RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

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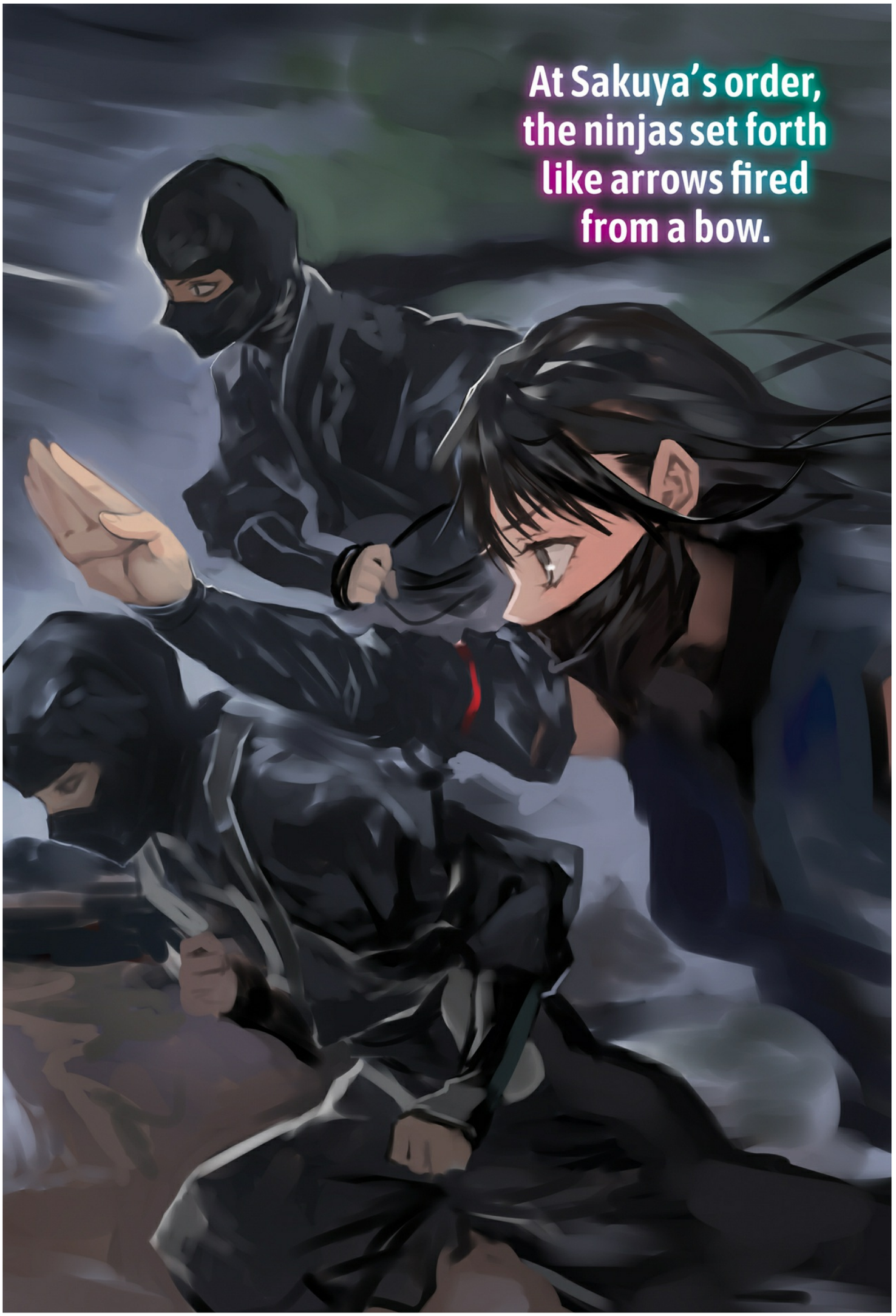


Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**


The boy, Coile, regarded the fact that Ryoma knew his name with surprise.
“E-Erm... I...”
Coile was so shocked he couldn’t properly put his gratitude into words.
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR


“Let’s go!”
Abiding by her call, the company left the citadel city of Epirus’s north gate and began marching along the road leading into the Wortenia Peninsula. Over 200 men were riding along the highway silently.


