching Asuka disappear into the hole. But soon enough, the door flew open with a heavy sound and a group of fully armed knights rushed into the room.

“What is this?! Is Lady Fontaine all right?!”

“No good, they’re all dead!”

Screams echoed through the room.

“You! Did you do this?!”

Before long, the knights surrounded Kouichirou, who stood in place composedly, and one of the men stepped forward. His voice implied he was in his mid thirties. He must have been a fairly high-ranking knight, since his armor and appearance were a bit more extravagant than the others’.

He stepped forward with a flourish of his white cloak and pointed at Kouichirou as he raised his voice.

“I ask you, in the name of Beldzevia! Did you commit this atrocity?!”

Most people would shrink at his shout. But Kouichirou didn’t see much value in his words. In his eyes, cutting Misha down was as trivial and carried as much meaning as cutting a radish. All the lives in this Earth were equally meaningless to his eyes.

The only thing that mattered was which of them could be exploited and used, and which of them were simply to be removed.

“Indeed. What of it?” he said composedly, as calm as a breeze.

“I see... Then you’re the one who slew my wife!” The knight exclaimed and drew his sword, holding it in a middle-level stance. “You won’t get away with this, otherworlder. You shall feel just how heavy of a sin it is to trifle with House Fontaine. You shall feel it upon your flesh!”

This was the justified anger of a man who lost his wife. A bereaved family sentencing an assailant. But upon hearing those words, Kouichirou could only sneer.

“I see... So you’re that woman’s family... Well, isn’t that nice. She did die a bit too easily.”

His voice was that of an infernal demon.

The killing intent emanating from Kouichirou’s body filled the room.

“This is the price for dragging poor Asuka into this world... And you’ll pay it with your life.”

Kikka’s blade shined, as if to support his words. And at that moment, everyone in the room swallowed nervously. They could tell the meaning behind the way the blade shined...

“Impossible... that’s the shine of a Thaumaturgical Sword! And that energy... Is it some kind of cursed blade?!”

The knights around Kouichirou stirred nervously, faced with something that shouldn’t have been there.

“Just who are you?! An otherworlder who only just arrived in this world can’t have something like this!” Words of stunned shock escaped Count Fontaine’s

lips.

But the answer to that question would never reach his ears.

“You don’t need to know... Die.”

As he said those words, Kouichirou’s right hand mercilessly swept sideways.

On that day, a great incident took place in the Kingdom of Beldzevia, located in the south of the continent. Misha Fontaine, court thaumaturgist, was found slain at the hands of an otherworlder she summoned. In addition, a host of knights, led by Misha’s husband and a knight of the kingdom, Count Fontaine, was also slain.

And to make things worse, the otherworlder who committed those atrocities managed to flee into the kingdom and break out of the castle, with its heavy security of several hundreds of knights unable to contain him.

The King of Beldzevia viewed the situation gravely, and immediately issued a royal decree, gathering his most skilled knights to strike down the otherworlder. But it all ended in failure, with only more losses. And worse yet, the affair was discovered by spies of their neighboring countries, and soon spread to the other Southern Countries, namely the ones that held powerful armies. It tarnished Beldzevia’s name, gradually weakening its national power.

Chapter 2: Heading North

“Where is he now, I wonder?”

A calm wind blew through the clear, blue sky of the capital, Pireas. It was hard to imagine this kingdom was in a state of civil war just a short while ago. The view spreading out before Helena’s eyes was awash in vigor and tranquility. Overlooking that landscape through her office window, Helena whispered those words.

“You mean Sir Ryoma Mikoshiba... correct?” her aide, Chris Morgan, replied as he stopped leafing through a bundle of documents. “It’s been only ten days since he left the capital. Assuming nothing happened along the way, they should be approaching the fortress city of Epirus, near the peninsula’s isthmus.”

“Yes...” Helena whispered back. “That should be about right.”

Her gaze turned north.

“Do you have regrets?” Chris asked her.

Helena didn’t answer. She had no answer to give.

“Honestly, I feel a bit of guilt toward Sir Mikoshiba, too. I crossed blades with the man once before he left, and he was quite skilled. He hadn’t learned thaumaturgy yet, but his skill and talent as a warrior is beyond unusual. If nothing else, I see now it was more than luck that allowed him to beat Kael Iruna with his own two hands...”

“Even you think so? The one praised as the Divine Lance?” Helena finally cracked a smile at his words, and asked him back curiously.

“In terms of sheer competence, that man is far below me. However...”

“It would be different in a fight to the death.”

“Yes...” Chris nodded somberly. “I would beat him in nine matches out of ten, but in real combat...”

And indeed, Ryoma Mikoshiba claimed the life of Kael Iruna in a duel during the closing stages of the civil war. Kael Iruna, the man who was said to be

unmatched when it came to his skill with the sword and mastered the use of martial thaumaturgy. But many people claimed Ryoma's victory there was but a stroke of luck. Many of Chris's colleagues held that view regarding Ryoma.

Perhaps it's just... envy.

Ryoma's achievements in the civil war were extraordinary. He came to Princess Lupis's aid when she was in a position of overwhelming disadvantage, and swiftly united the nobles that maintained neutral status until then under her banner. He even performed the truly impressive feat of returning the national hero, Helena Steiner, from retirement back to active duty. He then went on to weaken the influence of general Hodram Albrecht, then head of the knights' faction.

His skill as a tactician was truly masterful. He established a successful bridgehead at the River Thebes, and during the battle for Heraklion, he swiftly stopped General Albrecht in his attempt to flee the country.

But the only thing all those achievements had earned him was a backwater region that served as a breeding ground for powerful monsters and pirates. An undeveloped land that had served as a penal colony for many years.

Effectively, it had no population. It was officially called a penal colony, but it was more of an execution ground. Any person exiled to that no-man's land was bound to become prey for monsters.

Queen Lupis lied, claiming this was a promotion meant to honor his achievements, but the only ones who believed that were the citizens of the capital. Anyone who knew the circumstances felt the way Ryoma was treated was unfair.

"But there was no other way it could have played out... Her Majesty ordered it, and objecting to the ruler's judgment would be..."

Chris picked up on Helena's state of mind, but he himself endorsed Queen Lupis's decision. Or rather, he had to endorse it. This wasn't a feeling that was exclusive to Chris, either — all of the knights and nobles who pledged allegiance to Queen Lupis and Rhoadseria felt the same way.

Lady Helena... I know you owe that man a debt. But still...

The nail that sticks out is beaten down first. Chris thought that was simply natural. In fact, that was how his promotion was withheld for years under General Albrecht's tyranny. He could understand the bitterness of being denied a fair evaluation all too well, but on the other hand, he had to wonder why such a bright person could mistake his own position. But for the sake of Rhoadseria's future, they couldn't afford for Helena to suffer the same fate Ryoma did.

"Between you and me, Her Majesty wishes to give the rank of general to Sir Mikhail. So if anyone were to catch wind of your displeasure, the country's position may well waver again... Do be careful."

Helena could only nod at Chris's advice.

Word of Mikhail's failures in the civil war had spread out and was common news across the country. Perhaps the fact he was considered one of the greatest swordsmen in the country influenced things. But the rumors circulating among the queen's associates held that it was some kind of conspiracy by someone who hated the way Mikhail threw his authority around as one of Lupis's aides.

But while the rumors were a bit exaggerated, there was some truth to them. He did charge in unauthorized over a personal grudge, and the fact he fell captive led directly to Queen Lupis agreeing to pardon Duke Gelhart.

Indeed, Mikhail had to pay for his failures by being subject to house arrest at his estate in the capital until just recently. Normally, anyone who failed this much would never keep an important post for that long.

However, the problem was that Mikhail Vanash was one of the people Queen Lupis trusted the most, and considering her past, it was only natural. During the time General Albrecht held control over all military affairs, Mikhail remained fiercely loyal to Lupis.

He'd been with her through thick and thin, even longer than Meltina Lecter, who stood as the queen's closest aide. They were so close that a few failures wouldn't be enough to shake the queen's trust.

Right now, Queen Lupis needed trusted retainers. The Kingdom of Rhoadseria was about to establish a new regime under its new queen, and it was natural for her to want to bequeath power over the upper echelons of the military to

those she trusted.

That wasn't to say Queen Lupis didn't trust Helena, of course. At least in terms of her loyalty to the country... But the queen couldn't help but question Helena's loyalty to her as a person. It had been over ten years since Helena was forced to retire due to General Albrecht's plot.

Queen Lupis, who was now in her twenties, was only in her early teens at the time. Perhaps things would have been different if she were an adult when it happened, but she only knew Helena to the extent of a royal child greeting a general in the palace's corridors or at her parents' dinner parties. Their relationship was too weak for Helena to honestly swear allegiance to Queen Lupis. Likewise, Lupis wouldn't easily trust a person she knew so little about.

It was a well-known fact among everyone in the castle that Queen Lupis only went against her own preference and gave Helena the position of general because everyone — knights and nobles alike — admonished her to do so. If Queen Lupis were to sense that Helena's loyalty toward her was wavering even in the slightest, she would gladly dismiss Helena and make Mikhail Vanash the new general.

Chris's concerns are justified... It's too soon for Mikhail to be a general. He'd need to spend ten more years as knight commander to gain that experience.

Helena didn't particularly dislike or look down upon Mikhail. She didn't doubt he and Meltina would be the ones to lead Rhoadseria's military in the future... But that was considering what would come years down the line. She believed that at present, it would be premature to put Mikhail in charge of the country's military affairs.

Composure, the ability to read into the depth of the situation, knowledge of tactics and strategy. Mikhail lacked all of those requirements at the moment. Driven by a personal grudge and a desire to regain his lost merit, he cast aside his reconnaissance duties and disobeyed orders. Letting a man like him hold the kingdom's army in the palm of his hand was a nightmare scenario in Helena's eyes.

Should such a narrow-minded person be given the rank of general, Rhoadseria's already unstable internal affairs would only be further disturbed,

and the surrounding countries might capitalize on this instability to launch an invasion.

Helena sighed, these thoughts weighing on her mind.

To begin with... Is Mikhail Vanash even suitable for the role of general...?

Being a general was indeed a role to which all knights aspired, but one needed to have certain qualities to sit upon that lofty seat...

And yes, those qualities had little to do with a warrior's ability to wield a weapon in combat. It took understanding of finances, diplomacy, and all matters related to the military, and of how all those matters are involved when it comes to war. In a way, one needed to be able to look at things from the perspective of God.

But from what Helena could see, Mikhail lacked those qualities. If he were to learn a bit of prudence he could serve as a fine commander on the battlefield, but he lacked the talent to grasp the happenings on all the possible fronts and grab hold of victory.

Though I suppose in that regard, very few people have that kind of talent...

From what Helena knew, there were only three people currently in Rhoadseria who possessed that sort of outlook. Herself, Ryoma who was now riding north, and that man who was living a life of reclusive retirement in his territory to the north.

We cannot let Mikhail be appointed to the role of general now... The best option would be to train that boy up and make him the general of the kingdom. But I betrayed Ryoma... I chose the kingdom instead... I put him on one end of the scales and the kingdom's future on the other...

She was well aware of how naive she was. Ryoma didn't help her out of the kindness of his heart, but it was thanks to him that she got the chance to exact revenge on Hodram. Regret and conflicting feelings swirled within her heart.

But she couldn't turn her back on the country she was born and raised in. Rhoadseria was teetering on the brink of crisis. From Helena's perspective, Queen Lupis was too immature to serve as the new queen. She knew too little about governing, diplomacy, economics... The one field she was somewhat

good at was military affairs, and even then, she was only passable. She was hardly reliable enough to serve as a ruler.

The causes for her inaptitude to be a queen were all too clear. Lack of experience, and her being far too kindhearted. In terms of sheer knowledge, Lupis was educated as a member of the royal family and knew more than enough to conduct her duties. She had a heart that loved the masses, and so normally one would think she would be a good fit for the role.

And yet, comically enough, she was all too unfit to rule. Her aides could not be called intelligent. The nobles' faction's survivors were conspiring against her. And worst of all, her heart was too kind to those she held dear, making her indecisive.

Arguably the worst factor was Queen Lupis's structure of government, wherein she took power over the countless problems that plagued Rhoadseria as a country. The biggest point of contention was her favoritism toward those she held close to her heart.

Her most extreme decision regarded Mikhail. He was confined to house arrest, but she ignored the objections of those around her. He returned to active duty as a knight within a mere two months. Of course, Queen Lupis would need people she could trust to reform the country. Helena recalled how Meltina used that reasoning to turn down those who stepped up to oppose the decision.

But restoring a man who had piled up failure upon failure after such a short period of time... All the while pushing away the man who contributed so much to the war — albeit a commoner — to the Wortenia Peninsula, made the queen's judgment questionable to those around her.

Queen Lupis, and Meltina who served her, didn't seem to understand how this reflected on them.

The civil war ended, and we managed to minimize the weakening of the kingdom's national power. But our domestic problems haven't diminished at all... No, if anything, things have gotten worse. What do those two think of that, I wonder...?

Helena frowned and sighed in melancholy again. On the surface, the kingdom

seemed to have regained its peace and stability. But Helena only saw that as a brittle castle built of sand. It was in a lull of sorts, and could crumble at any moment. That was Rhoadseria's current state.

If the queen's aides were more prudent, perhaps this wouldn't be the state of affairs. If the queen was more decisive, perhaps it would change. But that wasn't the reality of things. The wall of social status standing between commoners and the ruling class was simply too thick, and the boy who had achieved so much in this war between nobles and knights was shunned away.

If he were to be one of Lupis's aides and thus in a position to guide the kingdom, this critical condition may have been averted. Helena did object to him leaving the country, but that was only because she sensed he was worthy of entrusting the kingdom's future to. But sadly, Queen Lupis feared his transcendent skills and chose to push him away.

Helena heaved a heavy sigh and began reading through her documents. Worrying about things would change little. Helena made her choice. As the general of Rhoadseria, she elected to rebuild this country of her own will. And that was why she said nothing when Queen Lupis decided to undo Mikhail's house arrest. As general, Helena couldn't afford to object to the new queen's decision at this point, when the foundation of her rule hadn't solidified yet. If she did, it would split the country in two.

"Reorganizing the country is more important now," Chris said. "As unjust as it may be, we can't exchange this country's future for anything. And no matter what land he's been given, a commoner was promoted to noble status. I won't deny Her Majesty broke the promise she made to Ryoma at the beginning, but that was unavoidable, in the end."

Helena felt a hint of fear in Chris' words.

He's got a strong sense of duty... And the greater one's sense of duty, the more they expect others to stand by their own promises...

It was likely that the only ones to understand Helena's apprehensions were the handful of people working under Count Bergstone, who interacted with Ryoma directly.

Casting him out into that peninsula is likely the same as unleashing a viper

into the wild...

Helena could vividly imagine the anger and hatred crackling in Ryoma's heart like flames. They writhed under the surface, as slowly and certainly as a current of magma. Having spent many days plotting revenge for her dead husband and daughter, she could sensitively pick up on Ryoma's hidden intentions, try as he might to hide them.



His hatred for those in power... Especially for rulers and those in privileged positions... It's something I'm all too familiar with.

While Queen Lupis's decision wasn't an admirable choice in the slightest, it didn't really call for that much criticism. In this Earth, social immobility was a common, iron-clad fact, and so it was only natural for those in high positions to go forward with their choices unchallenged. But Princess Lupis got one thing critically wrong: the procedure.

She could have simply explained things ahead of time and received Ryoma's approval. Ryoma was hardly a man who couldn't be reasoned with, and given an honest, proper explanation, he would understand her point of view.

But the difference in class between a noble and a commoner reared its ugly head. Perhaps she didn't do it consciously, but her attitude eloquently declared that her intention was "Shut up and listen to what the queen says, commoner."

True, trampling over a commoner while hiding behind one's social status wasn't uncommon in this world, but Queen Lupis neglected to realize that those trampled won't always bear that humiliation silently.

I forgave them... But that boy...

Having been born a commoner, Helena went through many bitter frustrations during her youth. But she simply used that frustration as a springboard to reach the position of general through her work as a knight, climbing to the top. Quite a few people resigned at the time, fearing Helena's retaliation for those acts.

Helena never did get even with them, though. But that was only because Helena Steiner was a citizen of this kingdom. She restrained herself, thinking it would be wrong to lash out against her fellow countrymen.

But what would a person with no attachment to Rhoadseria do? Their heart would likely simply shake with humiliation and anger, believing the day they would exact revenge would surely come...

Will I eventually have to fight that boy...?

Each time that question crossed her mind, Helena shivered. Of course, she had no intention of raising her voice in warning of that situation, nor did she

intend to advise Queen Lupis to seek reconciliation.

Should Ryoma come for revenge, she would simply lock blades with him silently. She knew his anger was justified.

Five years...

The words rose in her mind. It was what Ryoma said the night before he left Pireas, at his farewell banquet.

This country has little time left...

The former Duke Gelhart was demoted to viscount, and had his territory changed from the grain producing region of Heraklion to an undeveloped land. Compared to when he controlled Heraklion, he was greatly lowered in status, but since his personal fortune remained untouched, he was still financially stable. He would surely regain his influence at some point.

And indeed, rumor had it that in the three months since the civil war ended, Viscount Gelhart had already begun to gather the remnants of the nobles' faction that had evaded punishment. Most of them were people that were driven out of their posts due to Count Bergstone and the other neutral faction nobles being promoted. They were plotting the nobles' faction's resurgence, with Viscount Gelhart as their leader.

And of course, this reformed nobles' faction used Princess Radine as its nominal figurehead. Viscount Gelhart's pardoning meant that Radine was officially recognized as a member of the royal family. It was only natural, since Queen Lupis accepted his explanation. But of course, the people who fought to prove the queen's legitimacy on the battlefield couldn't accept this state of affairs that easily.

Queen Lupis is even more badly cornered than before...

On the surface, the public order in the kingdom had improved and the markets were lively. In terms of the citizens' quality of life, the kingdom was certainly being rebuilt. But that was only a deceptive peace.

It was as if the country was ill and refused the surgery that would heal it, and was only functioning due to medicine suppressing the symptoms. On the outside, everything looked fine, yet the disease was slowly but surely ravaging

the inside of the patient's body.

The problem was that despite the fact that Queen Lupis won the civil war, she couldn't execute Furio Gelhart. Hodram, who was married to a Tarjan noble, had died. This left Rhoadseria and Tarja in a state of tension. They weren't in a state of war with Xarooda or Myest, but they were still diplomatically distant. Hostilities might break out with those two kingdoms at the slightest trigger. And on top of all that, there was a faction within the kingdom that plotted to drag Queen Lupis off her throne.

Ryoma estimated the amount of time Queen Lupis had left while considering all of those factors, and shared it with Helena. Five years... Or rather, five years at most. Things could very well fall apart even sooner. In fact, given the situation, it seemed very likely they would fall apart much earlier than five years.

"If you don't prepare accordingly in these five years, Queen Lupis might die... Though I suppose you know that already. But I'm telling you this, just in case... I did practically force you to be a part of this, after all."

Ryoma said that with a smile.

The moment she saw that smile, Helena realized he'd completely given up on Queen Lupis. He spoke purely out of concern for Helena... Warning her to not lead herself to destruction by obeying a queen that had no future.

"Five years..." The words slipped from her lips.

"Hmm? Did you say something?" Chris asked back, looking at her quizzically.

"No, it's nothing... Could you hand me the next document?"

Chris handed her the next piece of paperwork as requested. She looked through it quickly and stamped it with her seal. There wasn't much time until the day Ryoma predicted would come.

Ryoma... Live on... And then, once again...

Helena prayed from the bottom of her heart for the well-being of this mature boy who was young enough to be her grandson. Hoping they would someday meet again...

The sun shone brightly in the sky, illuminating the people walking across the highway. The scars left by the Rhoadserian Civil War were still vividly felt, and the circulation of goods was still inhibited in the country. But now, three months after the fighting had concluded, peaceful life was finally returning to Rhoadseria's civilians.

Among the people traveling along the highway heading north was a group holding up a particular banner. It was made from a black-dyed fabric. A flag of a double-headed serpent with gold and silver scales coiled around a sword. The serpent's crimson eyes seemed to glare at its surroundings.

Upon accepting the title of baron, Ryoma Mikoshiba had this flag made by one of Pireas's craftsmen, dubbing it the crest of the newly formed House Mikoshiba. The sword stood as a symbol of strength while the serpent stood for cunning and wisdom. A symbol that accurately signified Ryoma Mikoshiba's nature.

Before Ryoma's eyes was a gently sloping hilly region. Spreading out from both sides of the road were orchards, with the commoners who populated the nearby villages laboring to tend to them.

"Boy! We should be going over the ridge soon!" Lione turned around and called out to him, her crimson hair flapping mildly in the breeze.

"Right, finally... Not gonna lie, my butt's been starting to hurt," Ryoma said, raising his hips slightly to rub his aching behind.

"Hell, the nobles of the world would bury their heads in shame if they saw a baron like ya do that," Lione said teasingly, a sarcastic smile on her lips.

Ryoma knew full well how shameful his conduct was. By contrast, Laura, who was riding beside him, looked at him with genuine concern.

"My, Master Ryoma... It must hurt. Bear it just a while longer, yes? I'll apply ointment to it once we find lodging..."

Before Ryoma could answer, Sara cut into their exchange.

"No, you should not have to wait that long. If you'd like, you could move to the carriage. If you're inside there, we can apply ointment, and I think you'd be able to travel much more comfortably."

Apparently, the Malfist twins were in the middle of some climactic battle for Ryoma's affection.

"E-Erm... I'll be fine, you two. Gotta get used to riding a horse..." Ryoma replied, putting up with the pain.

Honestly, moving to the carriage is a bit tempting...

Up until now, Ryoma had no experience in horseback riding. In Japan, the only means of transportation typically used, aside from going on foot, were bicycles and cars. Depending on the distance, one might need to take a train or an airplane, but those were all much more convenient compared to a horse.

A car's seat was, of course, quite comfortable, but even a bicycle's saddle was much more pleasant than a horse's. Being a child of the modern age, Ryoma's behind was chaffed from sitting atop the saddle for a long time.

When they pursued Hodram, he shared the saddle with one of the Malfist sisters, so his knowledge of how to ride a horse was very basic and superficial. Any pretensions he had on the matter of horseback riding were completely gone after this ten-day journey on horseback.

He couldn't give in to temptation and move to the carriage here, though. After all, that would bring him into a situation where he'd have to let the Malfist sisters rub ointment over his exposed bottom...

And if I say 'no' the wrong way, they might start crying on me...

Ryoma actually made them cry over refusing their help once or twice when they first met. The Malfist sisters fundamentally placed their service to Ryoma above all. In a way they doubled as both maids and bodyguards, and so they often functioned as the former. They helped him change his clothes, cooked his food and fed him; they essentially tended to his every need.