At Sakuya's order,
the ninjas set forth
like arrows fired
from a bow.

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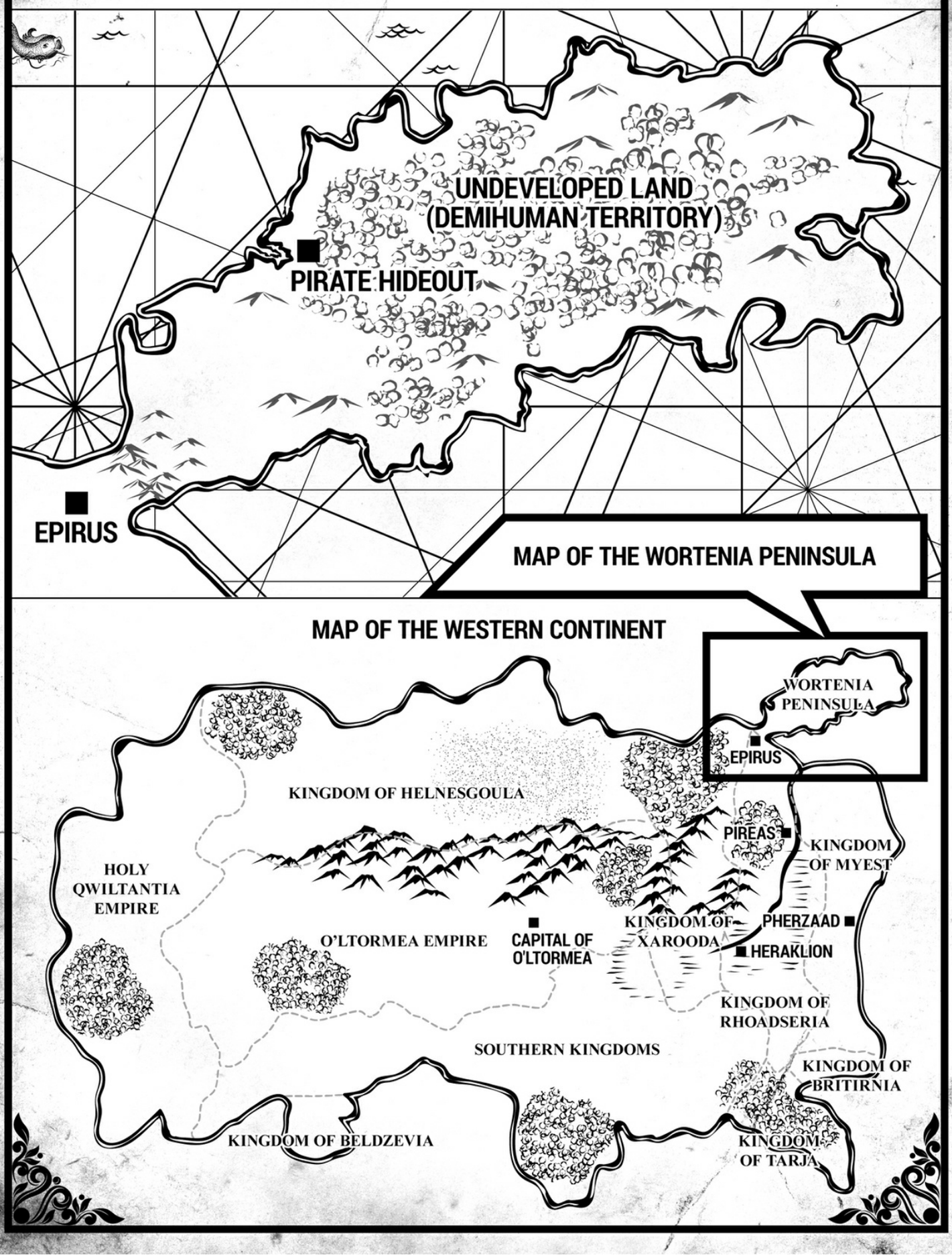
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Prologue

As Asuka Kiryuu faintly opened her eyes, her gaze was met with a brown, wooden ceiling. The wooden planks were exposed, which wasn't something one would see in modern architecture.