Indeed, some nobles in this world did have maids help them with any and all affairs. Depending on their situation, they had their servants and maids help them with more personal matters. At times, this meant helping with the bedpans of the ill and the aged, but oftentimes — particularly in this case — those personal affairs took on a more sexual interpretation.

And so, Ryoma declining their service in this situation was a blow to the

sisters' purpose in being. They felt as if their very presence with him was being denied. It took him a full day and night to convince them this wasn't the case last time, and ever since then, there hadn't been any problems.

But recently, the sisters' attitude had shifted. Ryoma's becoming baron made them change their thinking, believing they now needed to serve him as maids would serve a noble.

Well, they're technically not wrong...

He might've been the lowest rank of noble possible, but a baron was still without a doubt a member of the aristocracy. And as such, he was supposed to expect the living standards and deference worthy of his station.

In the end, Ryoma could only chalk it up to a difference in culture.

"Well, just bear with it a bit longer! Once we're past this ridge, Epirus's castle walls should come into view," Lione said with an uncharacteristically cheery voice, stirring everyone as she felt the peculiar direction the conversation was heading.

The group of men led by Lione included the thirty-three members of Lione and Boltz's mercenary group, the Crimson Lions, as well as Gennou, Sakuya, the Malfist sisters, and Ryoma. They were too large a group to handle typical mercenary work, but too small to take control of a territory.

I'll need people who can handle paperwork...

The only people Ryoma could see around them had their specialties overwhelmingly tilted toward military and martial matters. They might be good for filing paperwork, but Ryoma intended to manage a country, and the current situation was unsatisfactory for those purposes.

Well, we can do that little by little... I won't be able to make the country I want overnight.

Ryoma whispered to himself with a small sigh and fixed his gaze forward, his heart burning with new resolve.

I will survive! And Lupis...! I will *get back at you for this... I'll see to it you pay for everything, with interest...*

Ryoma swore in his heart as he watched Epirus's walls gradually grow in size as he approached.

The citadel city of Epirus. The fulcrum of Rhoadseria's northern territories, located at the root of the Wortenia Peninsula.

The city was surrounded by a deep moat and stone walls standing dozens of meters tall. It had three entrances. Two to the east and west, and one to the north. To the south stood the regional governor's — Count Salzberg's — castle.

All of Rhoadseria's and Xarooda's citizens knew this city stood as the stalwart rampart defending the kingdom. Xarooda had attempted invasion from the west, but the fortress had successfully pushed them back, which helped cement its reputation.

But all of the city's denizens understood that the city they lived in was the lid to a crucible containing nothing but chaos...

†

Ryoma was now resting at an inn, located opposite of Epirus's main street. Ryoma's group had finally concluded the formalities, and had at last reached what could be considered the entrance to the Wortenia Peninsula.

As Ryoma was resting in his room, he held a meeting with the rest of their primary members, led by Boltz. Its purpose was to decide their future policy.

"I expected the defenses would be heavy given this is a border town, but they're doing more than just trying to defend against Xarooda." Boltz shrugged.

His vast experience as a mercenary was showing its worth. While everyone else had been taking a break in their rooms at the inn, he walked around the town's guild, gathering information.

"A breakwater to make sure the monsters don't flock into Rhoadseria?" Ryoma asked.

Boltz nodded.

"I heard a lot of rumors about the Wortenia Peninsula during my time as a mercenary, but this is a much more difficult land than I thought..." he said. "We'll have to really put in some effort if we're to make something of this

place.”

His words were met with small nods from everyone. They knew it would be a difficult land since the time they were back in the capital.

“That would mean we should prioritize our preparations in this city... Right?” Ryoma said.

Right now, what he needed was more detailed information about the peninsula and about this city, Epirus. He knew that walking into Wortenia in their present state would likely be suicide. It’d simply land them in the stomachs of monsters.

Ryoma and his group were lacking in everything, from equipment to topographical information. Apparently, the Wortenia Peninsula was dotted with pirate enclaves and demi-human villages. The key word was “apparently,” as there was no concrete proof of their existence. Even if there were such proof, it wasn’t as if they could barter with the pirates and demi-humans for food and water, anyway.

As such, food and water was their biggest concern, and until they formed a self-sufficient city, they would need to rely on Epirus for a stream of supplies. They’d need to find a company that would help them in that regard.

True to its name as the Fulcrum of the North, Epirus was dotted with countless firms of different sizes. Given the scope of their upcoming operations, they’d need a company that sells wholesale, while also not having too many attachments to the governor. There was a chance the governor might try to interfere with the trade.

“We’ll have to pick carefully from the companies here in Epirus,” Lione said.

“It’s like you said, Sis. If we just deal with any company we find, we could end up with the rug pulled from under our feet when we head deeper into the peninsula.”

They had already assessed the situation thoroughly. Every one of them was doing their best to ensure they survived.

“We will search for the right company...” Laura quickly allotted the two of them a role. “For now, we’ll check which businesses deal predominantly with

commoners. Will that be acceptable?”

“Yeah, please do.”

This was proof that Laura had a solid grasp on the situation. Sara likewise nodded quietly, showing she understood just as well.

“Then Boltz, you handle the guild. We need as much detailed information on Wortenia as you can get. Especially the positions of any rivers or lakes, and everything you can gather about what types of monsters are breeding there.”

“Understood, lad! Leave it to me!” Boltz drummed a fist against his chest assuredly.

Ryoma nodded, and this time turned to Gennou. No one was more suitable than he and Sakuya for the task of gathering information. Upon noticing Ryoma’s gaze, Gennou’s eyes glinted sharply.

“Gennou, I need you to investigate this city’s influential figures, namely Count Salzberg. Their family structures, their weaknesses, their strengths, everything! We’ll have to make this city our base for a while.”

“I see, milord... Having the influential figures of this city on our side would be ideal,” Gennou replied.

Ryoma’s expression became pleased.

“But don’t do anything that would make you stand out. Be especially careful around Count Salzberg. From what Lady Helena told me, he’s got a very... particular personality. The worst thing we can do is accidentally antagonize him.”

“Consider it done...” Gennou bowed his head reverently. “Do not worry, milord, by tomorrow I will have answered your expectations.”

“Boy... You want me to handle the mercenaries?” Lione asked.

Ryoma turned his gaze toward her. With Gennou and Sakuya investigating the town’s influential figures, Ryoma and Lione were the only ones left without a task. Lione knew her role well enough, though.

“Yeah... But not in the way you think. I want you to pick out the really skilled people, and do it behind the scenes... Honestly, now would be a good time to

build up our numbers, but given that we can't expect any income right now, that will be difficult..."

"Should I tell 'em we're looking for knights, then?" Lione asked. "Saying we're looking for knight candidates attracts a different crowd compared to if we say we're looking for mercenaries."

Ryoma shook his head. It was equivalent to looking for full time workers as compared to part time workers.

"No... Of course, in the future they might end up being our knights, but for now keep them employed as mercenaries. We should pick up and keep whoever looks worthwhile among them. And that way, we can filter out the problematic ones... See?"

"Problematic ones...?" Sara repeated the words quizzically.

"Like spies sent in from the governors of the neighboring countries," Ryoma answered with a light smile.

"Those would be annoying," Lione said in a teasing tone. "If we're hiring some nobodies we've never heard of before, why not hire groups like Arand's and Gran's? They have a great deal of respect for ya."

Ryoma met those words with a smile. He was close enough to those people that, if it weren't for Queen Lupis and her foul tricks, they all considered forming a new mercenary group led by Ryoma. Taking them along would usually have been the obvious course of action, but Ryoma didn't choose to do so.

"Well, I considered that... But I figured that since I'll be needing trustworthy people later on, I'd rather squander people I'm not as attached to... You know?"

"By the gods, you're such a frightening, evil man..." Lione cracked a thin, dark smirk.

"Investing in the name of a better future... I guess that about sums it up." Ryoma shrugged.

It would take years for this groundwork to begin bearing fruit. In a sense, this was something of a wasteful choice on Ryoma's behalf, given that his life depended on the success of his governing over the Wortenia Peninsula. But on

the other hand, preparing for what he was to do in the event his groundwork paid off was also an apt hand to play.

Whether this groundwork pays off or not is all a gamble that hinges on me being able to make this peninsula my land.

Ryoma's mind wandered to Gran and the others, who were now spread out across the continent. Lione was likely thinking the same thing. After a long moment of silence, Lione parted her lips to speak again.

"Well, I guess that's enough about Gran... So, I should hire them as mercenaries."

"Yeah, for the time being. We might not have money to pay any salaries later down the line, after all."

He honestly wanted to hire them as knights, but given how unclear their outlook was, employing them for the long term was too dangerous. They were better off with mercenaries that would simply stop working for them once they ran out of money, than with knights that might turn against them once things go sour.

"You might be right... Maybe refrain from hiring any more knights until the peninsula's development is underway." Being the leader of a mercenary group gave Lione some insight into how running an army is a high-cost, low-return endeavor. "Well, anyway, I'll handle it! How many people are ya gonna need, though? The skilled ones cost a pretty penny."

Skilled mercenaries requested higher wages, of course. Lione wouldn't be able to progress things without knowing what their budget was. Faced with her question, Ryoma turned his gaze to Laura. He'd let the Malfist sisters handle the tasks of depositing and withdrawing his money.



“We have roughly four thousand gold coins on hand,” she replied fluently. “That’s Master Ryoma’s personal wealth. Besides that, we have the five thousand gold coins promised to us by Queen Lupis, but we’re set to receive those at a later date.”

“Well, hell, I didn’t know you were rich!” Lione said, her eyes wide in surprise.

Her surprise was understandable. Four thousand gold coins was the wealth of a middle-tier noble. There were a few reasons as to why Ryoma had amassed such a fortune. First, there was the money and jewels he stole from the slaver Azoth when he rescued the Malfist sisters. That accounted for most of his funds, but there was also the money he earned as an adventurer and the reward he received for his activities in the civil war.

And the five thousand gold coins the Kingdom of Rhoadseria was to deliver to them in development funds was added to this. It gave the illusion that his financial situation was secure, but there were many problems to address.

“But we’ll be starting by building up a village, and it’ll be in an undeveloped, unpopulated land...”

It wasn’t outright impossible to develop a wasteland from the ground up in this world, but that was assuming it was only an undeveloped frontier, and not a blasted hell of a land.

“We’ll need a bit more leeway than this, eh?” Lione asked.

Ryoma nodded. It would take years from the point in time they built a stronghold in the peninsula until their income stabilized, and until then, these nine thousand gold pieces were Ryoma’s lifeline. Honestly, it didn’t matter how economical they might be. It wouldn’t be enough.

“Then how about five hundred golds?” Lione suggested. “With that I’ll get enough people for a year... About two hundred or so men. That should give us some leeway for buying water and provisions, right?”

“Yes, I think we’ll be able to manage that much.” Laura nodded.

“Roger, roger.” Lione nodded vigorously. “Ya alright with that, boy?”

Having led a mercenary group for years, Lione was capable of discerning a

mercenary's skill with ease. She was a perfect fit for this role. Except...

Two hundred men... So two hundred and thirty, including us...

How skilled the men they found could greatly influence their war potential, but compared to this Earth's logic, this was the number of men usually affiliated with a count's household. Except, those numbers normally consisted of knights, and a normal noble would be able to conscript their subjects in order to bolster their army.

They both held the same title of count, but Count Salzberg was in charge of defending a border and Count Bergstone was situated at the capital. The number of knights serving them wasn't the same, of course.

Thinking of it from that perspective, Ryoma's current number of men was certainly small. Perhaps it could be seen as more than enough of a military force given his status as a newly-formed baron household, but since he didn't have any people to conscript, his overall number of troops was quite clearly lacking.

The question is whether we can control Wortenia with all those powerful monsters crawling around... That'll probably be a difficult task.

Truth be told, if this peninsula could be controlled with a force of this size, one noble or another would have probably tried to do so already. After all, from just a geographical standpoint, the region was overflowing with benefits. A cursory look at the map made it blatantly obvious.

Being a peninsula, Wortenia obviously had access to the sea from the north, east and west, with the only inland route being to the south. That route was also a winding, serpentine road strewn with perilous cliffs and forests. It didn't give the impression of a solitary island, but upon closer examination, this no-man's land would be revealed to have a mountain of treasure.

Foolish as the nobles may have been, it was hard to believe no one ever tried to make this region their own. And indeed, someone else seemed to have reached the same conclusion as Ryoma.

"But I do believe we're a touch too understaffed to challenge that cursed land..." Boltz, who had kept quiet until now, parted his lips to speak. "It's obvious our funds are not bottomless, but what do you have in mind, lad?"

He led a mercenary group alongside Lione, so it was perhaps natural he would hold these doubts. Ryoma himself wasn't confident that his force of a bit over two hundred would be enough.

He's right, but even if we want to gather more troops, we can't do it now. We need more detailed information to craft a plan...

In strategy games, soldiers were but a number, a statistic on the screen, but in reality things were different. They need food, slumber, and clothes. The important part was knowing how to gauge the right number. Ryoma took a deep breath and put his thoughts into words.

"Yes, I agree with your concerns, Boltz. We may need more people... But Lione, keep gathering people like we decided. I'll observe the situation and think of something we can do."

He was only pushing the problem to a later date, but his conclusion was that there was no point thinking about it right now.

"Understood, lad... My apologies for speaking out of line." Boltz lowered his head, sensing the conflict in Ryoma's heart.

"Roger that, I'll see to it!" Lione tapped her chest with her fist.

This left Ryoma as the only one without a task.

"What do you intend to do, Master Ryoma?" Sara asked.

"Me...? I think I'll go meet Count Salzberg," Ryoma said.

"Epirus's governor? Why bother meeting with him...? Won't he just look down on ya for being a commoner upstart?" Lione said, with almost everyone else nodding in agreement.

Her suspicions were well-founded. It was Queen Lupis's betrayal that got them into this predicament, after all, and so being suspicious of the nobility felt like the natural response.

Gennou, however, seemed to be in agreement with Ryoma.

"Ah... A fine idea," he said.

"What do you mean, Gennou?" Lione hadn't caught on to the reason yet.

Her gaze fixed on the old man. Though it wasn't an antagonistic glare; merely a curious, questioning look. This was where Lione excelled. She was poised to hear and understand the other party's opinion.

It may seem like a simple trait to have, but it was actually quite hard to abide by it in practice. It was something the nobles of this world lacked as a whole, with Rhoadseria's aristocracy being the most striking example.

"True, the nobles of this land are rotten for the most part. We've seen that well enough... And indeed, just as you suspect, Lione, it is quite probable Count Salzberg is up to no good. But the reality of things is that Epirus neighbors Wortenia, and so meeting with its governor would be wise... And conversely, should milord not give his greetings, the count may hold it against him and attempt to harass him for it."

The idea of the count using that as a pretense to treat them unfairly felt vividly real to Lione. After all, if they were to survive in the peninsula, they would have to depend on Epirus for provisions. If they drew the governor's ire for whatever reason, he could pressure local companies, and that would increase their expenses.

"Aye... I can see that happening."

"Right? Nobles have a way of being very fragile about their sense of pride..."

Noble pride may have had a nice ring to it, but it was actually haughtiness and arrogance for the most part. They were blind to their own lack of respect toward others, while exceedingly keen when others were insolent toward them. Nobles of that type were the overwhelming majority. Everyone seemed satisfied with Gennou's explanation.

"Then it would be better if Master Ryoma approaches him first. That way the count won't have an excuse he can leverage against him," Sara concluded.

"I agree with Sara. Meeting him should give us a better idea of what kind of person we'll be dealing with. He may actually turn out to be in our favor."

Ryoma nodded at the Malfist sisters' advice.

"Yeah, for now I'll just meet him and see what kind of man he is. It should help me gauge if he's a foe or a friend to us..."

And then there's Lady Helena's warning... Beware Thomas Salzberg, the governor of Epirus and head of the ten noble houses of the north...

Helena told him this before he left Pireas, during their final meeting. When Ryoma asked her why he should be wary of him, she simply shook her head in silence.

She probably wanted me to confirm that for myself, without any prejudice...

Ryoma looked around the table, fixing his gaze on everyone, who nodded back at him. They all knew from painful experience that nobles and royalty weren't worthy of trust. That didn't mean that all nobles without exception were suspicious. The only way to find out was to confirm whether they could be trusted with one's own two eyes...

Well, the same holds true for us, I guess... Gennou Igasaki... It's about time we clear this out. And we need to decide how to deal with that man...

Gennou was an odd one. His granddaughter, Sakuya, was sent to assassinate him, but for some reason he decided to switch to Ryoma's side. By now, they both served Ryoma alongside Boltz and Lione.

But one wouldn't make that kind of choice out of whimsy. With that thought in mind, Ryoma cast a meaningful gaze in Gennou's direction.



“Milord... Is there anything you would like to tell me?”

Everyone left the room with the talk concluded, but Gennou had returned to the room on his own. Apparently he felt Ryoma’s gaze.

“Yeah... I’d like to ask you something.” Ryoma showed no regard for the fact that Gennou opened the door without so much as a single sound.

Hmm... So he felt my presence...? Perhaps my skills have dulled... Or not, it’s his abilities at play.

Gennou had seen many ruthless battles in his youth. He may have distanced himself somewhat from field work since joining the Elder Council, but his assassination skills were still at the top of his clan.

He really is the one the elders of the first generation sought...

Gennou’s gaze was fixed on Ryoma.

“What is it, Gennou?” Ryoma asked.

He picked up on the intense emotions in Gennou’s eyes. He turned a puzzled expression at the old man standing stock still at his room’s entrance.

“Ah, my apologies, milord...” Gennou lowered his head reverently. “Well? Do you need me for anything?”

“Ah, not much... Just a little request... Except I need to ask you something before that request, so that’s why I wanted for you to come back in.”

“Aye, understood, milord. Ask me anything you will.”

Ryoma called him back after breaking up the group, so it was apparently something he didn’t want Boltz, Lione and the others to hear.

It’s likely regarding me and Sakuya... He may have confidence in our work, but he can’t fully trust us.

Gennou swiftly picked up on Ryoma’s doubts. They did initially come to assassinate him, after all, and he’d been using them since without executing them. This was a show of Ryoma’s tolerance, of course, but at the same time he always remained slightly reserved around Gennou and Sakuya. It was proof he didn’t fully trust them.

But that's only natural... After all, I did not disclose everything to him...

It was a relationship where neither of them could fully trust the other. That didn't mean they were necessarily suspicious, but rather that they adopted a wait-and-see approach toward each other. But that could very well change depending on Ryoma's approach.

Do I tell him everything now...? No... It's too early. I can't entrust the clan's future to this man on my own discretion.

Ryoma Mikoshiba's skill as a warrior was top class, and he was a skilled commander and a talented tactician. He was also a tolerant leader. But that wasn't enough to make him worthy of being the Igasaki clan's master.

The clan's future hinged upon this decision. Gennou was understandably cautious and wary.

"I have just one question, Gennou... Why do you follow me?"

He'd apparently read Gennou's emotions and cut straight to the heart of the matter. The question touched on what Gennou kept hidden, and he could only meet Ryoma's query with silence.

"Can't tell me yet...?" Ryoma asked.

Gennou felt Ryoma's eyes on him.

I don't want to lie to him...

That emotion tightened Gennou's lips. A shinobi could lie as much as necessary, but that wouldn't earn him any real trust. And so his only choice was neither denial nor affirmation, but to simply remain quiet.

After a long moment of silence, Ryoma shrugged in resignation.

"Fine," he said. "You probably have your reasons. I won't force you."

Gennou's expression filled with surprise.

"Are you sure it's fine...?" the old man asked.

"Of course not. But I don't think you're up to anything malicious... You're being pretty secretive, but I figure I'll ask you again when the time seems right."

Ryoma could vividly sense that Gennou was serving him out of some sort of

purpose, and not a malicious one. If Ryoma felt even a hint of ill-will from Gennou, he would have disposed of him and Sakuya without any mercy. Even if they did have Japanese blood running through their veins.

That's fine. He'll tell me himself once the time comes. For now, we need to deal with that matter...

Ryoma switched gears. He needed every skilled person possible to lend him help.

"By the way, Gennou. I want to ask your clan to handle a task. Can I hire their services?"

"Why... Of course you can, milord."

Gennou regained his cool after Ryoma's surprising words. At the same time, his mind began coolly analyzing what Ryoma was going to ask.

He's asking for my clan... Is it because he doesn't want to move me and Sakuya away...? Then, whatever work it is, it's not around Epirus... It can't be! Does he want us to assassinate Lupis Rhoadserians?!

That was the most probable option right now, given Ryoma's personality. He hadn't known Ryoma for that long, but Gennou already had a good grasp of his character.

He never forgets a favor, but at the same time, he never lets go of his grudges.

Considering Queen Lupis maliciously forced him into governing the frontier land of Wortenia, it would come as no surprise if Ryoma would resort to having her assassinated. And yet, Gennou ultimately denied that conclusion.

No... That isn't the case here... He would gain too little by doing that now...

It might have been an option when they were still in the capital, but the peninsula was now right before their eyes. At this point, going to the trouble of killing Queen Lupis would achieve little.

Killing her now would just plunge the kingdom into chaos... Choosing to do that now, when he doesn't have a base of operations yet, would be reckless... In which case...

It would take several years to develop the Wortenia Peninsula into a proper

territory. Throwing the kingdom into a state of turmoil would make Ryoma lose the precious time he needed to build up this region. Ryoma was acutely aware of everything that was relevant to his interests, and would never make that kind of choice.

But what Ryoma said next was a most unexpected name.

“I want you to kill someone. His name is Wallace... Wallace Heinkel, the guildmaster of the port town of Pherzaad. And also his family.”

Gennou found himself tilting his head questioningly. He had naturally heard of the man who duped his current master. Their group had mentioned him rather often, as well. But by now, the business surrounding him was concluded.

“You look surprised,” Ryoma said. “Don’t understand my reasoning?”

“Correct...” Gennou nodded honestly. “Queen Lupis’s influence should have proved your innocence... Why kill him now?”

Is it just a plain desire for revenge...?

If so, Gennou’s high opinion of Ryoma would decrease significantly. The desire to get back at a man who set him up for a fall was understandable, but they were pressed for every coin they could save at the moment. A man who squandered his funds away on a personal desire for revenge had no future... And wasn’t worthy of being entrusted with the clan’s future.

But Gennou’s anxiety was misplaced.

“True, thanks to Lupis’s influence Lione and I are proven innocent. But that only means Lupis could render us guilty again, right...? And Wallace wasn’t particularly punished by this whole affair, either. He’s still working as Pherzaad’s guildmaster.”

That made Gennou realize Ryoma’s concerns to some extent.

“You suspect Wallace Heinkel might try to bare his fangs against us again?”

“He duped us once already. It’s only natural we’d hold a grudge against him, and he knows that... In which case, we’re a nuisance to him. A threat. At worst, he could join forces with Lupis to set us up again.”

Those words made Gennou consider that option as well. The Queen of the

Kingdom of Rhoadseria and a guildmaster. That would indeed be a dangerous force if they allied with each other.

“So you want to weed out this threat before it has a chance to sprout,” Gennou concluded.

Ryoma nodded silently.

“Understood... I’ll have the clan send people over.”

“Thanks... I considered just asking you and Sakuya, but it’s too far away right now.”

A round trip from Epirus to Pherzaad would take a month and a half. Along with the time it would take them to prepare for the assassination, it would take a full two months. But since taking possession of the peninsula took precedence over all else right now, having Gennou and Sakuya gone for that long wasn’t a possibility.

“So about the pay... How much will it be?” Ryoma asked.

Gennou Igasaki served Ryoma personally, but the same wasn’t true for the Igasaki clan. Hiring them naturally meant he was going to pay them for their service. Gennou, however, simply shook his head gently.

“Nay... There is no need, milord.”

Ryoma’s right brow furrowed at those words.

“Are you serious? No... There must be some kind of condition here.”

A guildmaster was a serious target. It was the same as asking to have an influential noble assassinated. Normally it would cost well over a hundred or two hundred gold coins, but Gennou claimed there was no need for payment.

I suppose they might not want money, but something else...

Ryoma knew that taking the words “there’s no need for payment” at face value would only lead to a swift death on this Earth.

“Yes... We only ask for one thing.”

Figures...

It was only natural Gennou would bring up his terms now, but the question

was what they would mean for Ryoma.

I guess I'll have to ask first before I decide whether to say yes or no...

"Sure. What is it?" Ryoma said calmly, after a few seconds of silent contemplation.

On that day, Gennou and Ryoma sealed a pact. But the only one apart from them to know its contents was the pale moon, shining in the sky.

Chapter 3: Leader of the North

A single carriage clicked against the flagstones as it rolled forward. It eventually stopped in front of the entrance to Count Salzberg's estate, located in the south side of Epirus. The sun had already set and the area was lit up by candlelight.

The black two-horse carriage was only barely adorned on the outside with the most minimal decorations. It wasn't shabby or simple, as its exterior was certainly polished and well-maintained, but it certainly couldn't be called magnificent.

In a word, it seemed to prioritize functionality over appearances. And frankly speaking, it didn't seem like the kind of vehicle a noble might use. But its owner didn't much care for that. With the task of developing the Wortenia Peninsula ahead of him, appearances were the last thing that concerned him.

"Here you are, sir." Mike, who accompanied Ryoma as the carriage's driver, opened the door for him.

Ryoma got off the carriage and stepped onto the ground, turning to face a row of servants who bowed their heads to greet him.

"""We welcome you, Baron Ryoma Mikoshiba."""

They bowed in a single, fluid motion. A perfect welcome performed by servants of a noble house. And as if prompted by their words, two figures appeared in the estate's door.

"Well met, Baron Mikoshiba!" said a man spreading his hands out in a welcoming gesture.

It was the master of this estate and the ruler of the citadel city of Epirus, Count Salzberg. He was over one hundred and eighty centimeters in height, and looked to be in his mid-thirties. With him approaching midlife, his gut was starting to stick out. But perhaps owing to his role as the ruler of a border town, his stance and form were clearly those of a warrior.

I've heard the Salzberg house dates back to Rhoadseria's founding, but

apparently he's not just some stupid, laid-back noble... Why is he being so cordial towards me, though? It's giving me the creeps...

In terms of title, Salzberg was a count while Ryoma was a baron — he was two ranks above Ryoma. They were both nobles of Rhoadseria, true, but their positions were in no way equal. Ryoma was like an employee promoted to section manager, while Count Salzberg was like the superior to a branch manager.

This wasn't Japan, where the class system was abolished. For better or worse, there was a clear, distinct hierarchy between the two of them. Ryoma was a vagabond who was promoted to noble status, while Count Salzberg was a noble of a famous house. Being welcomed so warmly struck Ryoma as exceptionally odd.

I should be cautious of this man...

Ryoma strained his consciousness. He did misjudge Queen Lupis's intentions, so it would be only natural for him to exercise caution. Not that he intended to let it show on his face, of course. Ryoma smiled broadly and lowered his head respectfully, just like Laura and Sara taught him to act in the presence of other nobles.

"Please accept my humblest apologies for the sudden visit. I may be young, but I hope our future relations will be of mutual favor to each other, Count Salzberg."

The outfit Ryoma was wearing that day was far from gaudy. He still had plenty of the money he got from killing Azoth the slave merchant, but considering the future he would need to save as much money as possible. With that in mind, insisting on ordering special clothes felt like a waste.

Nobles had their dignity and honor to consider, though. Ryoma felt it was a foolish thing to obsess over, but even he realized meeting a noble in his usual hemp black shirt and trousers would be unfitting. Getting into trouble over something as simple as not being dressed for the occasion wouldn't do.

And so, Ryoma was dressed in a somewhat handsome outfit of a black silk shirt and pants, held up with a belt with a golden buckle. He also had a cloak which he wore outdoors, like now. But for a noble, it was the absolute

minimum. He only maintained the least possible manners required.

Count Salzberg didn't seem to look down on Ryoma for his appearance, though.

"No, no, I'm honored to have a hero of the rebel war visit my humble abode. House Salzberg is a family of warriors, and so I am proud to have you. I apologize that we haven't much to greet you with, however. Your visit was a touch sudden, but we've prepared a fine dinner. You may find my hospitality somewhat lacking, but do enjoy whatever we may offer you."

With that said, Count Salzberg took Ryoma's hand and led him in.

"Your words are wasted on me... I'm greatly obliged." Ryoma swiftly lowered his head.

"Now, now, raise your head and come on over. Allow me to introduce you to my wife. Go on, Yulia, introduce yourself," Count Salzberg said, prompting the blooming young woman behind him to step forward.

She seemed to be edging into the age of thirty. Her braided hair was a shining shade of gold. She was about a meter and seventy centimeters tall, and had voluptuous, attractive limbs. Any man would have his heart stolen by her attractive appearance. She was a bewitching woman, indeed. Ryoma did not miss the intellectual glint in her eyes, though.

"Well met, Baron Mikoshiba. The journey from the capital must have been quite taxing. You may take your time and rest tonight in our estate. Right, beloved?"

Count Salzberg nodded magnanimously at Lady Yulia's words.

"As my wife says, I hope this visit allows you to rest from your arduous journey. After all, once you enter Wortenia, there will be no villages or cities to rest in... You'll have no choice but to bring in supplies from Epirus in the near future. This is in the name of our friendship as ones who rule over neighboring lands! And I hope it will be a longstanding friendship, at that."

"Erm... I'll gladly accept your invitation, then... I hope you will be able to guide me in my future duties." Ryoma meekly lowered his head to the count.

Hmph... He read my intent already. From what he says, he's willing to help me with the supplies... First order of business is to figure out his intentions.

Ryoma's eyes glinted sharply.

"Now come along, Baron Mikoshiba. I've ordered my head cook to put together a special feast to welcome you," Count Salzberg said. "Sadly, my land is much more of a backwater region compared to the capital, so we haven't much in the way of local specialties. But it is a bountiful land, thankfully, so we do have plenty. Do relish it."

Confirming that Ryoma had taken a seat, the count declared the beginning of the banquet. At his words, the doors swung open and maids walked in, pushing carts lined up with dishes.

"This is all very..."

Ryoma was taken aback by the many dishes being placed on the table. Chicken, beef, fish, and a whole roasted pig were served as the main dishes, surrounded with an abundance of salads, seafood, and vegetables. Cold fruit chilled by lumps of ice was served in gold cups, filling Ryoma's nostrils with the pleasant, chilly scent of the fruits of the season.

Just the three of them were seated at a dinner table that had enough food to accommodate at least twenty people. And all of the dishes were delicacies that were by no means inferior to what Ryoma was served in Pireas during the feast celebrating the civil war's end.

Just how much money was squandered on this feast? As the guest, Ryoma couldn't help but ask himself that question with a hint of concern.

"No... I am somewhat beside myself with shame here," Count Salzberg said, scratching his hair. "A guest from the capital might not know of this, but it is customary here to greet guests with more food than they can eat... I do not mind if you think of it as some foolish backwater custom and play along with me here."

"No... I am simply surprised you'd hold such a feast for an upstart like myself. I'm quite grateful, Count Salzberg."

"Ahaha! An upstart, you say! There's no need for modesty, Baron Mikoshiba.

Your exploits in the last war are varied and great. I hear Queen Lupis holds a great deal of trust in you... During the civil war, I couldn't afford to leave this land because of the threat of an invasion from Xarooda." Count Salzberg concluded his words with a hint of self-deprecation.

"I'm afraid that it's you who is being too modest, Count Salzberg," Ryoma replied with a forced smile. "I truly believe your protection of the north is what allowed the civil war to end without interference from another country."

"Beloved, I do believe that's enough chatter. Do you intend to have our guest eat a cold meal?" Yulia chided her husband.

"Oh! My apologies... Is Baron Mikoshiba's glass empty? Have it filled at once!"

At the count's order, red wine was poured into Ryoma's glass.

"Now then... Let us raise a glass to the flourishing of House Mikoshiba! Cheers!"

Ryoma downed the glass. The first thing he felt was the rich aroma filling his mouth. It was soon accented by a slightly spicy, stimulating taste. After relishing the wine for two or three more seconds, the thick flavor of the wine washed over his taste buds. Finally, he felt the pleasing sensation of the wine slipping down his throat, as smooth and sleek as quality silk.

The grapes are amazing... This must be high-quality wine.

A high-schooler like Ryoma wouldn't normally be very keen on the intricacies of wine, especially wine like this that was so far removed from the cheap bottles one could pick up at a convenience store. But owing to his grandfather's uninhibited nature, Ryoma had tasted alcohol during his life in Japan, and drank it daily since coming to this world.

And from his experience, the wine the count served him was of the highest caliber obtainable. It was made of fine, hand-picked grapes and produced by the finest wine-makers. He was provided with fine wines during his stay in Pireas, and these were in no way inferior to that.

Between the cooking and the wine... What's his angle? No, forget that, where does he even get all this luxury? Can plain riches really afford all this?

The same could be said for the dishes they were served. The ingredients were excellent, hand-picked and garnished with the finest spices. Even if he did want to welcome Ryoma warmly, it was far too extravagant for some upstart baron.

Is this really their idea of normal hospitality...?

Ryoma snuck a glance at Count Salzberg, who was happily eating away.

His outfit is pretty flashy, too... It's got an elaborate design, and made of high-quality silk... His ornaments are incredible, too.

Ryoma wasn't jealous of the man, but there was no denying that in terms of outfit he stood in stark contrast to him.

But oddly enough, there isn't any vulgarity about him...

True to his status as a born noble, Count Salzberg wore ornaments graced with gemstones that showed off his position. His shirt's buttons used pearls, and the brooch on his chest was designed in the form of an elaborate flower. But for how gaudy they all were, Salzberg somehow managed to make them appear natural.

Of course, in terms of sheer brilliance, the dress adorning the woman beside him, Yulia, far outmatched his outfit. It had a striking, novel design that covered her entire body, but still bared her cleavage. The white fabric harmonized well with her golden hair.

She had a small silver crown on her head, and her fingers were adorned with ruby and sapphire rings. A large diamond necklace hung from her neck. Overall, she gave the impression of a gemstone chiseled in the shape of a woman.

From a modern man's perspective, it felt as if she was too decorated. But watching Lady Yulia smile warmly right in front of him gave Ryoma an impression of noble dignity and a jewel's balanced beauty.

If nothing else, it doesn't feel like they're pretending... They're used to this.

There were plenty of people out there who would put on airs so others wouldn't look down on them. But most of those people weren't able to properly maintain this facade, making it easy for others to tell they were acting. It was the difference between simply putting on the clothes of a noble and truly

wearing them naturally.

But Count Salzberg and Lady Yulia didn't give off the atmosphere that this was a facade. They seemed perfectly natural.

But if that's true...

That raised the question of how Count Salzberg obtained and maintained all this luxury. Their outfits were truly high class and it was obvious with a glance that they must have cost a fortune. Their meals were a match for the capital's feasts.

This... doesn't make sense. Taxes alone aren't enough to maintain this lifestyle. And if that's the case...

Ryoma couldn't say for certain. He didn't have information yet, but if what he had in mind was true...

I guess it depends on what the others can dig up...

"Ooh. You don't seem to have much of an appetite, Baron Mikoshiba. Does the food not suit your palate?" Count Salzberg asked Ryoma, who fell silent after sipping some wine.

"He must be exhausted from the long journey," Lady Yulia remarked. "Does the meat have a bit too much oil...? Anne, give the baron some cold fruit. I'm sure he'll like it."

A maid placed a golden cup full of fruit in front of Ryoma.

"My apologies, I didn't mean to worry you," Ryoma said, bringing a cold orange from the cup into his mouth.

He was actually just contemplating things, but he didn't feel inclined to correct Salzberg's misunderstanding.

"You must really be tired..." Count Salzberg said. "I've heard you were a first-class warrior, Baron Mikoshiba, but it takes half a month even on horseback to reach Epirus from the capital. I suppose it stands to reason."

"Beloved! You're being rude... I'm sure having been made a noble so suddenly must be exhausting for him. Isn't that right, baron?" Lady Yulia turned a considerate gaze at Ryoma.

“Yes... It’s all too sudden.” Ryoma said, picking a piece of beef from his plate and bringing it to his mouth. “I’ve lived as a commoner so far, so I’m honestly not all that sure how to handle ruling over a territory...”

“I see... But I hear you’re quite intelligent and blessed with wit,” Count Salzberg replied. “I will do anything in my power to be of assistance. Our ruling adjacent territories must be some sort of fate at play. I’m sure we’ll help each other in the future... Hmm? Is something wrong with your food?”

Count Salzberg suddenly eyed Ryoma suspiciously as he chewed on the meat.

“No... The salt is just a bit stronger than I imagined. Between the salt and the spices, it’s all so different from the weak flavors I know from the capital.”

The spices aside, salt was a fairly rare commodity on this Earth. Salt was fundamental for everyday life, but this world didn’t have any saltpans or rock salts to mine. Territories that were near the sea had a source of salt, but Count Salzberg shouldn’t have had any lands that fit that description. That meant he either managed to dig up some rock salt, or brought it in from another land.

“Ahaha. I suppose a man that’s grown too used to the capital’s blandness might feel that way.”

Ryoma then chose to cut to the heart of the matter. His objective was, of course, to shake Count Salzberg.

“I don’t believe any of the lands you govern is adjacent to the sea... Did you find a vein of rock salt? Or did you trade with the nearby territories for it?”

“No, actually...” Count Salzberg was about to answer Ryoma’s question with a smile, but...

“Yes, precisely... We’ve found a large vein of halite last year.” Lady Yulia cut into his words.

“Oh. That’s quite fortunate. I can’t say I’m not envious.” Ryoma accepted her words with a smile.

He had no intent of criticizing the couple here.

Salt, huh... This is something else I should look into... Ryoma thought to himself as he swallowed another mouthful of well-salted beef.

The dinner party ended rather uneventfully after three more hours, after which Ryoma and the count moved to a parlor. They talked over trivial matters and deepened their friendship. Count Salzberg opened a treasured bottle of wine, during which Lady Yulia also started participating in the conversation. The couple didn't show any of the conceit Ryoma came to expect out of the nobility, and welcomed him warmly the entire time.

As night approached, Ryoma made to leave, upon which Count Salzberg insisted he spend the night at his estate. Ryoma obliged out of courtesy. As he was being led to his room by the maids, he couldn't help but let out a sigh.

The furniture was all masterfully crafted, and the curtains and sheets were of course made of high-quality silk. The walls and shelves with paintings and vases left a striking impression even in Ryoma, who was detached from the arts. The room wasn't unlike a high-class hotel's suite room. It was a veritable mountain of treasure.

"Wonder if they'll blame me for taking one of these," Ryoma whispered as he cast himself into the large bed and reached for one of the vases on his bedside.

With how pressed he was for money when it came to developing his territory, being in this room was bad for Ryoma's heart.

Guess this is proof of how strong his economy is... But when I looked into him in the capital, all I found is that these territories aren't producing anything too noteworthy...

Something didn't quite click about Count Salzberg and Lady Yulia's attitude. On the surface, they seemed to be a kind, friendly couple, but Ryoma couldn't help but feel like there was something behind the scenes with those two.

"Baron... May I come in?" a woman's dainty voice suddenly called out from behind the room's door.

"Yes... What is it? The door isn't locked."

"Thank you... sir."

At Ryoma's permission, the door opened and a maid walked into the room.

"Did the count tell you to do this?" Ryoma picked up on the situation the

moment he saw the way the maid was dressed.

“Ah... Erm... The Lady told me to... Baron...”

The maid’s skin was hidden behind a white negligee, which was transparent enough to give a glimpse of the pink bra and panties beneath them. It was quite the sensual, seductive sight. But a glance at how her shoulders shivered and the way her expression seemed to be enduring something would make any man understand the meaning of her attire.

“Would it cause you trouble if I were to insist this isn’t necessary?” Ryoma asked.

The maid’s expression colored over with despair.

“Ah! Erm... I’m, uhh... Well... This would be my first time, but... Ah... I’ll do my best to... Erm... Am I... no good...?”

Perhaps the way he’d put it was a bit too forceful, because she earnestly insisted. Seeing her blushing face made it impossible to push her away.

“You’re fine... Come here.” Ryoma said as gently as possible, so as to not frighten her.

Of course, Ryoma wasn’t experienced with women. But turning timid here would harm his dignity.

“Yes...” The maid timidly took hold of his extended hand.

Hearing her delicate response, Ryoma pulled her body gently against his own. And as he did, a faint, floral aroma filled his nostrils. It wasn’t long before the room’s candles were blown out, and darkness fell over the room.

✝

While Ryoma Mikoshiba was enjoying a night of lovemaking in his room, in another part of the mansion, Count Salzberg and Lady Yulia were having a private conversation.

“My word... Perhaps we shouldn’t have been this welcoming,” Count Salzberg complained to his wife as he sipped tea. “Does that boy really have enough value to match all the extravagance we spent on him?”

The pleasant smile that was on his face during the dinner party and up to the moment he escorted Ryoma to his room was gone without a trace. His expression was filled with a noble's arrogance and scorn towards the common rabble.

"Yes... Well, he apparently is bedding the maid, so I would say everything is going in our favor," Lady Yulia said with a smile.

Count Salzberg directed a bitter glance at his wife.

"See, that's what I'm displeased with! I've had my eye on that girl, and you throw her to that upstart?!"

It was perhaps natural for Count Salzberg to make his displeasure clear after having a maid he'd been pining for allotted to another man, but Lady Yulia shrugged away his complaints as if they were the most trivial thing imaginable.

"Does it really matter? We can get more maids than would last you a lifetime... And you'd get bored with her within the month, anyway." There was a hint of exasperation and reproach to her words.

Count Salzberg's lecherous skirt-chasing had been a constant source of concern for her.

"That's besides the point! Even if I do get bored of her and cast her aside, I wouldn't tolerate another man taking her! And I haven't even laid hands on her yet... Blast! Women like her aren't easy to find!"

With that said, Count Salzberg took another sip of tea, his feet absolutely shivering with anger. His irritation likely wouldn't die down for a while.

"Fine... I'll have my people look for another girl tomorrow."

"I'm sure it goes without saying, but I've no need of used women!"

"Yes, yes, beloved, don't worry... I'll find a girl to your liking." Restraining the desire to roll her eyes, Lady Yulia tried to placate the count.

I swear... Why must his sexual appetite be so obnoxious? There's plenty of slaves and professional women he could call, but he keeps looking for inexperienced virgins... And after two or three times, he gets tired of them and sells them off to slavers...

Thinking of her husband's preference for virgins made her gaze turn icy cold. If he were to have concubines for the sake of leaving heirs, she could accept that this was part of a noble's duty. Count Salzberg only did this to sate his lust, however. He dragged in any young woman in arm's reach, but never made them into his concubines. Even if they did conceive children, he never allowed them to give birth.

After a few weeks, a month at best, he would cast any girl aside. That was what always ended up happening. Even if this Earth was a world where the strong feasted upon the weak, few people acted out that rule as blatantly as this man.

He was the worst possible kind of husband one could have, and the worst possible person one could hope to associate with. But Count Salzberg never let those aspects of his personality rise to the surface.

I can't afford to earn his ire now... No matter how absurd the things he says might be...

Lady Yulia had to sacrifice many things up to that day. Giving up at this point wasn't an option.

"Hmph, fine... I've no interest in that commoner's leftovers, anyway..." Apparently deciding he'd complained more than enough for the time being, Count Salzberg took a deep breath and sunk his body into the sofa. "Was it necessary to tell him about the mine, though? It wasn't just to draw his interest, was it?"

His eyes, which were clouded over with carnal lust until now, glinted sharply. He may have been a despicable man, but he was a skilled ruler and commander. If he weren't, he wouldn't be able to govern over this border zone and hold Xarooda's military aspirations in check.

"Hmm... I suppose that it wasn't quite necessary... But I think it was really all the same. He wouldn't blindly swallow anything we'd tell him... He wouldn't deny our words, but he wouldn't believe us, either. And if the matter of the salt drew his interest, he'd look into it on his own. In which case, hiding it would mean little. If anything, this might actually dissuade him from looking into it."

Lady Yulia could tell Ryoma Mikoshiba wasn't an ordinary man.

He's a troublesome one... Throughout the dinner party, he'd been gathering information discreetly, so we wouldn't notice.

She could pick up on that owing to her own skills as a shrewd merchant. Count Salzberg, however, scoffed at his wife's appraisal of the man.

"Hmph... I doubt he's that sharp. How would he even find out, anyway? He's just a hired sword that performed well during the civil war. How would he look into where we get our salt? I hear the so-called retainers he has are the filthy mercenaries that worked with him during the civil war, and that he had them forcefully named knights. The only thing people like that are good for is war."

From Count Salzberg's perspective, Ryoma was just a well-built young man. At Lady Yulia's advice, he welcomed him as lavishly as possible, but his innermost impression of Ryoma was utter disdain.

With his physique, he probably is a skilled warrior... But his face doesn't strike me as all that intellectual.

He seemed upright and collected, but not at all bright. His amicable behavior seemed indicative of a weakness of character, while his gentle demeanor came across as lacking in resolve. Count Salzberg's opinion on the young man was that aside from his body, he was entirely unacceptable.

"I agree that he didn't come across as extremely intelligent, but there's simply no possibility that could be true," Lady Yulia said.