"What the... Aaah...!"

As soon as Asuka tried to whisper, a sharp pain ran through the muscles of her jaw and cheeks. And with that pain acting as a trigger, every muscle and joint in her body screamed out in pain.

Aaaah, oooow... Why... What's happening...?!

Her body was filled with intense muscle pain, as if she was an amateur who had been forced through intense training... With one exception. The pain Asuka was feeling was several times more severe.

Asuka did keep her body in good shape, but never before had she experienced pain this intense. It was terrible enough to render her incapable of even exhaling the air in her lungs. She felt tears welling up in her eyes.

But at that moment, this pain was something Asuka needed. The agony jolted her mind, forcing it to operate. The first thing that came to her mind was the ugly, distorted face of Misha Fontaine. The fact she was so well-featured outwardly only made the fact she was so vile at heart feel all the more sinister.

But that woman was dead, her head severed by Kouichirou Mikoshiba. Asuka could still remember the warm, vivid sensation of the woman's blood spraying her in the face. The sound of her decapitated head rolling down to the floor. It felt like she'd seen a scene from a horror movie play out in real life.

That... wasn't a dream.

Her own blood relative had slain a human being before her very eyes. The weight of that reality was all too heavy. He may have done it to save her life, but seeing Kouichirou grip a bloodied katana with a cold smile on his lips shattered something in Asuka. The sense of ethics she'd built up over the decade and a half she'd lived — her perception of right and wrong, of common

sense — had been smashed to bits.

Asuka reflexively covered her mouth, feeling something hot and acidicly sour rise up in her esophagus.

“Nngh...” Filled with fear and anxiety, a small sob escaped her pursed lips.

How much better would she have been if she could cry openly and wallow in her misery, if only for a short while. But Asuka knew to restrain those emotions, as much as she had to force herself to do so. And that was because she instinctively knew. If she were to let herself get carried away by her emotions even once here, she would never be able to rise to her feet again.

Asuka was now on the run, and she couldn’t afford to simply curl up and stay idle without having a grasp on the situation. Doing that would be the same as willingly signing her own death warrant.

Asuka sat up, enduring the pain running through her body.

“It doesn’t look like anyone lives here...”

That was Asuka’s first impression of the room she was in. It was by no means large — perhaps ten square meters in size. There wasn’t much to speak of in terms of furniture. All she could find was a wooden table and two chairs, and the bed she’d been sleeping in just now. The bed was adjacent to a window.

It truly was the bare minimum in terms of furnishings. A dreary room indeed, lacking in any human presence or warmth. But the bed sheets were fresh and new, and the floor was visibly scrubbed clean. Looking out the window, she could see tree branches, which made her conclude this was a room on the second or third story.

I suppose I haven’t been caught by those people...

Ouka was sitting on the table, contained in its sheath. This was undeniable proof she wasn’t taken captive. If whoever brought here meant Asuka harm, they wouldn’t have left a weapon in arm’s reach of her.

Huh?

Asuka’s gaze fell on what was piled up next to Ouka — her clothes. Apparently, they’d been washed. That wasn’t the problem though. Asuka didn’t

recall taking them off, which meant someone had to have stripped them off of her. And the moment she realized that, all the blood drained from her face.

If whoever did it meant well, everything was still fine. Normally, the barbaric act of stripping an unconscious woman would be enough to warrant a stream of curse words. But Asuka could understand the circumstances, and managed to stop herself. Asuka wasn't keen on sleeping in bloodstained clothes, after all.

And so, even though she couldn't say she was very much satisfied with this turn of events, she managed to keep her emotions in check. But the world wasn't a place devoid of malice, and unfortunately, Asuka wasn't in a position where she was poised to believe in the good faith of others.

Yet thankfully, the worst case scenario that sprung to Asuka's mind was nothing more than momentary fear. She hurriedly turned over the sheets that covered her, and the bra and panties she'd made a habit of wearing recently came into sight.

It was a set of black silk panties and bra adorned with laces that was perhaps too mature for a girl of Asuka's age. She'd bought this set of brand-name lingerie a few months ago. Not something a high schooler would normally wear, but Asuka was at an age where girls were prone to experimenting with more mature things.

Plus, the friend who escorted her to the store kept egging her on and telling it looked good on her. Asuka couldn't bring herself to say no even if she didn't like the set. Even Asuka, who was seen as responsible and level-headed by those around her, was susceptible to that kind of peer pressure.

Thank God...

A sigh of relief escaped Asuka's lips. Whoever saved Asuka likely took off her clothes, but they weren't senseless enough to strip an unconscious woman entirely. But that thought made Asuka recall something Kouichirou had told her once before.

"Oh, no!" Asuka exclaimed despite herself and reached over to Ouka.

The pain running through her body tormented her again, but she didn't have the leisure to care for that. Unbroken, unbent and perfect for slashing. That was

how one could describe a Japanese katana. But while this was a sublime weapon, it required daily maintenance to show its true worth. Even kitchen knives needed to be washed and wiped clean. Swords needed tending to, to ensure they weren't chipped.

Of course, right now Asuka was in a state of emergency and was greatly limited in what she could do. But when she cut down that strange tiger in the forest, she didn't even think to wipe away the blood. If a bloodied sword were to be put back in its sheath as is, the blood could, at worst, harden like glue, making it impossible to draw out again.

And right now, Ouka wasn't just a precious keepsake given to her by her grandfather. It was essentially her lifeline. The sword's presence or absence at her side could be the difference between life and death. Asuka grabbed Ouka's grip, praying as she did, and pulled...

"No way..."

...only to draw a blade that sparkled like a mirror. It was as if the sword had just been whetted. Something about the way it reflected the light gave Asuka chills — it almost felt divine, somehow.



“Forget being nicked, it’s perfect... But back then, I’m sure I didn’t...”

A blade growing dull and chipped with use was par for the course for swords. Those were things that happened naturally, regardless of the capability of their wielder. One’s skill and experience might slow down the process, but that was all.

And Asuka wasn’t at all used to handling swords, to say the least. Perhaps she wasn’t completely inexperienced, but she lacked the sheer volume of practice Ryoma and Kouichirou had. There should have been no chance the blade was unharmed after she used it to cut down such a large tiger.

What was even more dubious than the blade was the sword’s hilt. Asuka could vividly remember how bloodied her hands were when she slashed through that monstrous tiger. But there weren’t any signs of blood on the hilt’s strings.

And it’s not like someone swapped out the hilt. It’s the same color, and I can tell by how it feels...

It was made to be similar to the kinds of katanas produced in Satsuma. It had a very characteristic appearance, one that placed little importance on beauty and stressed weight instead. It made it come across as a boorish, heavy weapon. And the sword definitely felt the same way Asuka remembered it did when Kouichirou handed it over to her. With all that in mind, it wasn’t physically possible for it to be completely undamaged.

The questions only became increasingly obtuse. But even so, Asuka could only linger on them for a moment.

Well, I don’t know how, but Ouka is fine... So that leaves...

The red sunlight streaming in through the curtains implied it was either sunrise or dusk. Asuka didn’t know which way the window was facing, but she could surmise quite some time had passed since she cut down the tiger.

Are Mr. Tachibana and Mr. Kusuda all right...?

The last thing she could remember was that she heard someone speak and a few figures appeared from the forest’s trees. Once she realized she wasn’t in

immediate danger, Asuka's mind wandered to the two detectives and their safety.