"Tch... Yes, I've heard the rumors..." Count Salzberg clicked his tongue audibly at his wife's words. "Though who's to say if they're true. If you ask me, he just curried favor with Helena Steiner. After all, it's been ten years since she was called the Ivory Goddess of War. I wouldn't be surprised if she's started going senile."

Lady Yulia laughed off this idea, though.

"Do you really believe Lady Helena would allow for that...? And true, she isn't young anymore, but apparently her abilities haven't fallen in the slightest. She even slew General Albrecht while he was trying to flee the border."

"Hmph... I guess it's all just speculation... And? You sent that girl to him, but did she fetch any information?" Count Salzberg spat out hatefully.

“She wouldn’t gain any information that quickly. Tonight she really is just making love to him... But tomorrow, I’ll ask him to take custody of her.”

Ryoma didn’t turn down the maid she sent to his room. He was either weak to women or simply did so out of consideration of her position. Whichever it was, they should have currently been in the middle of the act.

But well, he probably is just weak to a woman’s wiles... And most men leak information in the bedroom... I can’t see Ryoma Mikoshiba being cold to a woman he slept with, after all...

Lady Yulia turned a cynical glance in her husband’s direction. She was more capable of hiding her lusts than he was. And unaware of his wife’s thoughts, Count Salzberg finally started complaining about Queen Lupis.

“Good grief... To think I have to curry favor with a filthy commoner... It’s so irksome... It’s all because of that stupid princess... The damn symbol should have been put in her place and made into Albrecht’s second wife...”

Needless to say, those were dangerous words indeed. Should they be caught by the wrong ears, Count Salzberg could find himself and his entire family executed for them... Lady Yulia didn’t so much as furrow a brow at his comment, though.

“She’s not a stupid princess, beloved, but a stupid queen... She’s recently been coronated as Queen of Rhoadseria.”

It seemed Lady Yulia wasn’t keen on arguing against Queen Lupis being called stupid. As insolent as it was, both of them were in agreement on that point.

“And now she even gave the Wortenia Peninsula to someone else... She’s utterly blind to all our efforts, and had to go ahead and do this!”

“Come now, beloved, that’s enough grumbling...” Lady Yulia chided him, trying to quell his anger. “The only thing we can do now is keep an eye on that man and make sure he doesn’t do anything unnecessary...”

“You’re right... And should the worst case scenario come to pass...”

“I think you know full well what will happen then,” Lady Yulia replied. “The peninsula’s monsters are always hungry for new prey. And look at how large he

is... I'm sure he'll fill their stomachs."

"Yes, yes. They'll have plenty to chew on." Count Salzberg regarded her words with a cold smile.

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"Aye, lad, I've heard you've had quite the night!" The middle-aged man sitting at the carriage's driver seat raised his voice at Ryoma.

The other mercenaries recently took after Boltz's example and started calling Ryoma "lad." They'd fought alongside Ryoma in the Rhoadserian Civil War, and so they were already on friendly terms with him.

"You heard about that? Where from, Mike?"

Mike spoke to Ryoma as soon as he left the count's estate. It was a short trip that only required going down Epirus's main road to the estate. Perhaps because it was in the middle of town, the horses appeared somewhat bored, as they could only move at a slow pace.

"Aah, the servants were whispering about it... And I kept me ears peeled, is all!"

Ryoma cocked his head quizzically.

"Did Boltz tell you to do that?"

"Aye..." Mike answered while combing through his beard with his fingers. "When he told me to drive you here, he said that if you end up spending the night I should mingle with the servants and try to draw some information out of them."

"Gotta hand it to Boltz... He doesn't leave a single stone unturned."

"Sure doesn't. Sis is the stronger warrior, but she isn't much for all the cloak and dagger... That's where Boltz shines and covers for her!"

Mike was a middle-class mercenary among the Crimson Lions. He was of course skilled with a weapon, but also proficient at scouting and construction work. And despite his grim appearance, he was also sociable and friendly. He had a strong sense of duty and was tight-lipped, which made him perfect for intelligence work.

Apparently, he was given the task of driver and bodyguard for Ryoma during this visit, while also gathering information behind the scenes.

“Still, I didn’t think he’d be right and you’d end up spending the night... Though I said yes all the same.”

Ryoma met Mike’s words with a wry smile. He was indeed given a perfect welcome, but unfortunately, that didn’t mean it was necessarily a pleasant stay.

“Yeah, well... The food and drink were all the highest class possible. They must have given quite detailed instructions, because they kept putting out one plate after another. Honestly they treated me so nicely it felt disgusting, and I only ended up feeling all the more uncomfortable...”

“Same for me... Though they didn’t give me a woman. But the booze and food they gave me wasn’t something for a servant... The bedroom was luxurious, too.”

“You too, huh...?”

“Aye... It was eerie, honestly.”

Ryoma nodded at Mike’s words and closed his eyes in contemplation. They both felt the same thing.

“Why did they go so far?” Mike asked, looking at Ryoma’s silent face. “I mean, I’m not as smart as you or Boltz, but... I can only tell you what my gut is telling me. If you’re alright with that...”

After pausing for a moment, Mike spoke of his impressions.

“I think they either want to ask you for something, or drive you out of this land before you do something they don’t want you to do.”

“They want me to leave, but they don’t want to fight me... It’s possible.”

In that case, it was possible Queen Lupis was pulling the strings behind the scenes. Ryoma and his group would be a source of anxiety for her until they went into the Wortenia peninsula. She may well have ordered Count Salzberg to make sure they go in.

Whichever it is, I don’t have too many choices... No good... I need more information. I can’t make any judgments until I hear what Boltz and Gennou

find...

“Can’t imagine them treating the damn carriage driver that nicely...”

“So they have an angle...” Ryoma muttered.

“Aye... Probably.” Mike nodded carefully.

The two fell into silence for a few moments.

“Uhh, by the way, Mike, could you keep what happened last night a secret from Laura and the others?”

Concluding that brooding over the matter now wouldn’t produce an answer, Ryoma elected to change the topic. There was no way of knowing what Count Salzberg’s intentions were at the moment, so for now he’d have to do whatever he could.

Which was, in this particular moment, making sure Mike kept his mouth shut.

At Ryoma’s question, Mike’s stiff expression melted into a smile.

“Aye, I figured you’d say that. If they hear about the fun you had last night... Just thinking about it makes me shiver! Those girls would go mental.”

Civilization wasn’t as developed in this world, and so sexual intercourse was one of the few sources of entertainment available, as it were. Ryoma had gone with the other mercenaries to pleasure districts before, of course. Thankfully, this world had nostrums that prevented sexual diseases, as well as medicine that prevented pregnancy when taken.

In that regard it was actually more developed than Ryoma’s world. This was one boon the monsters granted to this Earth. There probably wasn’t a world more suited for a group of men to go out on a night of pleasure.

The only problem was what came in the morning that followed that night.

“Hey, don’t even joke about that!” Ryoma found himself nervously raising his voice at the man. “I don’t even know why, but I can see them seriously getting mad at me!”



“I’ll be honest, lad, but that’s just how it goes. You’re aware of how they feel about you, aye?”

Mike spoke to his master, who was effectively young enough to be his son, giving him a piece of fatherly advice.

“Well... I guess...”

It truly went without Mike having to say it. The Malfist twins’ feelings were clear and evident.

“Then you probably understand that those two want you to take them as well. They want that from the bottom of their hearts.”

Ryoma saved them from the slave merchant soon after he was summoned to this world, and it had been nearly half a year since then. They’d always operated together, and so it was natural for romantic emotions to form. Ryoma was conscious of them as members of the opposite sex, too.

“I know that...”

Ryoma didn’t know if this was something to be thankful for, but this world didn’t forbid polygamy. Men were free to have as many wives as their personal fortune could finance. So with that in mind, he didn’t have to worry over having to pick one of the twins over the other. Except...

“You can’t cut away your attachment to Rearth?”

The Crimson Lion mercenaries were already aware of Ryoma’s circumstances. He told them when they met Gennou and the term “Hinomoto” came up.

“I suppose... I understand this already, at least in my head. But... I just can’t come to terms with it, or, well...” Mike’s question left Ryoma uncharacteristically noncommittal.

Ryoma’s reasonable mind had already realized he had no choice but to stay in this world, but his heart couldn’t accept it that easily. His friends and family were still back in Japan. Ryoma may have had a severe personality that showed no mercy to his foes, but he was still an ordinary man who lamented and agonized.

Sleeping with them would take... resolve. It would mean choosing to stay in

this world with them...

He wasn't as troubled when it came to bedding a prostitute. It was just a case of money solving a problem, as it often does. But the Malfist sisters displayed selfless affection for Ryoma. Would he be able to bring himself to go back to Japan after making love to them? No. He couldn't bring himself to be that heartless.

"Well... You made us into knights and decided to develop this land. I think you've already made that choice," Mike said.

"Yeah... I can't go back after getting all of you mixed up in my mess..."

The gears of fate were already in motion. What would Lione and the others do if Ryoma were to suddenly go back to his world?

Even if I had a way back home, I...

He'd already come to his conclusions. He'd already steeled his resolve...

"Well, don't worry, I'll keep last night a secret from those two... But in exchange! Buy me a pint next time around, eh?" Mike said, his bearded face contorting into a smile.

"Sure thing... I'll get you as many drinks as you want!"

Mike only changed the topic out of concern for Ryoma, and that wasn't lost on him. The consideration warmed Ryoma's heart.

It all depends on me, huh...

Jolted by the carriage as it rolled through Epirus's streets, Ryoma sighed to himself.

Chapter 4: The Christof Company

“Right... So, next up is Gennou’s report.” Ryoma turned his gaze to Gennou.

It was two days after Ryoma visited Count Salzberg’s estate. That morning, they held a meeting to report all the information they gathered over the last few days. Half of the people involved had already given their reports.

All that’s left is the twins and Gennou... But it looks like something’s up.

On the surface, Gennou was simply listening to the other reports with his eyes closed and his arms folded, as he always was. But it was clear that a ninja wouldn’t let his emotions rise to the surface. The only ones who hadn’t given their reports were the Malfist sisters and Gennou, but a feeling of dread spurred Ryoma to leave his report for last.

The sisters’ report was regarding a company they could purchase food from. There shouldn’t have been any particular problems to mention in regards to that.

At Ryoma’s words, Gennou shook his head.

“No... I think I should speak last... Let Laura and Sara go first.”

Apparently, he had something in mind.

“Hmm... I suppose you have your own reasons.” Ryoma nodded suspiciously, and turned to the Malfist sisters. “Right. Laura, Sara, tell us about that company.”

“Very well.” Laura and Sara nodded and began giving their report.

What it said, however, would knock Ryoma’s optimism down to the bottom of the abyss.

“Our conclusion is that most of the companies in Epirus have strong ties to Count Salzberg.”

“Strong ties?” Ryoma tilted his head.

Their words implied the aforesaid ties were stronger than a company’s normal connection to a governor.

“Yes. They have extremely close, intimate connections with him,” Sara said, and spread a map over the table.

“Is that... a map of Epirus?”

“Yes. The red dots are the companies working in this city.” Sara’s finger pointed to one red point on the map.

There were ten points overall on the map. Those were all the large, influential trade companies existing in Epirus.

“The Mystel Company... The Rafael Company...” Sara moved from point to point, reading the respective names of the companies. “These ten companies form a union that has the economy of the citadel city of Epirus in the palm of its hand... The problem is that the count’s wife, Lady Yulia Salzberg, is the lone daughter of the union’s representative and the Mystel Company’s owner.”

“Is that true...?” All the color drained from Ryoma’s face.

His shock was understandable, as they had no means of providing food in the Wortenia Peninsula. They had no farmers, of course, and even if they did have people to settle into the peninsula, they would only produce any kind of crops within six months to a year. At least so long as there were no kind of unusual plants that grew within days of being planted, they had no choice but to rely on supplies from Epirus until they became self-sufficient.

They couldn’t hunt monsters down for food, after all. Some monsters may have been edible, but the large majority of them weren’t. Maybe it would have been possible to feed several dozen people through monster hunting, but it wasn’t realistically possible to feed hundreds that way.

Food and water weren’t things he could ask people to abstain from. They were absolutely necessary for survival. Maybe being able to use water thaumaturgy could solve that problem, but they had nothing to do when it came to food.

“Yes... If we want to purchase supplies, we’d have to work with one of those ten companies... But the countess being the daughter of the union’s leader means...”

Laura cut off her words there. Everyone else present understood what she

was trying to say. Trading with a company was very much their lifeline. They didn't want to imagine a future where that lifeline was subject to the countess's whims.

Right now things were still fine, since Ryoma was still outwardly cordial with Count Salzberg. But things could very well change. It could be any conflict of interests, or even something as simple as the count having a bad mood.

The moment Count Salzberg might feel inclined to tighten the noose around the necks of Ryoma and his group, it would all be over. All he'd have to do would be apply pressure on the companies under his wing. They would never be able to ignore Count Salzberg's intentions.

"Apparently, the Mystel Company's representative is quite the ambitious man... The original representative of the union was the Christof Company, but his daughter marrying Count Salzberg allowed him to snatch away the position..."

As she said that, Ryoma clicked his tongue sharply.

"I get it... They married their daughter off to a noble, and used his authority to increase their influence... It's not unheard of..."

It was certainly common enough, and it even happened in Japan.

"Still... I'm surprised a noble married a merchant's daughter."

Within the class system, a merchant was considered a commoner, and that wouldn't change no matter how much money they accumulated. But she was the Count's wife — not a concubine, but his legal wife. Ryoma couldn't help but be surprised.

"I looked into that as well, but... Apparently, House Salzberg has been in a bad financial state ever since the previous head's time..."

"Hmm... So they lured him in with money? What hurt their finances in the first place? Military expenditures?"

Count Salzberg was pressed enough for money that he had to marry a merchant's daughter... The fact a noble chose practicality over dignity was proof the count was probably quite cornered. The question was what made him

so pressed for money to begin with.

“Yes... Between protecting the border and defending from monster attacks coming from within Wortenia, House Salzberg has had to divert a great deal of their budget to military funds...”

Everyone nodded at Laura’s words. Armies had a way of sucking up money. A military was like a starved monster that consumed supplies but produced nothing in exchange. That was how the army worked.

And to top it all off, this monster needed to be fed with large amounts of the finest goods possible. Soldiers needed to have their wages paid, as well as be provided with armor and weapons. Horses needed to be bred, food and provisions delivered... The army consumed many resources, even in peacetime. And when the time came for war, the rate at which it devoured funds would skyrocket. It was like a bottomless pit. No matter how much money one poured into it, it would never be enough.

And yet countries still had to fund their armies. It was essential to protect one’s country, one’s people, one’s territory... To protect what mattered most. And for a noble in charge of keeping a wary vigil over a neighboring country, this responsibility was that much heavier. It was only natural that Count Salzberg’s finances were in dire straits.

“Figures, I guess...” Ryoma said pensively. “He’s not just watching over Myest’s and Xarooda’s borders, he’s pushing back against the monsters invading from the peninsula.”

“From the documents I looked into...” Boltz said, “Roughly once every decade, the monsters in Wortenia stage a large attack. The ten families of the north must deploy their troops together whenever that happens.”

“Well, damn... That’s basically the same as going to war.” Lione nodded.

“Allow me to supplement by pointing out this land isn’t suited for farming,” Gennou chimed in. “This region has no crops worth mentioning. They produce enough to be self-sufficient, but it’s far from an abundant land.”

“How about salt?” Ryoma asked suspiciously. “I heard a little something during my visit at the count’s place. Apparently they discovered a halite vein.”

At least judging by the count and his wife's appearance the other day, they didn't seem to be in financial trouble. A noble may spend quite a bit to keep up airs and maintain their honor, but even that had its limits.

From their clothes to the meal provided, it was clear that the count wasn't wanting for money. His table was stacked with more food than one could possibly eat, all garnished with precious spices. That wouldn't be possible if they were in financial trouble.

But the truly suspicious part was the matter of the halite vein. Salt was a necessity, and while it wasn't worth as much as precious metals, it was in constant demand. If House Salzberg did come into possession of a source of rock salt, it would be perfectly possible for them to rebuild their finances.

However, Gennou shook his head at Ryoma's question.

"No... No halite veins exist in the count's territory."

The way he worded it was significant. The moment he heard those words, Ryoma's heart was gripped with a great sense of unease.

What the hell...? If they don't have any veins, how did they rebuild their wealth? Did they come up with some other industry?

Ryoma's mind explored the possibilities.

If they found some other source of funds, why did the countess lie about the vein? Why mention salt of all things?

A good lie was one that had a hint of truth mixed into it. Fabricating a web of lies and making it convincing is exceedingly difficult, as falsehood that wasn't consistent with reality would just make the whole story fall apart.

"Ah! Maybe they..." Sara then raised her voice with surprise.

"What, Sara? Did you think of something?" Laura asked, to which Sara nodded and turned her eyes to Gennou.

"Maybe Count Salzberg has a vein outside of their territory... within the Wortenia Peninsula?"

""""Aah!""" Everyone raised their voices in surprise.

Gennou regarded Sara with a composed smile.

“Keenly observed, miss. Indeed, the count has a vein in the Wortenia Peninsula’s land, one that is kept secret from the rest of the kingdom.”

It wasn’t an unexpected revelation, but coming from Gennou it was even more convincing.

“Wait just a second,” Lione said, visibly shocked. “Yer sayin’ Count Salzberg owns a vein in the peninsula? Without the kingdom’s approval? I mean, it’s an abandoned land, sure, but that takes balls... If that gets exposed, his whole family’s gonna get hauled off to the gallows.”

Before it was given to Ryoma, the nobles that were in charge of Wortenia were technically the Rhoadserian royal family. And while the peninsula was undeveloped land, that didn’t mean extracting natural resources from that land was legal. If the royal house were to learn of that, the count’s entire bloodline would die in large scale executions, even down to distant relatives and close associates.

“He takes his greed so far I almost feel like admiring him for the sheer pluck of it...” Boltz sighed, praising Count Salzberg for his courage.

He was very much treading on thin ice.

“Gennou... Do you know where the vein is?” Ryoma asked.

Gennou pointed to a location on the map that wasn’t too far from Epirus. A mountainous region ran along the base of the peninsula like a breakwater, and the spot he pointed at was on Epirus’s side of the mountains.

“Oh, I see... Shit! No wonder they were so friendly and nice. The bastards wanted to push me into the peninsula as fast as possible.”

Technically, the vein was on Wortenia’s side of the border, but it was a stone throw’s away from Epirus. It was on such a vague border line that even if the royal house were to learn about it, Count Salzberg could just play dumb.

Ryoma was the legal governor of Wortenia now, but with that position he would never investigate the vein unless he knew of it ahead of time. After all, from within Wortenia, it was on the opposite side of the mountain. The bits and

pieces in Ryoma's mind all clicked into place, and Count Salzberg's plot became clear.

"He didn't kill me right off the bat because he didn't want to make a big deal out of this... If I were to die, people from the kingdom might come in to investigate the place."

"Yes, milord, I suspect he only welcomed you so you would enter the peninsula unaware..." Gennou nodded. "And if you were to learn about that secret..."

"He'd just have the monsters eat me..." Ryoma said, narrowing his eyes sharply.

"What shall you do, milord? Sakuya and I can claim the Count's head," Gennou proposed.

"I don't know about that. I feel like that might do us more harm than good right now." Sara opposed the idea.

"Oh? You're against it, are you...? May I hear your reasoning?"

"I agree that assassinating Count Salzberg will halt his plot against us, but our objective is establishing a territory in the peninsula. To that end, Epirus has to remain stable. If the assassination works we may escape the count's grasp, but there's no telling who might come to control this land later. At worst, it could be someone under Queen Lupis's command..."

They'd be jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. Given how cautious Queen Lupis was when it came to Ryoma, there was no telling what kind of harassment could be in store for them. Sara's claims made sense.

"Hmm... Your doubts are well-founded, Miss Sara. I may have suggested it a bit too lightly." Gennou nodded at Sara's words.

"What do we do about the halite ore, then?" Laura asked. "Isn't stealing it from Count Salzberg a possibility?"

Ryoma placed a finger on his chin in a contemplative gesture.

"I don't know about that," Gennou remarked. "I can't imagine a man such as the count letting go of a source of income that easily. At worst he could even try

to stop us by force.”

“Yeah...” Ryoma nodded. “And even if we do take over the ore, we don’t have a way of selling that salt to anyone right now. It’s not something worth souring our relationship with him over, at least for now...”

“Yeah... It’s a good source of income to have handy, but even if we do take over it, no one in Epirus will trade with us.”

“Sounds about right. The count and the trade union are too closely connected. It’s obvious that he can pressure them into refusing to trade with us.”

Even if they did steal the mine away from Count Salzberg, they wouldn’t have a way of converting its salt into money. It would have been a different story if they could sell it off in another city, but since they’d have to go through Epirus to get anywhere, they had no possible logistic route to do so. They could use sea trade in the future, but at present they couldn’t do anything.

“Then how about we just let Count Salzberg handle it for now?” Laura proposed.

“Are you saying we should let him do what he wants?” Ryoma asked, his expression stiff.

No governor would be happy about letting someone else do as they please in their territory, even if they were an impromptu governor like Ryoma.

“We mustn’t let the Rhoadserian royal house learn of this, though, or the count would certainly be culled. That would be no different from us assassinating him.”

“I... suppose.”

That was their biggest problem. Killing the count was fine. Be it a direct assassination from their hands or by leaking the information to the royal house... There were enough ways to see to it that the count died. But that would allow Queen Lupis to interfere.

“We could simply relinquish the vein to Count Salzberg, and have him promise to aid us in exchange. And in the meanwhile, we prepare... Prepare to crush

him. What do you think?”

Laura’s proposal wasn’t ideal, but it was realistically feasible. The question was whether the count would agree to it.

“I agree with Miss Laura’s proposal,” Gennou said.

“Yeah, same... That’s probably the most realistic solution we have. Though letting Count Salzberg use us to his ends doesn’t sit well with me.” Lione agreed as well, though with some reservations.

“I agree, Sis, there are a few parts to this plan I’m not quite pleased with... But it’s not a bad idea.” Boltz nodded.

It really isn’t a bad idea... It would buy us time and let us prepare. The question is whether Count Salzberg will agree to cooperate with me... No, he shouldn’t be able to take that option. He doesn’t want to draw the royal house’s attention. If he has my... the legal lord of the land’s approval, he wouldn’t need to fear anything. That’d be a pretty big boon for him. It’s pretty likely he’ll go along with this... And since we can’t convert that salt into money, I guess we shouldn’t be that fixated on the vein...

Ryoma was prepared. They’d need to gain more power than Count Salzberg first. And that didn’t mean just pure military might. Economic power, political power...