Now that she was separated from Kouichirou, Asuka's only two trustworthy allies were Tachibana and Kusuda. And of the two, she was most pressed to learn of how the former was doing. Kusuda was unharmed, but Tachibana's head was injured and called for immediate treatment. Otherwise, he could very well be in risk of dying.

I have to find him...

Asuka picked up her clothes from the table and hurriedly got dressed. She then used Ouka and its sheath as a cane and slowly approached the door. Normally, leaving the room carelessly would have been a poor idea. It didn't seem as if she was confined, but she had no reason to think she was free to leave, either. Assuming the worst would have been the wisest course of action.

If possible, she would have been better off jumping out the window and fleeing as fast as her legs would carry her before anyone noticed she was gone. But the pain ravaging her body rendered her incapable of running, to say nothing of jumping. And since that drastic measure was closed to her, she only had one option available to her. Asuka stood in front of the door and took a deep breath.

If I don't do anything, I won't gain any information... Aaah, damn it! A woman's gotta have guts!

But just before Asuka's outstretched hand grabbed the doorknob, she froze in place.

The sound of someone climbing up the stairs reached her ears.

Chapter 1: Negotiations

That night, Ryoma Mikoshiba walked down the main street of the citadel city of Epirus, without any of his companions to accompany him. He was heading for Count Salzberg's estate, built near Epirus's city center.

However, his appearance couldn't be more different than how he looked when he visited the estate last time. He was wearing a sooty cloak and had his face covered with a hood. He was the very image of an adventurer or mercenary. No one would suspect Ryoma might be a Baron, or indeed be in any way related to the nobility.

But of course, this outfit wasn't appropriate for a visit at the Count's estate. Ryoma knew this perfectly well. But he couldn't afford to let anyone learn of the negotiations he was about to enter into.

All right... The question now is how Count Salzberg will react...

This bargaining was a play that could very well turn the tables and put Ryoma in a winning position. If all went well, Count Salzberg would turn from a bothersome enemy to a dependable sponsor to Ryoma. But there were reasons to be concerned, of course.

Ryoma had somewhat of a grasp on Count Salzberg's nature and character, but that wasn't to say he understood everything about the man. The self-importance and feeling of superiority nobles typically had was one thing Ryoma was especially unfamiliar with. That much was perhaps to be expected. Ryoma came from a world where the class system was an antiquated relic of the past.

I guess I just have to hope he bites...

If these negotiations were to fail, Ryoma's only remaining option would be to resort to brute force. After all, Ryoma was about to head out into an ominous no man's land. He couldn't afford to leave behind someone who might stab him in the back. But resorting to those extremes was very much a gamble.

Those kids are trying their hardest, but the really harsh part of their training is about to begin now. It'll take a while before I can rely on them as an army...

A faint smile surfaced on Ryoma's lips as his mind wandered back to the slave children he collected. They were given proper meals and trained to build up their stamina. Right now, they were being taught basic arithmetic, as well as how to read and write. This also gave the children time to rest from their taxing training.

Thanks to the prolonged training they were put through over the last month, the children's bony, thin limbs had gained muscle. Indeed, once people were no longer tormented and backed against the wall, they were capable of exhibiting great strength. The same held true for young children. The speed with which they soaked up information was astonishing.

No, maybe it was exactly because they were young that they clung to life this desperately. No one wanted or needed these children until Ryoma reached out to them. It felt as if they were training and learning so intensely out of fear and desperation.

Unfortunately, a few of the children failed to keep up with the rest and had to retire, but things were going essentially as planned. It would still take some time for them to reach the standard Ryoma sought from his soldiers, though.

"I guess I should hurry, then."

The moon was already at its zenith, and starlight poured down from the heavens as Ryoma quickened his pace.



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“Ah, Lord Mikoshiba. A pleasure to see you again.”

A maid girl led Ryoma into a room, where Count Salzberg and Lady Yulia awaited him. Upon noticing Ryoma, the pair rose from the sofa to greet him. They weren’t quite as well-dressed as they were the other day. Their clothes were still fair, but they carried little in the way of ornamentation. Those were likely the clothes they wore while at home.

In the nobility’s terms, this meant they were greeting him less as a guest, and more like a close friend or acquaintance. Ryoma wasn’t bothered by this, though. They didn’t greet him at the entrance like before, but they still seemed to be just as welcoming as last time.

Most people would be fooled into believing Count Salzberg might be fond of them, but Ryoma wasn’t foolish enough to take the man’s kindness at face value. Especially given that he knew what they wanted from him.

Ever the double-faced bastard, aren’t you. Both you and your serpent of a wife...

Hiding that thought in his heart, Ryoma bowed with all the honor he could display.

“Come, come, take a seat.” Lady Yulia ushered him to the sofa.

“Well? I hear you’ve purchased quite a few young slaves. I trust your preparations to develop the Wortenia peninsula are going well?” As Ryoma sat opposite of him, Count Salzberg asked him casually.

“Not at all... For now I’m only just managing to get by...” Ryoma muttered a faultless answer.

It appeared those words caught Count Salzberg by surprise, though. He cocked an eyebrow and chuckled as if amused.

“Oh, barely managing to get by, you say... Hmm, I suppose, if you say so, Lord Mikoshiba...”

“Are you implying something?” Ryoma directed a probing gaze at the man.

“Not at all, I think taking unsold slaves isn’t a bad idea at all. But it might be a bit insufficient if you’re to develop that peninsula from nothing. They may be dexterous and shrewd, but in the end those are just children. You’d be better off buying horses or oxen if a labor force is what you need. Though I suppose your choice does have its merits. They can understand complex orders and a taste of the whip would make them obedient... Hmm.” Count Salzberg concluded his words and directed a questioning gaze at Ryoma. “Honestly speaking, I can’t help but feel they wouldn’t be good for much more than acting as food for the peninsula’s monsters...?”

He was, indeed, the governor of Epirus and the leader of the ten houses of the north. He already had a strong grasp on Ryoma’s actions. But before Ryoma could reply, Lady Yulia cut into the conversation.

“Now, now, beloved... You can’t ask the good baron a question like that all of a sudden... My apologies, Baron Mikoshiba. My husband is a bit of a hasty man at times... Don’t you think we’d be better off leaving this talk until after we’ve had tea?”

Lady Yulia chided her husband softly and reached for the tea set prepared at the corner of the room. She poured some tea into a porcelain cup herself and handed it over to Ryoma. The faint steam rising from the cup carried with it a rich aroma that tickled Ryoma’s nostrils. The exact same scent Ryoma remembered from when he was served tea at the Christof Company just the other day, in fact.

“Go on, try it,” Lady Yulia prompted Ryoma to drink. “These are some exquisite leaves we had brought in from Qwiltantia.”

Is this a coincidence...?

Eyeing her questioningly, Ryoma brought the cup to his lips. Lady Yulia watched him with a smile that didn’t seem to harbor any ill-will. If she served him this tea while knowing of his meeting with Simone, she would have shown some sign that would have alarmed Ryoma. And yet, there was nothing.

But the fact Lady Yulia poured him this tea herself must have had some kind of significance to it. Ryoma turned a casual glance at the woman, who directed a meaningful smile back to him. If nothing else, she didn’t seem to have any

intention of openly blaming him for meeting with Simone.

So this is a warning... I see. Thankfully, we won't be making any real dealings with Simone until much later down the line. It's probably fine even if Lady Yulia knows something. Still, they caught wind of what I was doing... I'll have to be careful going forward.

Apparently, making it seem as if the Mystel Company was his main business partner was a bad idea. At least, for now...

Qwiltantian tea again, though... I should look into it later.

Nobles had a preference for Qwiltantian tea, it seemed. And indeed, Ryoma could tell the leaves were of exquisite quality. Ryoma was hoping to make his country thrive on trade in the future, and something like this may very well become a source of funds one day.

Oh, but we're in the middle of negotiations right now... Almost slipped my mind.

What mattered at the moment was not dreams of the distant future, but the conversation at hand.