“All right... I think this’ll buy us the time we need. We just need to use that time well to build up our strength,” Ryoma told them.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“So, now that we’ve decided that we’ll be negotiating with him, what will we need to do that?” Ryoma asked.

“I think we should look for a trustworthy trade partner to work with, aside from the people we’ll be negotiating with,” Laura proposed. “We’ll need to get provisions, and possibly trade with them for the salt in the future. I think the Christof Company might be the right people here... After all, the Mystel Company did snatch away their position.”

“I agree with Laura,” Sara chimed in. “The other eight companies are all under

the Mystel Company's umbrella. Any dealings we make with them would be leaked to the Count. The Christof Company is the only company in the union that's detached from him. If we want to negotiate with anyone, it would have to be them."

The twins were, after all, the ones to look into the trade companies. They had a good grasp on the topic. Ryoma couldn't help but be grateful for how resourceful his companions were. They were doing their all to save Ryoma, swearing their loyalty to a young man like him. This alone was a treasure that was worth more than a fortune.

Count Salzberg... You may have the upper hand right now, but I'll be having the last laugh!

That emotion surged up in Ryoma's heart, only making his determination that much stronger. He couldn't afford to lose — because his defeat would mean the death of those that followed him.

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The following day, Ryoma walked roughly one kilometer across Epirus's main street, coming face to face with a tall wall. It exceeded ten meters in height, rivaling even the capital's ramparts. This made it abundantly clear how important it was.

Of course, trade was flourishing. The street's width was roughly twenty meters, and it was built in a leisurely fashion. The road was paved by flagstones, allowing for a large traffic of people and carriages. All of the shops built along the road were large and respectable, with quite a few people going in and out of them.

It was just before three in the afternoon. The sunlight was soft, making it an ideal time to shop, and indeed the people were swarming about the stores. But among them, the building Ryoma looked up at stood alone and isolated from the tumult.

It was significantly larger than the nearby shops, a sturdy building made of stone. It had a respectable sign made of oak. It was very much a structure that exuded tradition and social status.

All of that rang hollow, however, due to the utter lack of customers. It had a dignified exterior that was carefully maintained, but something of a filthy shadow seemed to cling to the place.

“So this is the place... Yeah, it does look like everyone’s treating them like an enemy...”

Ryoma compared the building to the other nearby stores. The Christof Company seemed completely detached from the tumult around it, and no one seemed to approach the place. It was as if an invisible wall separated it from the rest of the street.

It stood opposite the main street and near the eastern gate. One would normally expect trade carts loaded with wares to be near the building. Reality didn’t quite conform with those expectations, though. And given its location, the whole affair felt extremely unnatural. It was as if someone’s enmity had tainted this business, forcing people to ignore it.

“Yes. The Mystel Company’s been harassing the place, and the business’s administration has been on the back foot since,” Laura said. “The customers couldn’t bear Mystel’s pressure either and have been avoiding the store.”

“Laura and I looked into the place, and apparently they’ve lost nearly all their high-paying clients... The company’s been hanging on one way or another since, owing mostly to the business talents of the company president’s daughter, Simone Christof.”

The Malfist sisters had a grasp on the Christof Company’s situation due to their prior investigations.

“Hmm... A shrewd woman, eh.” Ryoma ruminated.

“Yes.” Laura nodded. “She’s been managing the company ever since her father became bedridden.”

“Bedridden? From disease?” Ryoma asked.

Laura shook her head.

“From what Sara’s picked up from the people around them, he had lost his wits and grown senile after having the position of union head snatched away

from him.”

It wasn’t unheard of among people who work vigorously and upfront. The pressure of working as the union leader disappearing likely made him lose his edge. But it was still just a rumor, and he’d have to learn the truth from the people involved now.

Whatever the reason was, the father collapsed, and his daughter, Simone, had to take over management of the business.

“I see... Mystel hates her business and her father can’t be depended on... Yeah, I can see why she might be open for negotiations...” Ryoma whispered with a cold smile on his lips.

He was in need of a pawn he could use. He was at a staggering disadvantage, and so he didn’t have the leisure to mind the methods with which he worked. Even if it was something as low as taking advantage of Simone’s weaknesses.

“Very well, Master Ryoma. We’re almost at the appointed time,” Sara said, and opened the store’s door.

Ryoma entered the Christof Company’s building, followed by the Malfist sisters.

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Ryoma was greeted by a large entrance hall. A soft red carpet was spread over the floor. It was called a store but the building itself was likely only used for business negotiations. It was well-furnished and wasn’t much inferior to Count Salzberg’s estate.

If anything set the two places apart, it was that the furnishings seemed to be more uniform and consistent. It wasn’t a matter of one place looking more expensive than the other. The way the furnishings were arranged was more classy and brought out their age. While Count Salzberg’s estate was by no means ostentatious, it did pale in comparison to this place.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Baron Ryoma Mikoshiba.” A middle-aged man standing at the bottom of a staircase greeted Ryoma. “Our acting company president, Lady Simone, is currently occupied. I apologize, but could you wait in the guest room until she’s ready to see you?”

The man looked to be in his mid-forties. His skin was dark and tanned, and he wore a white suit. He seemed mild and amicable, but the glint in his eyes set him apart from the rest. And for some reason, a thick salty aroma wafted up from his body.

“All right. We’ll wait, then... Could you show us the way?”

Ryoma stepped forward, but the man suddenly stopped him.

“My apologies, Sir Baron, but could you leave your weapon here? And I would also ask that your escorts do the same as well.”

His eyes had an intensity that made it impossible to say no.

“Are you telling him to leave our swords behind?!” Laura exclaimed.

The two sisters grabbed hold of their weapons. The man’s request was a rude one. A merchant asking a noble to disarm themselves was extremely unusual.

“These are our company’s regulations... I’m afraid that if you wish to meet the acting president, you will have to oblige...”

The man conducted himself politely, but his body seemed to be full of unwavering conviction. This was about more than just company regulations.

He’s got something in mind... Right, he’s wary of an assassination... They don’t trust us either... I guess that makes sense. From her perspective, it looks like one of the Count’s allies is visiting her...

Outwardly, Ryoma seemed to be affiliated with Count Salzberg. The fact he actually wasn’t didn’t matter here; the only thing that did was that Simone thought he was.

“Understood... Laura! Sara!”

At Ryoma’s order, the Malfist sisters drew their swords from their scabbards and handed them over to the man. They were equally anxious to meet a person they had no reason to trust while unarmed, but their master’s orders took precedence.

“Right... And these are pretty dangerous, too. I’ll leave them in your care.” Ryoma handed his katana over to the man, and then also gave him the small leather pouch dangling from his belt.

“Oh... Why, this is quite impressive...” the man exclaimed, peering into the pouch.

The pouch contained Ryoma’s chakrams. They were quite lethal projectile weapons, but they certainly weren’t something a noble would normally be walking around with.

The man’s gaze bored into Ryoma and the sisters. It only lasted a few seconds, after which he looked away and politely bowed his head before stepping onto the staircase.

“Please come this way. The guest room is on the second floor.”

Apparently, the fact Ryoma voluntarily handed over his chakrams left a good impression on the man. Ryoma nodded slightly and followed the man up the stairs.

“Please wait here. The acting president will be with you shortly.”

The man led them into the room closest to the stairs before lowering his head again and leaving.

“What do you think?” Ryoma whispered to the sisters quietly.

He had no way of knowing what tricks were set in this room. The room could very well have been tapped in some way.

“He’s quite skilled... But what really strikes me as odd was how tanned he was...” Sara said, to which Laura nodded in approval.

All three of them were wary of that man. The glint in his eyes and the way he carried himself didn’t look like the way a merchant might act. Instead, it came across as the way a man skilled in combat might behave.

“And he smelled like salt for some reason... Even though Count Salzberg’s territory doesn’t have any access to the sea...”

“Yeah, you’re right. I noticed it, too... I don’t know if he just drifted here from another town or if there’s some kind of other reason for it...”

There were a few possible options, but...

“No point brooding over it now... We need to focus on speaking to Simone,

first.”

And as if in response to Ryoma’s words, there was a modest knock on the door.

“May I?” a young woman’s voice asked.

It was a serene voice, but at the same time seemed to harbor a certain inner strength.

“Go ahead.”

With Ryoma’s permission, the door opened and a woman walked into the room and bowed before them politely. Her chestnut-colored hair was tied up neatly and fixed into place with a silver hair ornament. The silk dress she wore was dyed in a faint blue, granting her a refined, cool-looking image.

“Yes, pardon me... Thank you for waiting. You are Baron Ryoma Mikoshiba, yes? A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Simone Christof, and I currently serve as the Christof Company’s acting president.”

While the company had fallen on hard times, she was still the daughter of the man who once served as the head of the trade union. Her introduction and apology were perfectly polite. Her flowing body motions had a distinct grace to them.

Hmm... She gives the countess a run for her money.

Ryoma compared Simone to the countess, Lady Yulia, whom he met mere days ago. They were both fair, attractive women, but the beauties they boasted seemed to be almost opposite of each other.

Lady Yulia was, in a word, dazzling. She had a calculated beauty that put even the fairest gemstones to shame. She asserted herself in a powerful, almost violent way. But Simone, by comparison, came across as pure. Her pale skin was almost transparent, her sleek hair was clearly well cared for and she wore the bare minimum of ornaments. She came across as reserved and docile.

It was like the difference between a rose and a lily.

But Ryoma keenly picked up on the animalistic ferocity hidden beneath that meek appearance. The fact she came to this room alone was suspicious, to

begin with. Ryoma expected her to have bodyguards, like that man from earlier.

This... might not go the way I expected.

“Hmm... Did I offend you in some way...?” Simone asked reservedly, eyeing Ryoma as he fell silent in contemplation.

“Ah... Not at all, pardon me.” Ryoma came to and apologized politely. “Yes, I am Ryoma Mikoshiba. My apologies for requesting this meeting on such short notice.”

“Oh, no, don’t let that bother you, Baron... You’re a prospective client, after all.”

Ryoma only made the appointment for this meeting earlier that afternoon. It was far from polite, but Simone’s expression didn’t betray any signs of displeasure. She merely smiled at Ryoma pleasantly.

“I’m very glad to hear that... It means this visit will likely be a worthwhile one,” Ryoma said after waiting for Simone to take a seat opposite of him.

“My! That’s good to hear... Although, our company is rather busy as of late. I don’t know to what extent we can meet your expectations, Baron... You may not be aware of this yet, but my father, the company president Louis Christof, is currently ravaged by illness and is in a catatonic state. I am now serving as acting president in his stead, inexperienced though I may be.”

“Oh, I see... A catatonic state... The rumor I’ve heard is that he lost his wits upon having his position as head of the trade union taken away by the Mystel Company.”

Ryoma intentionally worded himself crudely, so as to provoke her. He wanted to see how she’d react.

“So you did hear of it... I’m surprised, to be honest... You only arrived in Epirus a few days ago, Baron. You must have good people working for you,” Simone said, elegantly cocking her head to the side. “Though I suppose you would, given your accomplishments... Your strategies in toppling Heraklion make it clear that you know the importance of information and intelligence. Even an amateur warrior such as myself could tell how creative and novel your tactics were... Your ingenuity in coming up with them is a thing to be feared.”

And despite her words, she didn't seem to be holding back her anger. Quite the opposite, in fact, as her words put Ryoma in a position that necessitated that he riposte.

"Oh... So you've heard of Heraklion... Maybe you even predicted I'd pay you a visit." Ryoma regarded Simone with a complacent smile, probing for her intentions.

This world had limited means of circulating information. There was no television, radio, or internet in this world. Sending letters and carrier pigeons were the only ways of gaining information that wasn't based on hearsay. That was why information was so precious.

And Simone knew about how Ryoma manipulated information in Heraklion. It went deeper than simply knowing that he helped Queen Lupis win. This was something she couldn't have known without investigating the smaller details. Knowing that much was proof that Simone was more than just a rich man's daughter.

"Hmm... I'd say I was half sure and half in doubt about that. I did assume someone of your wit would see through Count Salzberg's intentions... But I didn't expect you to seek me out a mere few days after arriving in Epirus. At worst I thought I may have to approach you myself."

"Did you, now... In that case, are you aware of the situation I'm in?" Ryoma asked.

Simone's expression didn't change one bit, even in the face of that question.

"Of course, Baron. I know about how Queen Lupis's scheming landed you in this situation, and about Count Salzberg... Ah, I can't believe myself! I didn't even offer you any tea, did I? Someone! Could you come in?"

Simone clapped, to which a maid entered the room. Simone requested she bring them tea. It was almost as if she was about to hold a tea party along with her friends. The maid walked into the room before long, carrying a teapot.

But the moment Ryoma saw the maid prepare the tea, his eyes narrowed. She poured the hot water from above directly into the teapot in a method called jumping. The water's temperature seemed to be just right, and a pleasant

aroma wafted from the room as soon as the water filled the pot.

“Please, help yourselves. These leaves are a Qwiltantian specialty,” Simone said, bringing her cup to her lips.

This was likely to show off that it wasn’t poisoned. Ryoma took a sip after her. The first thing he felt was the rich aroma. It was vivid, and had a way of exciting the heart. Eventually, a moderate lingering bitterness remained on his tongue. He naturally reached out to the cookies placed in front of him. They had a fragrant scent and appropriate sweetness.

“Hmm... This is good! The tea leaves are high quality, and even the way it was served was perfect! And the cookies fit the tea just right... Whoever made this is a master at serving tea.”

High-quality tea leaves that were perfectly prepared, and teacakes that had just the right degree of sweetness. Whoever served this went about their job like a master craftsman.

Ryoma didn’t assume himself to be some kind of gourmand, but his tongue was more sensitive than most. Possibly because his grandfather, Kouichirou, had absolutely no taste when it came to teas and alcohol. But even that aside, good food would be seen as such even by those who weren’t connoisseurs.

As proof, the Malfist sisters, who were sipping tea at his side, had their eyes open wide and round with surprise. The two of them were daughters of a noble house from the central continent, even if it had since fallen into ruin. Nothing but the finest quality would elicit surprise out of them.

“Oh! You can tell? You’re quite the refined man, Baron.” Simone smiled with praise.

“Refined? Uh, I can just tell what tastes good from what doesn’t, that’s all.”

Honestly, Ryoma never really pursued delicacies out of the intention to be some kind of connoisseur. He just happened to have been graced with the chance to taste a wide range of food.

“I suppose so...” Simone shook her head slowly. “Rearth must be blessed with many types of cuisine. I’ll admit I’m quite envious of you.”

Those words made Ryoma's pulse hasten in his chest.

This woman... How much does she know?

Ryoma quickly restrained his agitated emotions. He couldn't afford to affirm Simone's words here.

"What do you mean?" Ryoma asked, not letting his expression change any.

"There's no need to hide it... Anyone might come to this conclusion, given enough thought," Simone said as if the whole matter wasn't anything out of the ordinary. "Your wit and intellect, Baron. They're something no commoner could ever hope to achieve. That meant you must have been a noble, but when I looked into your past, I found nothing. Absolutely nothing dating further than six months ago, when you registered with the guild. That should not even be possible... I may not find any definitive information, but my intelligence network is quite expansive. If it could turn up no information about your past, Baron... The only explanation is that you must have appeared in this world suddenly. I did know you were summoned in the O'ltormea Empire capital city. Roughly around that time, O'ltormea's court thaumaturgist, Gaius Valkland, disappeared mysteriously in the middle of his work. I concluded, then, that he must have fallen by your hand."

Her conjecture was perfect.

"Right... Well, if you figured out that much, there's no point to me playing dumb," Ryoma said, a resigned expression on his face.

Her knowing he was from Rearth wasn't that fatal of an issue, but the same couldn't be said for his involvement in Gaius Valkland's murder.

Shit... Depending on how she goes about it, I might have to shut her up... Killing a woman doesn't really sit with me, but...

Ryoma wasn't pretentious enough to claim he was some kind of gentleman who indulges women, but he wasn't sick enough of a man to derive joy from killing them, either.

Still, that intelligence network of hers is impressive...

Nothing turned up when she tried looking into his past, and so she concluded

he must have been an otherworlder. That showed she had absolute trust in her intelligence network.

“Yes... Though truth be told, I didn’t quite believe you were an otherworlder. I thought it was likely... But normally, otherworlders are immediately bound by thaumaturgy, which ensures they wouldn’t be able to escape.”

“Right... So, what’ll you do? Do you intend to oppose me?” Ryoma asked, bloodlust radiating from his body.

This was a threat, of course. If Ryoma was truly keen on killing her, he would have wordlessly crushed her throat with a brandish of his hand. Simone understood this as well, and didn’t so much as stir despite being exposed to Ryoma’s seemingly seething bloodlust.

“No... I have no intention of doing that. To tell the truth, I agreed to this meeting for two reasons. The first was to confirm my intelligence network’s findings, and the other was to prove that I don’t intend to make an enemy out of you, Baron.”

True, no person who would openly share their information source to the other party could be considered hostile. If Simone did intend to oppose him, she wouldn’t have told Ryoma about this.

“Right... I guess we should lay all our cards on the table this time,” Ryoma said, allowing his bloodlust to recede.

“I’ll admit you’re as strong as they say... The pressure was so great, I couldn’t even budge...”

“You looked pretty composed to me.”

“Only because I knew that wasn’t truly your intent...” Simone’s expression changed to a whimsical, alluring smile.



“Yeah... Though the people hiding in the walls don’t seem to think that way... I can sense them, you know.”

“Do not blame us for it. Mystel’s subordinates are always plotting against us... My people were merely worried for my well-being. Please overlook it, out of respect for me.” Simone bowed her head in apology.

With that, the thick murderous intent Ryoma felt from the walls died down.

“Was that the man who showed us to this room?”

“Yes. He is my secretary and bodyguard... And oh, yes, my apologies for his having to ask you to leave your weapons behind.”

“That’s fine. Let’s just say I feel more confident about teaming up with a person who knows how to keep herself safe.”

Simone regarded Ryoma’s words with a bitter smile and sat back down on the sofa.

“Then let’s begin the negotiations. We already have an understanding of your demands, Baron. You’re seeking to ensure you have a source of provisions in Epirus for the time period until you can turn the Wortenia Peninsula into a self-sufficient land, correct?”

Simone’s expression was still friendly, but upon entering into negotiations, the air around her changed. She regarded Ryoma with an aura that felt like a vivid, sharp blade.

“Yeah... And in the future, I intend to build ports in the peninsula and trade with other continents. We want the Christof Company to provide goods exclusively to us, so we may sell them as trade commodities.”

Simone likely didn’t plan that far ahead. Those words made her expression stir.

“My... You plan on a very grand scale... If that were to become a reality, the Wortenia Peninsula would become an extraordinary source of profit. And a permanent, self-sufficient source of profit, at that... And you wish for me to help you with that?”

There was a shiver in Simone’s voice. Understandably enough; if Ryoma’s

intentions were to become reality, the Christof Company would be granted a great deal of wealth and privilege for helping him — the sort of wealth and privilege other companies wouldn't be entitled to.

A powerless merchant would scoff at this plan and write it off as impossible. But Simone's mind could envision the port that would be made in the Wortenia Peninsula.

"But making that happen would take a long time and require a great deal of funds... And once you're in on it, there's no getting off halfway through. In other words, if you help fund this, you're with us whether we sink or swim."

Ryoma's words were only a promise for what may come. To get there, they'd need to build cities on the peninsula and secure trade routes. It was an endeavor that would take years. Simone choosing to help them would be equivalent to placing the fate of the Christof Company in Ryoma's hands.

But Simone had already made her choice. She'd intended to offer them funds even if Ryoma hadn't said anything.

"It is fine... This was my intent to begin with. Though I didn't imagine your plans extended that far..."

"I get it..." Ryoma said, picking up on the meaning behind her words. "You're hanging by a thread, aren't you?"

Ryoma turned a probing glance at Simone. The Christofs' business was well-maintained and they had expensive furnishings passed down through the ages. In terms of appearance alone, one wouldn't be able to tell the Christof Company was in financial trouble.

But that wasn't the case. They'd lost all their clients, and they weren't able to form new business connections. A company like that had no future.

"Yes... The company has some funds left, so we won't go under immediately. But the way things are going, we have three years left, at best. We need to make a choice by then. We either leave Epirus behind and seek our luck in new lands, or fight back against Count Salzberg and the Mystel Company to the best of our ability..."

"I see. I guess we'll need to talk this through a bit more," Ryoma said.

“Yes.” Simone nodded. “We should get to know each other a bit better.”

Ryoma described his plans and future outlook, and then went on to explain why they were more than just a pipe dream. And to prove it, Ryoma would need to exhibit his power.

“By the way, how did you get those tea leaves from Qwiltantia?” Ryoma mentioned a concern that nudged at the back of his mind since Simone revealed the Christof Company’s troubles. “They’re one of the largest powers on the continent. Isn’t it going to take days to get there, be it through a sea route or land?”

Goods brought from afar were expensive, as transport costs were reflected in the price. The Christof Company expressly chose to use expensive tea leaves. And Qwiltantian ones, at that. That made Ryoma think there might have been some hidden agenda there.

“You noticed... We ordered those leaves from Pherzaad the other day.”

Simone took a map of the western continent out of a cabinet and spread it over the table. It wasn’t as detailed as a Mercator projection, but it was probably quite accurate, since it seemed similar to the one they saw in Pireas.

“Do you know of Pherzaad, a trade city in the Kingdom of Myest?”

“Yeah, I’ve been there before.”

Simone nodded at Ryoma’s words and pointed at the left side of the map next.

“The tea leaves we served you were of the highest class even in the Holy Empire of Qwiltantia. They cost quite a bit even in other countries... They’re produced here, in the northwestern regions of Qwiltantia.” She pointed at a mountain town located a short distance away from the coastline. “The tea leaves produced here are delivered to the trade city of Lorcana, where they’re then shipped to the east by ship.”

She dragged her finger along the map, drawing a line from Lorcana, around to the south and to Pherzaad. Lorcana was located on the northwestern tip of Qwiltantia - the sea route they used was clearly a roundabout one that circled two-thirds of the way around the western continent. Ryoma directed a

suspicious gaze at Simone.

“So you noticed...”

“Why are they taking such a detour...? Wait, no! I get it, it’s the Wortenia Peninsula!”

“Precisely. The reason they have to take a roundabout route is the Wortenia Peninsula... There’s no supply port in this region. That’s the greatest reason the northern sea routes aren’t in use.”

The seafarers had been avoiding the northern sea routes ever since the peninsula became a haunt for pirates.

And the reason for that was quite simple — no people lived in Wortenia, and so there was no supply port. Meaning that ships passing through the north couldn’t expect any rescue or resupply in case of emergency.

There was no telling what might happen at sea. Even in a coastal region, there were monsters that inhabited the sea, and storms were always a possibility. The rudder breaking for whatever reason was also not improbable. And if any of those things were to happen, landing in the peninsula for repairs or rescue wasn’t possible.

An ordinary ship would require seven to ten days to cross the peninsula. Given the dangers that might arise during that time period, it was only natural sailors would refuse to take the northern route.

And yet, companies had still used a few trade ships to cross through the northern route.

“Now that the peninsula is a roost for pirates, the northern route had to be abandoned completely... However.”

Ryoma jolted with surprise and excitement.

“If you were to spin it the other way, hypothetically, building a port on the Wortenia Peninsula and dealing with the pirates... There’s profit to be made there. Simone, did you serve that Qwiltantian tea so you could bring this up? Because you wanted to see a port established there?”

“Yes... With a port there, we’ll be able to trade with Qwiltantia directly, and

not just them. Helnesgoula and the other continents would also be open to trade... The peninsula is effectively a trove of treasures.”



Simone’s eyes lit up bewitchingly. She was very much gambling on Ryoma’s wit and ingenuity.

“I see... So I wasn’t the one testing you. You were testing me.”

This entire meeting was a test to see if he would realize her plan and be able to help her. And had Ryoma turned out to be a fool, she was prepared to leave Epirus behind.

“Honestly, I didn’t expect you to be this keen when it came to business, Baron. I didn’t imagine you’d come up with the same idea... However, with this, I and the Christof Company are willing to put our faith in you.”

“So I passed?” Ryoma asked.

Simone reached her right hand out to Ryoma.

“Of course. Please, lend the Christof Company your strength.”

“In that case, call me by my name.” Ryoma asked. “Being called ‘Baron’ doesn’t sit well with me.”

Simone laughed out loud for the first time.

“Oh, I couldn’t do anything that rude. And considering what’s to come, I think you should get used to this,” she said playfully. “But if you insist, Baron, I could consider it a favor to a comrade and call you Mikoshiba when in private.”

“That would be better. I hope we have good business going forward.”

“Yes. You can count on me,” Simone said, her smile austere and fair.

Her face was that of a proud warrior, resolved to step into battle.

Chapter 5: The Oppressed

“Ooh, so she tried to test you, milord... That woman is indeed wise enough to lead a company on her own at such a young age.” Gennou narrowed his eyes upon hearing Ryoma’s account of his meeting with Simone. “And yet, to think she could look into you that thoroughly... We shouldn’t make light of her intelligence network. She would make for a problematic enemy.”

Gennou had a positive impression of her abilities upon seeing she had looked into his master. This was proof he wasn’t serving Ryoma out of blind loyalty. A more blind follower might have taken issue with the fact she had tested Ryoma, but none of Ryoma’s companions reacted that way.

“I don’t think we need to worry about her turning on us for the time being. She needs me for as long as she chooses to remain in Epirus,” Ryoma said. “Me, with my right to rule over the Wortenia Peninsula... Though, who’s to say when the situation might change. Stay cautious if nothing else, Gennou.”

Ryoma didn’t think Simone would turn against him of her own volition, but it all depended on the situation. For example, one terrible possibility was her father being taken hostage. She would have no choice but to oppose him.

“Understood, milord... But her intelligence network is quite impressive... She likely used the merchants.”

“Looks like it. Even if her company’s in decline, they’re a long running company. They probably have connections with other large companies. They likely still exchange information via carrier pigeons every now and then.”

“The strength of a long running company, is it... They use that information to send people out to investigate rumors.”

“Yeah, at the same time they send their caravans out to trade... I’ll have them working in tandem with you, Gennou. From what I hear, they have some combat specialists accompanying their caravans for self-defense.”

“Then I shall support you from the shadows with them, milord.”

Simone’s group was better suited for mass information gathering with a large

number of people. Gennou was better suited to burglary, torture, and subterfuge. The difference between them is that Simone's group was able to gather information on a larger scale but on a superficial level, while Gennou was able to gather a lot of information regarding a pinpointed target.

They were both adept at information gathering, but the way they went about their work was essentially opposite of each other. Both had their merits, and if they were to work together, they would form a formidable intelligence network.

Gennou seemed relieved that his value hadn't decreased in Ryoma's eyes. His normally cold, unchanging expression melted into a soft smile.

"Well, whatever happened, it all ended well, yeah? We hooked up with a powerful intelligence organization without even planning for it, and we know we can trust in the Christof Company for supplies, right, boy?" Lione asked.

"No... The Christof Company isn't going to start selling to us immediately." Ryoma shook his head.

"Huh? The hell?!" Lione exclaimed in shock. "Weren't this talk all about us buying supplies from them? If we can't get what we need from them, where're we gonna get it from?!"

Her surprise was understandable. They needed a supplier that wasn't influenced by Count Salzberg, and that was the Christof Company. The company even agreed to cooperate with them. And yet, Ryoma had just said the company wouldn't deal with them. There were only ten large companies in Epirus, but the other nine were all under Count Salzberg's thumb.

Ryoma anticipated her question, though.

"Well, the Mystel Company, of course... Or, well, that's what I decided with Simone... At this point, it would be bad if the Christof Company allied itself with us publicly. It'd just serve to provoke Count Salzberg, you see?"

Those words made that realization dawn upon everyone present. Allying with the Christof Company, whom the count had seen as his opposition, would make Count Salzberg sense that he was in danger. Why would they deal with that company? He would assume Ryoma might be planning to oppose him. This

wasn’t a good turn of events for Ryoma and his group.

And so, when Ryoma and Simone discussed things after agreeing to a partnership, they decided it would be best for Ryoma to work with the Mystel Company as if nothing had happened. At least until they had some leverage against the count.

In the meanwhile, Ryoma would leak information from Count Salzberg’s side to the Christof Company, while Simone prepared for when the count would try to pressure Ryoma in the near future. And if Count Salzberg did look down on Ryoma and thought he was a mere upstart, he would likely act in Ryoma’s favor for as long as Ryoma continued to keep his head down and beg for help.

After all, Count Salzberg had a major weakness hanging over his head — his possession of the halite vein.

“I see... Yeah, that would be safer...”

“Indeed.”

Gennou and Boltz nodded in understanding.

“Well, that’s the kind of plan you’d hatch, boy. Especially the part where you use up the count for all he’s worth,” Lione remarked teasingly.

Throw the enemy off his guard and finish him off with a single blow. A plan that stressed efficiency and cared little for appearances or dignity. A person who would unflinchingly do things that might be considered cowardly or unfair in this world.

From Lione’s perspective, Ryoma was the type of person who would make for the most terrifying enemy imaginable.

“But Master Ryoma... wouldn’t Count Salzberg know that we visited the Christof Company before we went to the Mystel Company?” Sara asked anxiously.

“Well, from what Simone says, the Christof Company’s building always has people watching it... We can’t hide the fact I met her,” Ryoma admitted.

“Then what will we do?”

“I’ll be honest. Tell them I asked the Christof Company to sell me supplies,

and they refused... Which is why I came back crying to Count Salzberg and asked him to introduce me to the Mystel Company."

And the reason he didn't ask the count to begin with would be because Ryoma felt too reserved to bother him. He only chose the Christof Company because the place seemed less crowded, but he was declined. Upon learning of the power balance in Epirus, Ryoma would panic and ask the count for help. He didn't intend to deal with the Christof Company in particular, and had no intention of opposing him...

Or at least, that would be Ryoma's story.

Simone's and Gennou's descriptions of the count's character matched with the unease Ryoma felt toward the man. The warm welcome he showed toward Ryoma a few days ago was an act. Count Salzberg was arrogant, entitled, and looked down on other people. Considering his personality, Ryoma throwing himself at his mercy would stroke his superiority complex and lower his guard. He wouldn't assume Ryoma was only fooling him...

"Hmmm... So you took the count's personality into account," Gennou remarked.

"As impressive as ever, lad..." Boltz sighed in a mix of exasperation and admiration.

"A good lie is one that has a bit of truth mixed in..." Ryoma said, a cold smile on his lips. "This would lull the Count into a false sense of security, and convince him to give us the help we need. We'll be able to leech off of him until we don't need him anymore."

They would fool him, which would enable them to defeat him later on...

"Well, now we know where we're going to find supplies... But what about the citizens?" Gennou asked with a hint of concern to his voice.

They'd been able to settle on their future policies when it came to hiring mercenaries and gaining supplies. The only remaining question was where they'd get residents to populate the peninsula.

"Yeah, about that... Does anyone have any good ideas?"

Ryoma had to admit this was a headache-inducing issue. Getting people to migrate was difficult enough. Even if they were to put up notices in the nearby villages and settlements, no one would want to migrate to an undeveloped land like Wortenia. It was crawling with powerful monsters, demi-human settlements, and pirate lairs.

If the land was at least somewhat developed, they may have been able to convince some people to come, but not when the land was essentially untouched. Even promises of favorable taxation wouldn't be helpful here.

And there was another major problem. Those lands were ruled over by nobles. Normally they only saw their citizens as cattle for producing taxes. But what would they do if their citizens were to migrate to another territory? Every person who left their land would mean less tax income for these nobles.

They would complain to Queen Lupis, or choose to resort to force on their own. No matter which path they'd choose, Ryoma would be finished. Perhaps in the future he'd be more powerful, but currently he was weaker than even the youngest, most insignificant noble in the country.

Everyone fell silent at Ryoma's question as they tried to think of a solution. Ryoma's travels had taught him to think creatively in ways that ignored this Earth's logic. That would be key in solving this dilemma.

"I have one idea... But it will be expensive," Laura said, upon which everyone's gazes converged on her. "But it will increase our permanent residents... And I don't think the other nobles would be opposed to this method."

Those words seemed convenient... Too convenient for Ryoma's ears. The fact money could solve this issue meant they could resolve it at their leisure and gain citizens whenever they wanted and as much as their funds would allow.

Did such an easy method really exist? Ryoma had to eye her with doubt.

"There are several slave merchants conducting business in this city's back alleys. Perhaps we could acquire labor slaves from them? That would only cost us the fee of buying the slaves. A normal citizen wouldn't have access to thaumaturgy, so we would need to teach them how to do it. In which case, perhaps it would be safer to forgo drawing people from the other nobles' territories and simply buy slaves."

Everyone swiftly weighed the pros and cons of Laura's suggestion.

"It's not a bad idea..." Gennou was the first to break the silence. "Purchasing slaves would avoid friction with the nobles, and would allow us to increase our population as much as our funds allow. My only problem with this suggestion is that the slaves we purchase might revolt against milord..."

Boltz, who sat next to Gennou, tilted his head.

"I think Gennou's concerns are well-founded. And there's also the question of if we can truly afford this. Weren't we pressed for funds?"

"I believe labor slaves, and especially ones that haven't matured yet, wouldn't cost that much... And they often offer discounts to clients who buy a large number of them. I believe it's financially feasible."

"I see... In that case, that does sound like a good idea."

Buying many slaves at once would allow them to bargain on the price per head. If they were to promise to periodically purchase more slaves, the slave merchants wouldn't be prone to refuse them. It was a plausible idea.

"But what about them revolting?" Lione asked. "The Wortenia Peninsula really is a hellhole. Money might not be a problem here, but can we really make those slaves into residents of this land?"

"Hmm. I wonder." Boltz cocked his head at her question.

A person who hadn't lived as a slave couldn't hope to answer that question. They knew a slave's life was a cruel one, but even still, living in Wortenia was a dangerous prospect. It was hard to imagine them willingly choosing to live there.

"Wouldn't promising to free them from their status as slaves in exchange be enough?" Sara proposed.

"Huh?" Lione turned a suspicious glance in her direction. "You're saying we should spend money on those slaves and then free them?"

"Yes. Laura and I were originally war slaves... But Master Ryoma freed us. We devote ourselves to him out of absolute loyalty, but if we were still slaves..."

They wouldn't harbor that kind of loyalty toward him. Sara left those words

unsaid, but everyone realized what she meant. No slave was truly loyal to their master. They might serve out of fear of the whip, but hatred would certainly be swirling in their hearts. Enough to prompt them to try and kill their master at the first sign of weakness.

"I see... So that's how you two met him," Lione whispered to herself, seemingly convinced.

Lione and Boltz always wondered why the two of them were so loyal to Ryoma.

Right... Slaves are considered living objects. So if anyone were to give them the right to be human again, they'd feel indebted...

Lione understood just how hard and shameful life as a slave must have been. She was born a commoner, and commoners honestly weren't much different from slaves. They were forced to pay taxes and fight during wartime, and on top of that, a commoner could very easily be sold off as a slave. And what waited beyond that was a cruel fate and the trampling of one's human dignity.

"Hmm, so freeing the slaves would solidify their fealty towards milord and wouldn't incur the other nobles' ire... A fine idea," Gennou concluded.

What mattered was that the slaves were loyal to Ryoma. Put another way, one might call it patriotism, in a way. That was something an upstart noble like Ryoma wouldn't normally obtain. But so long as Ryoma didn't do anything foolish enough to make them revolt, the liberated slaves wouldn't turn against him.

It'd be manipulating their emotions... But I don't have much of a choice.

And if Ryoma wouldn't buy their freedom here, they'd remain slaves to fate. They would continue to be used by others, at least for as long as they're not graced with a great deal of luck. Compared to that, the Malfist sisters' idea almost seemed like a salvation of sorts. Ryoma was certainly still going to use them, but the critical difference was that they would be treated as human beings.

"All right. If I don't buy them, someone else will... and saving them will work in my favor. It's a good choice. First thing tomorrow, let's go around to the

businesses that deal with slaves. Sara, Laura, you two come with me. Gennou, I want you to keep looking into Count Salzberg! Lione, you keep working on the mercenaries, and Boltz, I want you to keep gathering information on the peninsula."

Everyone nodded at Ryoma's words. Ryoma loathed the slave system from the depths of his heart. It reduced people into objects, and in Ryoma's eyes nothing was more important than a person's will and freedom. This was part of why he loathed Queen Lupis so much. She misused her authority and social status and ignored Ryoma's will as a result.

Having been oppressed once, Ryoma would exact revenge using the power of equally oppressed slaves. The sound of that idea rang sweetly in his mind.

A class system? Screw that. I'll crush that arrogance of yours to bits!

The will filling this room would go on to overflow, and wash over the entirety of the western continent like a tidal wave.

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"The back alleys, huh?"

The sun had just passed its zenith and was beginning to dip into the western sky when Ryoma set foot in Epirus's northern district. Dirty alleyways, full of the scent of filth and decay, spread out before him. He'd only slightly stepped outside the main street when he found himself on dark roads covered with shady establishments.

"There should be a square further ahead where all the slave merchant companies are located."

Ryoma nodded lightly at Laura's voice and entered the dark underbelly of the citadel city of Epirus.

"Well met, sir noble!" A bearded man who introduced himself as the shopkeeper bowed to him cheerfully. "Is this your first visit here? We're honored to have you. The Abdul Company is the largest supplier of slaves in Epirus. We deal in labor and sex slaves, and have a selection of war slaves as well. Our stock is vast, and we guarantee you will find a slave to your liking among our wares."

All around them were slaves, who looked into empty space with vacant expressions and were bound to the wall with chains. The shopkeeper's skin was greasy and his expression was thick with greed and lust. It was as if some force of nature had taken the definition of the word "Avarice" and fashioned it into a human face.

His body was thick both horizontally and vertically. He was only a bit shorter than Ryoma but three times his width. He was dressed in a long-sleeved robe covered with jewels. But despite that outfit, the leather whip dangling from his belt felt awfully vivid. He probably used it to whip disobedient slaves. The leather of its handle gleamed, as if to attest to how often it was used.

"I would... like to purchase a slave," Ryoma said through his teeth, trying his hardest to suppress his emotions.

Had Sara and Laura not been gripping the hem of his cloak, Ryoma would likely have been overcome by the anger rumbling inside his heart and beat the merchant's face to a bloody pulp. The shopkeeper was blissfully ignorant of Ryoma's feelings on the matter.

"Oooh! We greatly appreciate your patronage, sir noble." The shopkeeper grinned as he quite blatantly rubbed his hands. "Do you seek labor slaves? Or perhaps a slave to pass the lonely nights with, hmm? We don't have as many war slaves, but we will gladly provide for you to the best of our ability."



For how large and slow-witted he seemed, the merchant had a way with words. His eye for potential clients was impressive in its own right. If nothing else, he discerned Ryoma was a noble just from a look at his outfit. He wore the silk shirt and cloak he bought for his visit to Count Salzberg's estate, but otherwise didn't wear anything else that might identify him as a noble.

"I need labor slaves, and a lot of them," Ryoma told him. "That's important. And I have a few requirements. I need boys and girls, all of them in their early to mid-teens. As many boys as there are girls. Roughly... Three hundred of them... If your business doesn't have that many, I'd like you to call on other businesses to supply those numbers."

The slave merchant eyed Ryoma quizzically. His requests likely came as a surprise.

"If I may, sir noble, they sound a bit too young for me. If you seek labor slaves, you would probably want older ones... Males, roughly in their twenties? And if you seek to make them your playthings, let me tell you that a labor slave's body isn't much to look at. Be they young girls or boys, the attractive ones are sold off as sex slaves. You won't find any handsome ones among the labor slaves, yes?" He directed a probing glance at Ryoma. "And three hundred of them... Our establishment is the largest in Epirus, but that number is a bit... My apologies, sir noble, but what do you intend to use them for? If you could explain your needs I may be able to advise you accordingly."

Labor slaves were mostly used for agricultural work. They were essentially no different from ranch bulls or labor horses. To that end, the value of a labor slave was measured in their muscle mass. This of course made men more valuable than women, and adults in their twenties more valuable than children. Purchasing girls may have been understandable if they ran out of boys, but no one would specifically ask for female labor slaves.

At least, that was what this shopkeeper's long tenure as a slave merchant taught him. And no one would purchase teenage slaves who were still in their growing stages, except for eccentrics with a taste for pedophilia.

Their muscle mass was undeveloped compared to an adult's, and the food costs of feeding an adolescent were higher. It was like knowingly purchasing an

automobile with bad fuel consumption.

But Ryoma simply met the merchant's apprehension with a cold voice.

"What's it to you?"

The moment those words left Ryoma's lips, the Malfist sisters shivered for a moment, as did the shopkeeper. Ryoma didn't raise his voice or anything of the sort, and his tone was perfectly calm. But the chilling bloodlust hidden behind those words cut through the air like a blade. It was so vivid that even the shopkeeper, with his lack of experience in martial arts, could sense it.

He's going to kill me...

The image of his throat being slashed open flashed in the slave merchant's mind. This man had killed countless slaves in his career. They had either grown too old, become disobedient, or maybe lost a limb and disfigured their bodies. Most of his victims were child slaves that were useless as workers, too.

At first, he would hold up the children he gathered at the front of the store, held in place by chains and collars. Attractive children were the first to be sold, as were children that looked older than they really were. Those had uses, after all. But there were always children that were left behind, unpurchased. And once no one bought them after a certain period of time, the slave merchants would kill them.

Feeding them was a waste of money, after all...

And even still, the slave merchants made good profit. They lined their wallets with gold... That was made on the backs of countless corpses. And the shopkeeper didn't think there was anything wrong about that.

He wasn't killing people, after all; he was killing slaves. Objects shaped like humans. And when people saw other human beings as objects, they discard the ability to feel emotion. Mercy didn't exist. Why would one harbor such feelings for an object?

And Ryoma was currently glaring at the slaver the same way the slaver would look at his slaves.

"O-Of course not! My apologies!" The shopkeeper fell to his knees and started

begging for his life. “Do forgive me, sir noble! Please... Please forgive me! I beg of you...”

He didn’t even realize the slaves were looking at him. This was no time to put on airs. He realized his only way of staying alive was by begging for mercy. The fact he was facing a noble didn’t matter. He’d do the same if he was standing in front of a commoner, no, even against a slave. Ryoma had towered over him with a clear, palpable difference in strength.

“Master Ryoma...” Laura tugged on Ryoma’s cloak harder, looking down on the shopkeeper lying prostrate.



In truth, the twins wanted to kill this man just as much as Ryoma did. The sight of this shop was simply that gruesome to behold. The slaves' skins were filthy and riddled with whipping scars. They likely hadn't bathed in months. Their hair was twisted in knots and they were dressed in what could only be called undergarments.

No, those that did wear undergarments were the lucky ones. Some of them were displayed at the storefront naked. There was no will in their vacant eyes as they stared into the air. It was like watching despair in human form.

The two of us were lucky... They let us stay together and at least fed us...

Sara and Laura were once slaves, too. But they were descended from a house of high-ranking knights and were given a proper education. And perhaps most importantly, they were both beautiful women. And so, even though they were slaves, they weren't subjected to the awful treatment the children standing chained and naked in this alleyway were.

Azoth, the slaver who bought them, treated them as precious wares. He vulgarly cursed at them plenty of times, but he never whipped them. In that regard, Azoth was perhaps slightly better than the slave merchant groveling before their eyes.

"Master Ryoma, right now you should..." Laura tugged on Ryoma's cloak one more time.

"I know, fine... I won't lose my temper here..." Ryoma whispered, restraining his rage.

Calm down... You can't... You can't do this, not now... Killing him won't help anyone, will it...? Right... This helps no one...

Ryoma felt his anger swell up as he walked down the alleyways, but he couldn't afford to let it burst here. This was Count Salzberg's territory, and all the slavers here were merchants approved by him.

Condemning slavery as evil was easy, but who held the right to decide what was good and evil? In Ryoma's world, the idea of human rights developed over a long period of time, eventually merging with Christianity's doctrine to form an ideology of freedom and philanthropy.

But those ideas only really became widespread during the second half of the twentieth century. Until then, the white race believed themselves to be chosen by God and treated people of color as subhumans. The same could be said of this Earth.

This world lacked both the idea of human rights and the religious value systems that existed in Ryoma's world. One could call slavery evil as much as they wanted, but no one would lend them an ear. Starting a riot on the matter here would simply result in Ryoma getting banned from doing business.

There was nothing Ryoma could do about this at the moment. It was this understanding that allowed him to pass weeping children being struck with a whip by and do nothing. But having this slaver speak to him like he knew it all simply added too much oil to the fire burning in Ryoma's heart.

"That's enough... Raise your head..." Ryoma said, bottling up those raging feelings.

"Y-Yes! My apologies!" The shopkeeper reacted at once.

He didn't even bother with the pointless act of checking Ryoma's expression. He knew full well that the next time he drew Ryoma's ire would be the moment his life flickered out.

"I'll say it again... I need three hundred male and female slaves in their early to mid-teens. Can you provide that, or not?" Ryoma repeated his question.

"O-Of course, sir noble! We will do everything in our power to satisfy your needs. I swear it on my life! We will do just as you wish!"