"It tastes wonderful. The smell is amazing, of course, but the flavor is simply remarkable. I hope you don't take offense to this, Lady Yulia, but I never expected you to be knowledgeable about serving tea."

Ryoma openly praised the tea, and there was no falsehood to those words. Even regardless of the leaves, there is such a thing as a correct way of pouring and serving tea. And in that regard, Lady Yulia's tea was perfect. She used soft water at the right temperature, heated up the cup before pouring the water into it, used a circular teapot meant to prevent convection, minded the time it took the tea to be prepared...

If nothing else, Ryoma doubted he'd taste tea of this quality anywhere outside of a special coffee shop that specialized in tea brewing.

"My, you flatter me... Now, you try it too, beloved." Lady Yulia urged Count Salzberg to try it, too.

"Hmm, my apologies..." Count Salzberg tipped his cup and heaved a deep

sigh. “Her Majesty has sent quite a few emissaries, you see... It’s done a bit of a number on my nerves. Do forgive me.”

Count Salzberg lowered his head and stroked down his hair. They truly were husband and wife — they seemed to be perfectly in sync.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Ryoma said. “But you mentioned emissaries from the queen?”

“Yes. Put frankly, they were sent to check on how you were doing, Lord Mikoshiba.”

“They came to check on me...?” Ryoma tilted his head in surprise.

Of course, Ryoma understood Lupis’s doubts regarding him. But what truly surprised him was that the emissaries openly admitted this. While they both saw each other as enemies, Lupis Rhoadserians was lord of the country, and Ryoma was, at least as far as appearances go, one of her vassals.

“Yes, apparently Her Majesty is quite anxious about this affair. I suspect she’s quite concerned over letting you handle the frontier lands of the peninsula. Of course, Her Majesty made the choice to bestow it upon you out of consideration of your abilities, but she naturally has an interest in seeing how things unfold. I myself am quite interested in seeing where your endeavors will take things, as I’m sure any noble of Rhoadseria would be.”

Salzberg concluded his words and looked at Ryoma expectantly. Those words were, in a manner of speaking, honest. Even if it stemmed from the Count’s own personal necessities.

Now’s my chance...

Judging that this was the opportune moment he’d been waiting for, Ryoma finally encroached on the main topic.

“Right... Actually, I came here tonight at such short notice to discuss my future territory at the Wortenia peninsula... Sir.” Ryoma said, eyeing Count Salzberg with the most distressed expression he could fabricate.

“Oh, so you are in trouble, after all...” Count Salzberg said. “I assumed as much since I received your message yesterday. It’s about the slaves, isn’t it?

You've bought too many young slaves and you're not sure as to what to do with them, perhaps? I could put in a good word for you, if you need it. I'm not sure I'll be able to get back the full sum, but I do believe I can convince the slavers to refund most of it."

Count Salzberg regarded Ryoma with a bright smile. It seemed he really wanted to have Ryoma owe him a favor. He didn't even ask for the details and simply assumed Ryoma came to him for help because he didn't know how to put his slaves to use.

Child slaves must really be undesirable... I mean, even mature slaves aren't sold for that much in this world... And between this and how they know about my talking to Simone, they must be keeping a tight watch on me... Only question is, are they doing it for their ends or under Lupis's orders?

Ryoma didn't come to Count Salzberg's estate with the intent of having him take slaves off his hands, but to sell him something else. Count Salzberg's attitude was simply too patronizing, though. He was probably desperate to have Ryoma in his favor.

I guess that makes sense, given he's embezzling off an illegal mine...

Possessing an illegal mine in another noble's territory was a severe violation of the law. That was true even when it was a lower ranking noble like Ryoma. Count Salzberg only had one thing in mind; to have Ryoma enter the Wortenia peninsula as quickly as possible. And he would lend his aid to some extent if it meant making that happen faster.

So far so good... My people do good work.

Holding back a sneer at how Count Salzberg jumped to the wrong conclusion, Ryoma detailed his request while still feigning distress.