This time the shopkeeper didn't say anything unnecessary and promptly answered Ryoma's question.

"Fine... Next, about the money. How much would three hundred cost in total?"

"Yes...! Well, given their age and how boys and girls cost differently..." the shopkeeper stammered.

"How. Much." Ryoma stressed the question, making the annoyance in his voice clear.

“How does a hundred and fifty gold coins in total sound?!”

Fifty silvers per head on average. It totaled up to roughly one hundred and fifty thousand Japanese yen. Apparently, a person’s life cost as much as a bike or a scooter. Perhaps he rounded the price down out of fear from Ryoma’s murderous aura, but Ryoma didn’t know how much a child’s life was worth in this world. Still, this sum was perfectly affordable for Ryoma.

“All right... When can you gather them up?”

“Y-Yes! We don’t have that many in this establishment, but given a week we can gather that many!”

“Good. Where will you have them delivered?”

“My apologies, but gathering three hundred in Epirus’s streets may be problematic... How about the city outskirts?”

He was right. Handing over three hundred slaves in the cramped alleyways wasn’t feasible. They’d need an open space for that.

We’d need to go to the outskirts anyway if we’re going to do thaumaturgy training... To the north there’s Wortenia, and the west is the border with Xarooda. If we’re gonna camp outside, it’d have to be to the east of the city.

Ryoma quickly calculated the situation and turned to the shopkeeper.

“We’ll accept them in the eastern outskirts... We’ll pay you half the sum now, and the other half upon delivery. All right?”

Ryoma received a sack full of coins from Sara and began putting the gold coins one by one into an empty sack, counting them as he did.

“That’s seventy five gold coins. Do confirm it.”

“At once! Please wait.” The shopkeeper received the sack from Ryoma and ran into the store.

He then jogged back out, after having clearly not inspected the bag’s contents. This was unbecoming behavior for a merchant, but there was no one present that would criticize him for it.

“Then... A week from now, outside the eastern gate... Understood?”

“Yes! Thank you kindly for your patronage!” The shopkeeper bowed at a nearly 90 degree angle. “Next week, we will have the wares you have requested delivered to the eastern gate!”

Ignoring his attitude, Ryoma walked away from the store as quickly as he could, restraining the urge to throw up. He didn’t want to spend another second in this place. He etched into his heart that human greed can come across as a toxic, suffocating stench.

Ryoma and the twins hurried back through the alleys until they finally returned to the sunlight of the main street. Exposed to the gentle light of the westering sun, the three of them took a deep breath.

“Master Ryoma... Are you all right?” Laura asked, looking at Ryoma’s back with concern.

“Yeah... I’m fine... How about you two?”

The sisters nodded wordlessly at Ryoma’s question. Their expressions were stiff and strained, but they were regaining their composure.

“So this is this city’s dark underbelly, eh... Shit!”

He knew a slave system existed beforehand, but the reality of it all was far more cruel and foul than Ryoma ever imagined.

I’ll change it... I’ll definitely change this system! Ryoma swore in his heart.

He knew he was only saying that out of self-satisfaction. Ryoma realized this. This was this world’s reality, and the most Ryoma could save were a small handful of the many lives being used by the system of slavery...

†

A week had passed since Ryoma’s agreement with the Abdul Company. Ryoma and his group moved out of the hotel they made their headquarters in during their stay in Epirus. They then set up camp on a field three kilometers away from Epirus’s main gate.

They would need to go through some basic training before entering the Wortenia peninsula, but the only places within Epirus that would allow for it were training facilities Count Salzberg built for his army. Ryoma couldn’t afford

to ask the Count to lend him those places, and so they decided to camp outside of town.

“For now, the preparations are complete. All that’s left is the question of how many people will be left...” The sunlight shined down on them as Ryoma glared at Epirus’s walls.

“Realistically speaking, I don’t see all three hundred of them being useful... We’d be lucky if half of them are any good.” Gennou spoke to Ryoma’s turned back.

“Yeah, I guess...” Ryoma shrugged.

He knew he didn’t have much of a choice, but his expression remained dark. They were about to hold a selection. A selection to pick out the strong ones, the bright ones, the ones with the strongest wills. Only those chosen children would be promised a future and freedom, even though all of them deserved to be free...

But freedom was a privilege granted only to the strong in this Earth. All of these children were lucky in their own way. Not all of them would gain freedom, but they would all at least be given a chance.

“Do not let it weigh upon your conscience, milord... If you didn’t buy them, most of those children would be killed,” Gennou said, but this only made Ryoma grimace.

He knew this well enough already. But while his mind understood the justifications perfectly, his heart couldn’t come to terms with things that easily.

I buy children with the intent of using them, while the slave merchants who sell those children... We’re the same, aren’t we...?

That emotion bubbled up in Ryoma’s heart. But he couldn’t afford to let that stop him here. The cogs of fate were already set in motion, after all...

“Lad! The merchants are entering our camp now!” Boltz’s voice called out to him from behind.

“All right! I’ll be right over... Let’s go, Gennou,” Ryoma said, then made way for the camp’s square.

His face was free of the doubts he'd harbored just moments ago. He knew well enough of how harsh and merciless reality can be, and that no amount of agonizing over that fact will change it...

"We thank you greatly for making use of the Abdul Company," the shopkeeper said, bowing his head as politely as he did last time they spoke. "As requested, we've delivered the wares. Do inspect them."

"Must have been a struggle to gather this many." This was how Ryoma chose to show his good nature.

He always knew to be grateful to those who did him right, no matter who they may be.

"Not at all. This is work for us, after all..." The shopkeeper waved his hand dismissively, denying Ryoma's words. "And ones of this age don't sell well no matter what establishment you'd check. They were actually grateful to us for taking them off their hands... Fewer mouths to feed, after all."

Ryoma directed a cold gaze at him. He'd only given them a cursory glance, but Ryoma got the impression there were more girls than boys behind the slaver.

"Fine, then," Ryoma said with a strong tone. "The gender ratio is equal, like I asked, right?"

"Yes... I've actually brought you three hundred and thirty five of them, but the girls outnumber the boys seven to three."

"Isn't that more than what I asked?"

"Yes..." The shopkeeper stuttered evasively, as if hesitating to answer Ryoma's question. "Well you see, boys often get sold first as labor slaves... And so, I've brought more than three hundred, due to, hmm..."

"To compensate for the lack of boys?" Ryoma asked.

The shopkeeper wordlessly flashed him a business smile.

"All right... Anything else?"

"No, sir noble, the rest is all according to your request. We've checked to make sure they're all healthy. None of them carry any diseases."

Ryoma snuck a glance at Boltz and Gennou, who answered his gaze with small nods. Most of the slaves were scarred from whippings, but all their wounds would recover given treatment. Ryoma didn't trust the slavers much and had them look into the matter.

"Understood. I'll believe you... We'll be taking them all, then. The rest was another seventy five golds, right?"

"Yes, good sir, indeed."

Ryoma nodded and handed over a sack of coins he'd prepared ahead of time.

"Thank you for your patronage." The shopkeeper didn't even bother checking the contents of the sack before stuffing it into his bag and bowing his head.

Apparently, he was keen on getting away from there before he might say anything that would annoy Ryoma. He then presented Ryoma with two documents.

"There's one last thing, though. If you could sign this invoice right here... Yes, with this, all the slaves here now belong to you. One copy goes to you, and the other stays with me."

Confirming Ryoma signed his name on the document, the shopkeeper nodded and put the remaining document in the bag.

"This concludes my business, then. We hope you deal with us again in the future."

Satisfied at having sold off useless slaves to someone, the shopkeeper once again bowed his head and left the camp with his employees.

"All right, then... Lione! Start distributing their clothes. And Laura, is the food prepared?"

It was warm at this time of the year, but the slaves would certainly get sick if they had to stand outside naked. Having seen how the slaves were treated at the storefront, Ryoma had clothes and underwear prepared for them, as well as warm meals. Ryoma thought they might at least dress them upon delivery, but apparently that wasn't customary in this world.

So their first order of business was getting the slaves dressed. The Crimson

Lion members started distributing clothes to the slaves, who stood stock still like dolls devoid of will, collars clasped around their necks.

“We gave them the clothes, boy, but...” Lione said with a disturbed expression.

The children stood there with their clothes in hand. Normally, any person forced to stand around naked would put on any clothes handed to them. Maybe they’d ask if they were allowed to put them on. But these children simply stood there silently, their gazes perplexed. They didn’t try putting the clothes on.

“Why won’t they get dressed...? Don’t tell me they don’t know how to put clothes on.”

These children weren’t three-year-old infants. They might have been slaves, but they surely knew how to get dressed.

“Master Ryoma... Allow me.”

Laura walked in front of the children and began speaking with a calm, kind voice. As she did, the children’s expressions began changing. At first they were surprised, and gradually their gazes filled with suspicion. But as Laura continued speaking to them, they began putting on the clothes they were given, albeit with a hint of fear.

The children she spoke to directly began getting dressed first, but the surrounding slaves gradually followed suit.

“What did you tell them...?” Ryoma asked, visibly surprised.

The enslaved children’s eyes were still leaden with gloom and despair, but Laura’s words apparently made them take interest in Ryoma and his group. It was only the slightest change in atmosphere. They were like expressionless dolls before Laura spoke to them, but afterwards their expressions seemed slightly more human.

“It’s a simple thing, really. I just told them those clothes they were given belonged to them now.”

“What? But isn’t that obvious?”

Ryoma was naturally taken aback. In his mind, he'd already given those clothes to the children. But Laura shook her head in denial.

"Slaves don't think that way. They only consider things as their own the moment their master says so... That's how Sara and I lived for the longest time..."

In truth, it was probably obvious if Ryoma were to think about it. The slaves were treated as objects, and so had to constantly mind how people looked at them and suppress their wills. Before they were bought their lives were at the mercy of the slavers, and after that they were subject to their owners.

It wasn't that they lacked wills of their own. They were simply restraining their individuality and will, so that they didn't make themselves seem unnecessary. Unnecessary slaves were killed and disposed of, after all.

"Oh, I see..." Ryoma realized the situation thanks to Laura's words.

The children couldn't do anything without explicit permission from Ryoma. Or rather, they were under the impression they couldn't. And so Ryoma realized he had to tell them otherwise first. Tell them that they were human. Human beings with wills of their own.

He would have to say that loud and clear, and remind them of their own humanity...

On that day, Melissa's fate underwent a radical change for the second time in her life.

Her fate first changed three years ago. She was born in a small fishing village in the Kingdom of Xarooda. Her family was poor, but the days she spent with her parents and siblings were full of happiness and peace. That life, however, would come to an abrupt end, thanks to the pirates lying in wait at the Wortenia Peninsula...

The rumors of pirate activity in the Wortenia Peninsula had abounded for some time. Even as a child, she'd heard of how pirates were attacking trade ships sailing along the coast. Still, trade ships were loaded with expensive merchandise, and her village was a poor fishing community that had nothing that warranted plundering.

And indeed, up until that day, their village was never attacked. Who would attack a village whose sole product was dried fish? But that question crumbled away all too easily in the face of cold, hard reality. Any thoughts of how unlikely an attack might be faded away when she saw the slaughter taking place.

Her parents were run through by the pirates' spears. Her siblings and friends were all scattered during the attack, and what became of them was unknown to her. The only thing Melissa, eleven years old at that time, could do was run. The pirates set her village on fire, and Melissa fled the flames and smoke, running for her life.

She couldn't remember what came next. She clearly remembered running out of the village, but her memory cut off there. When she came to, she was in some city she didn't know. Apparently a man had found and sheltered her. But now she had a collar clasped around her neck. She stood in front of a store, essentially naked.

She had no idea how this fate had befallen her, but soon enough, the fact that this was real and could not be overturned dawned upon her. A life where any word she uttered was met with a blow from a whip. Crying resulted in her getting whipped. Screaming earned her another serving of the whip. And when she begged for mercy, all she was rewarded with was more whipping.

As one scar after another appeared on her body, Melissa learned how to conduct herself. She learned to act out the part of a doll, to silence her own emotions — all in order to survive. And as she did, she watched as slaves who couldn't find any buyers were being disposed of. A sight that only tightened the shackles around her heart.

She was a girl, and not one graced with physical talent or stamina. Her facial features may have been considered cute, but she was not exceptionally beautiful. If she were a bit older, she may have been sold off as a sex slave, but she was still only fourteen years old. And years of slavery had made her body thin and emaciated, as if to cruelly ensure she would not stir a man's lust. Had Ryoma Mikoshiba not bought her that day, she would no doubt have been disposed of and killed as undesirable, defective goods.

And yet, the whims of fate gave her a chance to live on.

What are these clothes...? What do they want me to do with this?

The slave merchants carried Melissa and the other slaves here, where she received a bundle of clothes and underwear from a bearded man. The other slaves held similar bundles of clothes, and looked just as confused as Melissa was.

What are these things? Can we wear them...?

The only things she was wearing were the same underwear she'd had on for months now and a tattered tunic torn by whipping. And that was all. She wanted to put on new clothes, of course. But that wish was beyond her reach.

She was an object, after all. Logically, one would assume the clothes she was holding were meant for her. But at the same time, Melissa's heart was weighed down by the belief that it wasn't possible.

No... I'm an object... Objects aren't allowed to have clothes...

Things like this had happened before. Half-eaten meat would be thrown in front of a slave, as if to say "Go on, eat it..." But that was only a nasty trick on the part of the slavers. If the slave picked up the meat and tried to eat it, a flurry of lashes awaited them.

She'd seen it happen countless times already. A slave's daily meal was a piece of hard bread and cold, salty soup. They wouldn't be given meat, no matter what. She'd grown used to these eating habits. Even if a piece of meat would be thrown to the ground before her, she wouldn't pick it up.

The slavers knew this, which was why they dangled meat in front of their slaves as bait. To etch the understanding that they were slaves into their very flesh. All of the children in this place had seen it happen time and again. And so, not one of them moved.

But the situation took an unexpected turn. A blond woman approached them, and said words they never imagined they would hear.

"Aren't you cold? Those clothes are yours now. My master, Ryoma Mikoshiba, is giving you these clothes. Feel free to put them on... My master wishes for that."

Melissa doubted what she'd just heard.

They're giving us... they're giving slaves clothes? Really? Nice clothes like these...?

Of course, they weren't made of silk. These were the kinds of clothes one could buy in bulk at a tailor's shop in town. Still, these linen clothes weren't something a slave would be allowed to wear. These were clothes — and new ones at that — which a commoner in town might wear. These weren't used hand-me-downs. They were far better than anything a slave might receive.

Melissa looked around. All the other children seemed to doubt the woman's words, but her tone was calm and soothing. It didn't look like she was lying.

"It's all right... Go on, get dressed! We'll have your meals ready in a bit!"

Spurred by her words, one of the boys put on his clothes and looked at the woman. Confirming that she nodded at him, the other slaves began putting on their own clothes. When all the slaves had put their clothes on, a man stood in front of them.

He had an imposing air to him, as if he was their king or something...

On that day, their fates — the lives they had spent as slaves up until that point — would greatly change.

Who is this man...? He's like... a black sun...

From servitude, to a harsher life of freedom.

Now dressed, Melissa and the children looked slightly better. Of course, they hadn't bathed in years and their hair was unkempt, overgrown and screwed into lumps at points. They looked no different from vagrants sitting in an alley. Their clean clothes only served to emphasize just how filthy they were.

This is... Embarrassing...

An emotion she'd long since forgotten lit up in Melissa's heart. She kept her gaze fixed intently on the black-clad young man standing in front of the slaves.

"Well... I guess we should let them eat first. Bathing this many of them is gonna be a chore and a half... But no... We can't leave them looking like this."

Ryoma's lament was relatable. There were over three hundred slaves standing in front of him with hollow gazes in their eyes. Getting them dressed and fed was one thing, but bathing them was a much more daunting challenge. There were bathhouses in the city that could support a large number of people, but they wouldn't accommodate this many.

For a start, given how filthy the children were, any bathhouse would turn them away no matter how much they might promise to pay. It was easy to imagine how any normal civilian would refuse to enter the same bath as them.

But that said, they couldn't simply rent out an entire bathhouse. Ryoma could try to use his status as a noble to forcibly do that, but Epirus was Count Salzberg's territory. Trying to have his way in another noble's territory wasn't wise.

"Let's let them eat first. It's fresh and warm, after all..." Laura suggested. "About their baths... I think our only idea would be to boil some water and have them bathe in it... We can't carry so many of them into town."

Ryoma nodded and turned to Lione.

"All right... Lione! You can begin."

There was much for them to do.

"Aye, boy! C'mon, ya lot! Line up!"

At Lione's prompting, the children split into five rows and lined up. They weren't exactly prompt or disciplined, but they did what they were told. They moved with confused, doubtful expressions on their faces. The pain of the whip was still fresh in their memories. Of course, Ryoma and his companions wouldn't lay a hand on them even if they were disobedient, but the slaves couldn't even fathom that possibility.

They did as Laura said and put on their clothes, but their eyes still visibly lacked the kind of will a free person had.

"Now be careful! It's hot. Be careful when you eat it."

Melissa couldn't believe what she'd just heard. The large, deep bowl before her eyes was filled with steaming soup and handed over to her. It was full of

carrots, onions, potatoes, and meat. Those squares of meat were likely beef.



This soup was more rich than what most commoners usually ate. Most commoners had simple onion or corn soups. They only had such a wide variety of vegetables or meat in their food during special occasions. If nothing else, to Melissa, who grew up in a poor fishing village, this soup looked like a luxury meal.

Why... Why are they feeding us something like this...?

Melissa couldn't believe the warmth of the bowl she was holding. Having been a slave that remained unbought for years meant her daily meals were nothing short of terrible. She only had two meals a day, and they were both thin soup that barely had any taste to it, thanks to what little effort had been put into making it, poured into a flat bowl. And since it was made to feed many slaves, it wasn't served hot. It was like drinking cold water.

And the only thing they were given to eat with that soup was dry, blocky bread that was several days old. They couldn't eat it normally without dipping it into the soup to soften it. Even when Melissa was a poor commoner, she had eaten significantly better than that. She'd had meat several times a year. That made it painfully clear just how terrible her life as a slave was.

And that was why she couldn't believe the reality unfolding before her eyes. The nearly forgotten memories of her life before her slavery were beginning to surface in her mind.

It's warm... It's... It's like the soup Mother used to make...

As poor as they were, Melissa's mother always made sure there was hot soup on the dinner table. It was a poor commoner's meal, of course, and wasn't all that garnished, either. It only had a few vegetables in it, and they were most likely to have meat or fish no more than once or twice a year.

And still, to Melissa, her mother's soup was the greatest delicacy she knew. It was always hot, and its heat seemed to soak into her heart...

"Ah, it's hot!"

As Melissa peered into her bowl, one of the boys exclaimed loudly. He then dropped his bowl, spilling its contents over the ground. Judging from his mouth and hands, he apparently couldn't help himself and tried to gulp down the soup

without permission from their master.

The surrounding children's expressions were dyed over with shock and fear. In their eyes, eating something without explicit permission from their owner was effectively a death sentence. And even more so when the soup he spilled was as luxurious as it was...

The boy squatted down at once, and the children surrounding him got away as fast as they could. That was their secret to survival. They knew that standing near a child that was about to be whipped meant they might get mixed up in the beating. It would be easy to look down on this act of self-defense, but it was just human nature to do so.

So when a silver-haired lady hurried to the boy's side, everyone prayed in their heart, believing he was about to be punished severely. Not knowing that their expectations were about to be completely overturned...

"Are you alright? You didn't get burned, did you?" She asked him with a kind, gentle voice.

The boy, who had expected to be shouted at, raised a frightened gaze at the woman.

"Are you sure you're fine? You didn't spill any soup on your legs, did you?" Sara asked, looking down at the bowl that lay overturned on the ground.

There was steam rising from the rim of the bowl. It had fallen over spectacularly, all its contents spilling directly to the ground beneath it and spreading the scent of soup all over.

"Yes... It looks like you only burned your mouth... You don't need to rush when you eat. Be careful, all right?"

Sara's words made the boy stare at her with surprise. He realized she was honestly worried about his well-being. The children looking at them from afar also realized this.

"Anyway, eat cautiously next time... Huh, wait... Huh?! Wait! No, stop!"

His soup had already seeped into the dirt, and wasn't edible. Sara intended to give him a fresh bowl of soup, but the boy didn't understand that. He

unflinchingly kneeled down and began picking up the vegetables and chunks of meat that lay on the ground, now filthy with dirt, and tried to shovel them into his mouth.

Had Sara not stopped him, he would have surely eaten them, filthy as they were.

“I didn’t mean that... Erm...” Sara was flustered by this unusual turn of events, but then pointed at Lione. “Over there! That lady with the red hair over there. She’ll give you more soup, so eat that.”

The boy turned an anxious, doubtful look in Lione’s direction. The dark light filling his eyes told all there was to know about their past. So Sara spoke up loudly, so all the children would hear.

“It’s all right! Do you understand? If you drop food to the ground, you don’t have to eat it. There’s enough for everyone. All right? So be careful and take your time when you eat.”

At Sara’s prodding, the children fearfully brought the bowls to their lips. If nothing else, they realized they were allowed to eat.

“Phew... I hope this is all right...”

She realized Ryoma’s feelings perfectly well. He didn’t give them hot meals and new clothes out of the kindness of his heart. He did it to make them have a will of their own. To bring out their desire. A desire for food, for clothes, for a home. To understand how they were treated compared to others, and the discrepancy that showed.

Desire inspired ambition in people, prompting them into self-improvement. Desire was the strongest motivator human beings could possibly have. By knowing desire, people could yearn for more than they had.

But slaves lacked that, naturally enough. All they had was resignation towards a reality they didn’t believe they could change. And so long as they were resigned to never gain anything, no amount of hardship would mean anything. They had nothing to begin with, after all.

But that could change by reminding them of a single thing — that they were human. Living beings with the will to move forward. Of course, they wouldn’t

remember that immediately. Their despair wasn't so simple that it could be resolved at once.

That was what set them apart from the Malfist sisters. The two of them may have been war slaves, but they still had the pride of their family to fall back on. Something to support their hearts.

That was why Ryoma gave the children six months to be educated. That was the time limit they were given. If they were to regain their human will during that period, all was well. But if they didn't...

What would he do with them...?

In truth, no one knew the answer to that question yet. Not even Ryoma himself.

Sara moved away from that thought and looked around. The children were wolfing down their soup and bread, and if one were to ignore how silent they were, it almost looked like a lively sight. Some of them were already forming a line in front of the pot, asking for seconds. If nothing else, they recalled the joy of eating a fine meal.

It looks like a success for now, at least...

Laura, who was standing beside the children, seemed to be thinking the same thing. She sensed her younger sister's gaze and nodded back wordlessly.

They gave them a taste of the carrot. Now to remind them of the stick.

What lay in store for the children was a period of harsh training they would need to endure at the hands of Lione, Boltz and the Crimson Lion mercenaries. At first they would go through basic training to increase their stamina, but gradually they would be taught combat techniques. They would mainly be trained with spears and swords, as well as unarmed combat and how to handle horses.

For a whole month, they would be worked to the bone. And following that, they would be taught to use thaumaturgy as they trained. And after that month, they would be sent out to experience real battle.

Ryoma had no need for warriors that couldn't fight. Only those children that

would be able to kill other people and monsters and survive that exchange of lives would be granted freedom. Anyone who couldn’t do so would be dealt with in the same way as any escaped slave — death.

Ryoma Mikoshiba only desired the strong. In this harsh Earth, any ideas of equality or saving the weak were only harmful to those that harbored them. He couldn’t afford to save those that couldn’t put in effort or lacked the will to live. He could help others grow stronger, but whether that truly happened depended solely on the individual.

Would these children die as the weak or live on to be strong...? No one could say for sure. At least, not yet...

Epilogue

Labored breaths escaped Asuka's lips incessantly. She couldn't tell how far she'd run already.

"Over here! Hurry!" Kusuda, who had taken the lead, waved toward her.

He stood beneath a tree overgrown with thick leaves.

"Keep going, Tachibana!" He'd repeated those words for what felt like the hundredth time.

How long has it been since...?

It felt like she'd been running for half the day, but that couldn't be. After all, the moon was still shining down on them from above. It had likely been an hour or so. They'd been on the run, trying to stealthily get as far away as they could. And worse yet, they were in a dark forest. There were no signposts and no one they could ask for directions from.

And yet, they were lucky enough for the fact that Kouichirou Mikoshiba had fought as wildly as he did and drew attention to himself. This helped them escape the castle and reach the forest.

But the way this is going...

Tachibana was holding a handkerchief against his wound, but it was gradually becoming more and more stained with red. His only way of stopping the bleeding was by applying pressure to the wound. If they could stop and rest somewhere maybe they could treat him, but they were unfortunately on the run. The clotted blood was tearing off as they continued running. And yet, they couldn't afford to stop.

"Miss Kiryuu, hurry!" Kusuda motioned for her to rush over.

"I'm sorry, I'll be right there!" Asuka called back to him.

Truth be told, Tachibana was already a burden to them. At first he was capable and lucid, but as they kept running his consciousness was beginning to fade.

But...

They all knew that logically speaking, leaving Tachibana behind would be the optimal course of action. But neither Asuka or Kusuda thought to suggest it. They knew that they were pushing themselves against a wall by doing this, and in fact, if either of them were to suggest leaving Tachibana behind, it would likely be done.

But this was why they couldn't stop. They feared that the moment they would stop, all the emotion they kept bottled up would rise to the surface.

Before long, the light of dawn began painting over the sky. By the time the sun was approaching its zenith, Tachibana crumbled to the ground. They'd been running along this unpaved route for hours without anything to eat or drink. It wouldn't be surprising if they were to pass out from fatigue.

"Mr. Tachibana! Are you all right?! Hang on!" Asuka called out in surprise.

"Tachibana!" Hearing Asuka's exclamation, Kusuda hurried to Tachibana's side and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Mr. Kusuda, don't shake him like that!" Asuka stopped him, flustered.

"Ah, sorry!" Recalling the wound to Tachibana's head, Kusuda hurriedly let go of the man. "But what do we do? What the hell can we even *do* in the middle of the forest?"

For the time being, they laid Tachibana against a large tree's trunk and let him rest. Kusuda's expression was bitter. It would normally make sense for him to take over as leader, but he was still inexperienced. Overcoming this crisis would be difficult for him. The fact his speech had been growing rougher was proof of him losing his nerve. Asuka couldn't blame him for it, though.

"I don't think we can keep going like this... We need to make sure Mr. Tachibana gets treated first. And we need water and food," Asuka suggested.

It was a reasonable idea. They were all nearing their bodies' limits, after all. Force of will kept them going so far, but it wouldn't last them for much longer.

"Still, we can't go back the way we came... And if what Mr. Mikoshiba said is true, this is another world, right? How are we supposed to treat him? Where

would we find a doctor?” Kusuda fired off his questions one after another.

Asuka wasn’t responsible for this situation, of course, but Kusuda’s tone seemed to blame her, as if it was somehow her fault. But upon watching her fall into silence, Kusuda was overcome with guilt.

“I’m sorry...” Kusuda bowed his head. “That was wrong of me.”

“No... It’s alright.”

They both knew that quarreling here would be the foolish thing to do, and so they came to a compromise.

“Let’s let Tachibana rest here...” Kusuda said. “I’ll go look for food and water for the time being.”

He then pulled his collapsible baton out of his bag.

“Judging by those people we saw yesterday, I don’t think it’ll be of much use... But I guess it’s better than going empty-handed.”

“Then I’ll...” Asuka said, as she tried to get up.

Kusuda stopped her, though.

“No, you stay here, Miss Kiryuu. We can’t leave Tachibana here alone in this state.”

Asuka immediately realized they didn’t have any other option.

“All right. Thank you, and good luck,” Asuka said, bowing her head.

Kusuda nodded back and soon disappeared into the forest.

“It’d probably be best if I don’t touch it directly...”

Asuka used her face sheet to clean Tachibana’s wound as he lay down. The blood clots had closed the wound to his forehead, and the bloodstained handkerchief, flaky to the touch, clung to his skin. The first sheet she used was soon dyed a dark red from blood, sweat, and filth.

“What’s going to happen to us now...?” Asuka whispered, wiping his face with a second sheet. “Aah... It’s so dirty...”

Asuka was discouraged as she watched the sheet turn black. Anger and doubt

surged up in her heart. She kept asking herself why they'd found their way into this world, but couldn't come up with an answer.

But it was then that Asuka heard a soft chiming sound, like a bell's, ring out in her ears.

"Huh? It can't be..."

She turned to look in the direction of the sound, where she found a katana propped against a tree's trunk. It was Ouka, the sword Kouichirou gave her.

"Why? Why are you calling out...?"

It was as if it was calling out to Asuka, trying to warn her of something. Asuka gripped the katana. And at just that moment, a massive shadow barreled toward the girl.

"Aaaaaaaaah?!" Asuka exclaimed in shock.

But while her body was about to squat in place and freeze up, she suddenly stopped moving. A heat suddenly blazed through her limbs. It felt as if the blood running through her veins turned to lava. And then, Asuka unconsciously released Ouka from its sheath — drawing it at lightning speed.

With her body positioned as it was, she moved as if she was a doll having its strings pulled, and thrust the blade into the mass lying on the ground. A long, pained howl of agony rattled the forest's trees.

Asuka's confused mind was beginning to realize what just happened. The first thing she saw was the body of a dead animal lying on the ground.

"No way... Is that a tiger?!" Asuka whispered in surprise.

Lying before her was the dead remains of a large animal that weighed five hundred kilograms. Each of the fangs extending from its mouth were larger than most knives Asuka had seen. Its claws were also sharp, and the shape of its face was decidedly feline.

"But this isn't a tiger, is it...?"

Looking closely, what should have been a tiger's sleek fur was a coat of fur that seemed to be made out of sharp needles. And more than anything, it was far too large to be a tiger. Typically, tigers weigh three hundred kilograms at

most. But the tiger-like animal lying dead in front of Asuka was nearly three times the size of the tigers she had seen in the zoo. It also seemed to have a third eye on its forehead. A three-eyed tiger.

Once she noticed the third eye, the cogs inside her head began spinning.

Yeah... This isn't Earth, is it...?

Even after braving that much danger and hearing Kouichirou's explanation, Asuka still couldn't tell if the reality playing out before her eyes was real or a dream. She didn't want to admit it, and preferred to believe this was all a product of her imagination.

But the three-eyed tiger that had just attacked her and which she cut down forced the gears within her mind to move. The act of taking a life rattled the heart of a normal human being to the core. That made it clear why Kouichirou chose to come back to Rearth in order to save Asuka.

But what really bothered Asuka right now was the odd sensation that had overcome her body when the tiger attacked her.

"But I... How did I...? It's like someone else was moving my body... Yes, it was like something was controlling me..."

But the indescribable sensation still lingered in her fingers. Her nostrils felt warm, and were filled with the scent of blood, which she had smelled too many times since yesterday. Her gaze turned in the direction of the smell, where the massive three-eyed tiger lay on the ground with a vertical slash across its stomach.

It seemed her initial slash when she first drew the blade ended up being a fatal blow. The creature's intestines were spilling out of its stomach and onto the ground. She thrust her blade into its forehead, so as to make sure she took it out of its misery. But even so, it was a gruesome slash.

It can't be. I couldn't have done something like that...

Kouichirou did train her a bit in swordplay, but it wasn't anywhere near the thorough training he'd put Ryoma through.

And yet, fate was moving far too fast to afford Asuka any time to think...

“Hey, I think that howl came from that way!”

“Yes, that sounded like a Third Eye’s roar.”

“All right, everyone, remain cautious! As large as those things are, Third Eyes are savage predators and can mask their presence to ambush their prey. If you let your guard down, it’ll bite you down before you know it!”

Those voices were accompanied by the sound of twigs being crushed by multiple footsteps.

Those voices, there’s people coming here... What should I do...?

Unable to decide if she should hide or ask them for help, Asuka stood stock still. Before long, a group of men clad in metallic armor appeared from the thicket.

“It smells like blood... Did we finally corner that thing?” the man leading the group remarked, sniffing the air suspiciously.

He was a young man, about one hundred and eighty centimeters in height. He had a thin but well-toned form. He looked to be in his mid-twenties. He was a handsome man with gold hair, tied into a ponytail at the back of his head. He looked like he might be the most popular member of an idol group in Japan.

The man soon noticed Asuka’s presence, and his face stiffened.

“Who are you?! What are you doing here? And that behind you... Wait, that’s a Third Eye!”

From his perspective, he’d just found a girl standing in the middle of the forest, gripping a bloody sword. His reaction could be called appropriate. It was like a scene from a horror movie. And when he realized the beast he was sent here to slay was lying dead at her feet, his confusion only deepened.

But what came next only served to leave him even more astonished.

Upon seeing the man’s face, Asuka suddenly collapsed.

“Huh?! What, what’s wrong, all of a sudden?!” the man exclaimed and hurried to her side. “Aah, what is going on here?!”

The man clicked his tongue and reached for the water canteen dangling from

his waist.

“All right, have this, drink it!” He lightly tapped on Asuka’s cheek a few times and tipped the canteen against her lips.

Of course, he knew that it contained not water, but some brandy which he carried in place of smelling salts. It was naturally illegal to do so. But in the state Asuka was in, brandy served just as well as water.

Asuka’s throat gulped twice, then thrice. Her eyelids fluttered and half-opened, but her stamina was already at its limits. She let her consciousness slip without drinking much.

“Hey! Hey!”

He called out to her again, but Asuka’s limp body showed no response. The rest of the group soon appeared behind the man, wearing matching suits of armor. An insignia of a cross held against the sun was emblazoned on their armor, likely the symbol of their group.

They were probably knights serving some country.

“Leader! Why did you break formation?” One of his subordinates approached the man. “Normally you’d stay at the back of the line... Wait, who is this girl?”

He noticed Asuka lying unconscious in the man’s arms and tilted his head in surprise. None of the men present understood this situation.

“I don’t know... What is she doing in the forest...? But she’s still breathing, so I don’t think she’s in danger of dying.”

Asuka’s attire didn’t make her look like an adventurer or mercenary. But the weapon in her hand told a different story.

“Judging by her outfit, I’d assume she’s from Rearth,” one of the knights said, removing her helmet. “I don’t know if she somehow managed to cross to this side or if some country called for her, though.”

She had a soft, chime-like voice and sleek black hair. She looked to be the same age as the golden-hair leader.

“And what’s more... this girl looks like she’s Japanese.”

“Menea, are you serious?” the leader asked, his expression clouding over with surprise.

“Yes, Mother has told me much of that land, and I’ve seen people summoned from there as well. Her outfit should be typical of the Japanese... Except...”

“Except what?”

“The sword she’s holding is a weapon traditionally used in Rearth’s eastern regions. But in that world, carrying weapons is mostly prohibited, so I must wonder where she found it... And the way the Third Eye’s body’s been slashed is peculiar, too. Its fur is said to be like steel, but the cut goes as deep as the flesh.”

“So it’s some kind of exceptionally sharp sword?” the man asked.

“There’s no doubt that this katana is quite sharp, but the quality of a tool matters little...”

“So that girl is this skilled?”

“I can’t say... As weakened as it may have been, that is still a male Third Eye. The fact she slew it by herself and without any visible injuries means her skill is somewhere on the level of a captain of the Temple Knights. But honestly, if she were that skilled, she wouldn’t pass out from exhaustion like this.”

The leader looked down at Asuka’s body, confirming the woman’s words were true. Indeed, her body was covered in many scrapes and a good deal of dirt, but there were no serious wounds to be found. Her attire didn’t seem like something one might wear for an exploration of the forest, which made it likely she wasn’t in this forest of her free will.

And yet, the body of the Third Eye she slew was a problem.

Well, blast... What now...?

In truth, he couldn’t come up with any other way to describe his current predicament. Reality was about to become much more cruel, though.

“Leader, there’s another man here! He’s injured, and doesn’t seem to be conscious!”

“What in the world is going on today?!”

The situation was introducing one startling development after another, and the man had no recourse but to utter the name of the God he worshiped.

“Meneos, what is the meaning of this...?”

Nine days ago, at dusk, they received orders to return to the Church and left the town they were stationed in. It was a sudden order, but it was signed by both the knight captain commanding the Temple Knights and a cardinal, and so they couldn’t refuse.

And yet, the elder of the village they stayed in begged them to slay the Third Eye that made the forest its home. And so they spent the last nine days tracking the creature, and when they thought they finally cornered it, all they found was a corpse and this unfamiliar girl.

And now they found an unconscious, injured man. The leader couldn’t help but grumble.

“How do we approach this, Leader?” Menea asked, standing behind him.

“You’re asking me that...?”

“Considering when we’re supposed to return home, we don’t have time to go back to the village. It would take us too long.”

The man’s face hardened at her words.

“Then what do you suggest? That we just abandon them here?!”

“Of course not,” Menea said, a bitter smile on her lips. “I didn’t mean to imply that. Our God would never tolerate such an act... And even if I were to suggest it, you would never do so, Leader.”

This man’s unit had always been seen as heretics of sorts by the other members of the Temple Knights, who always prioritized the Church’s orders. This was despite the fact that, in a way, this man and his companions were the ones who abided by the Church’s teachings more closely than anyone else.

This man had never turned a blind eye to the troubles of the weak and the downtrodden. This was why he chose to help the village elder, even though they only stayed there for a single night. And he did so knowing it would delay his return, which was a military order.

Hearing Menea's words quieted down the leader's anger somewhat. He heaved a deep sigh.

"Then what are we supposed to do?"

"Have our men carry them until we return to the Church. If we're lucky, we'll find a town along the way, where we can leave them with some money."

Since abandoning them wasn't an option, Menea naturally suggested they take them along.

I guess that's the only choice we can take here...

The man sighed again and looked up at the sky.

What is it that you seek of me, God...?

The sun, of course, didn't answer his question. It simply shone in the heavens, the same as it always did, blessing the earth with its gentle warmth.

Afterword I doubt there are many remaining, but I welcome any new readers who took up *Record of Wortenia War* with this volume. And to those of you who have been following the series since volume 1, it's been four months since we last met.

This is Ryota Hori, the author.

According to the calendar, we're at the end of autumn and edging into winter, but the days have been so hot, only to suddenly turn cold. It's rather easy to get sick in this climate. I myself caught the flu and several colds, forcing me to frequent the hospital more often than I would like this year. Do take care of your health, kind readers.

Now, for those of you that start reading from the afterword, here's our customary digest of the book's story.

Firstly, the most striking point regarding volume 5 is that the protagonist's grandfather, Kouichirou Mikoshiba, and his cousin, Asuka Kiryuu, become much more involved in the plot. This is one big departure the Hobby Japan novels have in comparison to the web novel. And yet, they will only reunite with the protagonist later down the line.

Truth be told, this was mostly included because this part of the story, where our protagonist gains dominion over the Wortenia Peninsula, has so much more scheming and negotiation than before. This ends up making it much less exciting. That may be the appeal of a "war record" story, but too much plotting and negotiation becomes tiresome after a while... For both the readers and the author.

But Kouichirou Mikoshiba and Asuka Kiryuu ended up being characters with much more latent potential than I had originally thought, and I ended up writing much more detail into them than I first expected to. That may well have been

another trigger. In the future, I intend to write more of how Kouichirou and Asuka grow used to this world, while making use of new characters introduced into the story.

The other remarkable point about this volume is of course, the protagonist and his group's actions. It already appeared at the end of the previous volume, but the titular Wortenia is brought to the forefront of the story.

Thinking back to the web novel days, when readers often asked when Wortenia would finally figure into the plot, is by now a pleasant memory. There were many direct and blunt opinions at the time, and I wondered if I should reply to them, even at the risk of going into spoiler territory.

With this volume, Ryoma Mikoshiba begins to set in motion his plan to turn the no-man's-land known as the Wortenia Peninsula into his territory, but as one might expect, things won't go as easily as he might hope. I don't like torturing Ryoma too much as the author, but perhaps thanks to him being such a harsh character, I tend to set him hard conditions to conquer. Just like his grandfather, Ryoma is quite the idiosyncratic one, after all.

But he's a protagonist who always finds a way to break through, which I think balances out the story...

Also, I'd like to take this chance to announce *Record of Wortenia War*'s manga version. The art style is serious but not too heavy, which helps bring the story out in a new light. As the author, I was quite impressed with it. At the time of this afterword's writing, it hadn't been published yet, but it should be published on Hobby Japan's site by the time this book reaches your hands. Do give it a look. I've already seen chapter 2's drafts, so I'm sure it will also be out shortly.

At this rate, we might even live to see a TV anime for the series, which is something I'll admit I've been secretly looking forward to. But given the work's themes and the brutality of the descriptions, an anime might lead to a lot of things being changed. Still, as an author, I would love to get a peek into the world of anime production.

The work on volume 5 came during a very busy time both personally and professionally, but I was able to deliver it to you on time. And I owe a lot of that to my editors who helped to lengthen my deadlines, and the many people who

offered their cooperation to me. I would like to take this chance to extend my warmest gratitude to them.

And the only reason I can continue to work on this series is thanks to your support, kind readers. I will strive to bring volume 6 to you as soon as possible, so do continue giving your support to *Record of Wortenia War* in the future as well.

After all, the conclusion I've foreseen for the plot is still quite a good distance away...

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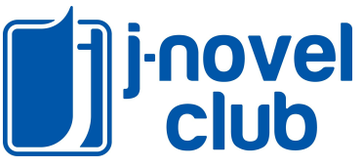
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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 5

by Ryota Hori

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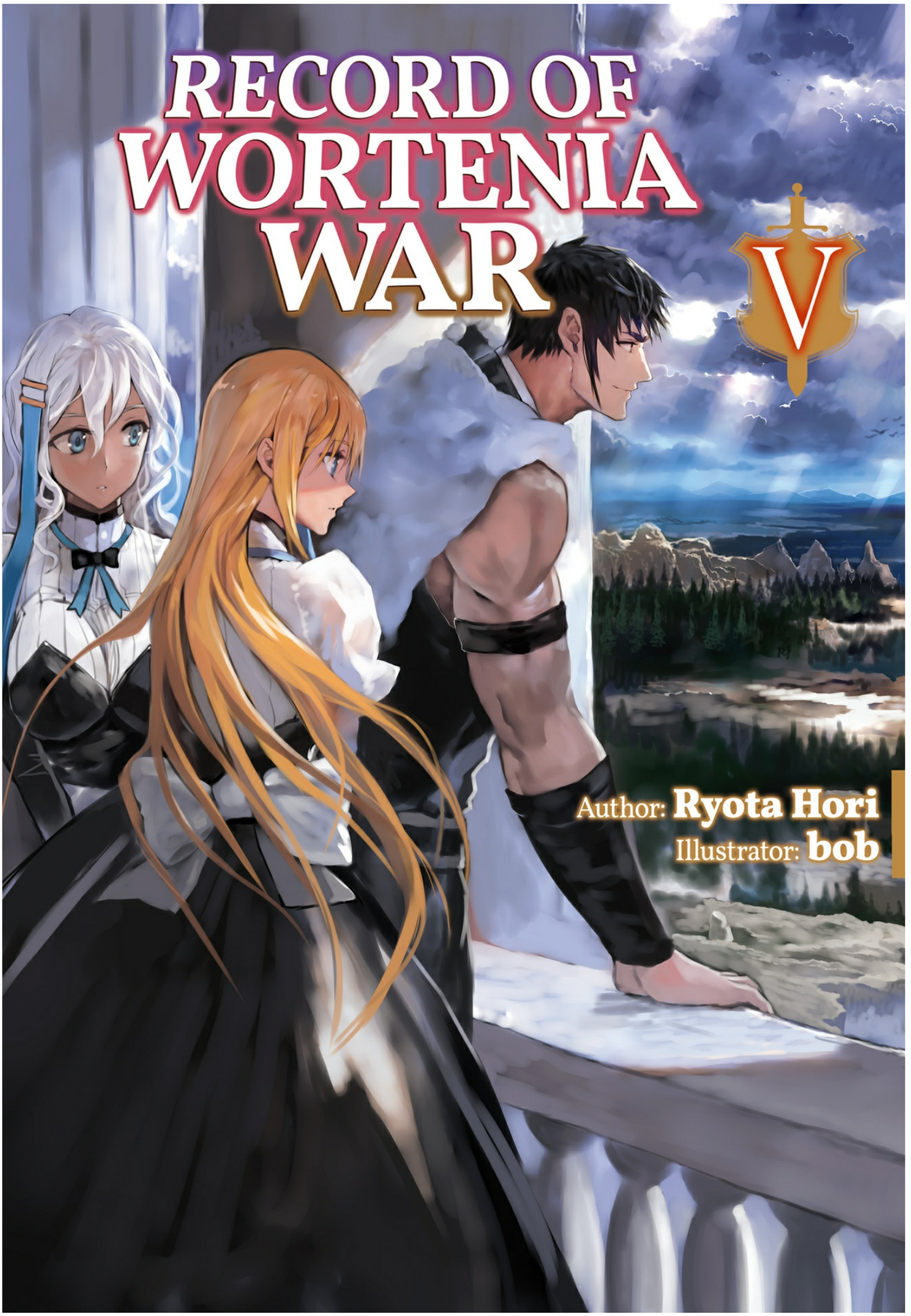
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