"Yes... I'm actually in a spot of trouble..."

"Regarding the slaves?" Count Salzberg asked.

Ryoma shook his head wordlessly. He took his time since buying them off the slaver. The children had completed their stamina training and were about to begin basic combat training. Ryoma had no intention of selling the children off at this point.

“What could it be, then?” Lady Yulia asked upon seeing Ryoma’s denial. “House Salzberg was ordered by Her Majesty to provide you with aid, should you require it. Feel free to state what you need. I’m sure we’ll be able to be of assistance to you. Isn’t that right, beloved?”

Those words made a cold shiver of fright slither down Ryoma’s spine. She said it casually, but Lady Yulia’s words implied a certain fact.

Ordered to provide me with aid, huh...? So they were told to keep an eye on me... That rotten bitch... She wasn’t going to leave me out of sight, and ordered Salzberg to do it... Whatever. That affords me some flexibility in its own way...

Lupis was wary of Ryoma and wouldn’t leave him unattended. Indeed, she had Count Salzberg watch his movements. Ryoma wasn’t gullible enough to believe she only told them to lend Ryoma their aid.

“I see...”

Perhaps their lavish welcome the other day was influenced by the Queen’s orders, too. But still, the two of them weren’t Lupis’s lapdogs. They claimed to be faithful on one hand, while embezzling resources away from the royal house’s gaze with the other.

Yeah, they’d do anything if it’ll profit them... That means there’s room to negotiate... I could sell them the rights to the deposit in exchange for them to falsify my reports to Lupis... It all depends on my acting, though... If I end up rousing their suspicions, it’ll all be over.

He’d have to wait for the perfect timing to name his conditions...

“Yes, indeed. So feel free to consult us, Lord Mikoshiba... So, if it isn’t about the slaves, what is it you require?” Salzberg looked at him questioningly.

He seemed very interested in what Ryoma was trying to do.

Guess he really wants me to get out of his hair as soon as possible... He really doesn’t like me, huh.

Count Salzberg was convincingly feigning kindness, but Ryoma knew his true intentions and could only see it as comical.

“Actually, I wanted to consult you about a salt vein in the peninsula... I believe

you know of it, Count Salzberg...”

The moment Ryoma said those words, the temperature in the room physically became several degrees lower.

“What are you saying? How do you know that? Did you look into it yourself?” The smile disappeared from Count Salzberg’s face, and he spoke with a suppressed voice that seemed to echo up from the bottoms of the earth.

He was glaring daggers at Ryoma. His gaze was full of suspicion, envy and bloodlust. Count Salzberg didn’t try to pretend he didn’t know what Ryoma was saying — likely because he knew he wouldn’t be able to talk his way out of this.

How does he know about the vein? The Mystel Company should be keeping a tight hold on the place... Did he understand something during the dinner party after all? Should I kill him? No, even if I do end up killing him, I’ll have to confirm a few things first...

Inexplicable bloodlust surged up in Count Salzberg’s heart. He felt as if a starved insect was running amok in his garden. But despite this, his intellect suppressed that anger. At worst he’d simply have to kill Ryoma. They were Baron and Count — both were nobles, but their ranks differed.

And most of all, they were in Count Salzberg’s estate — far and away from the capital’s gaze. He could concoct whatever excuse to kill Ryoma. But before he made that choice, he needed to get some information out of Ryoma first.

And as if manipulating the Count’s judgment and emotions like a puppeteer, Ryoma presented the ace he’d prepared beforehand to the Salzbergs.

“Well, you see... I recently came across this...”

“What?! Hand it over!”

Ryoma held out a letter. It was made of ordinary paper and ink bought from a shop in town, and was scribbled over haphazardly, which made it impossible to discern the handwriting. It looked very much like a common letter. Count Salzberg quickly skimmed over the letter before handing it over to Lady Yulia and falling silent.

Who wrote this unnecessary garbage...?

The letter's contents were quite simple. It was an incriminating letter, speaking of how House Salzberg possessed an illegal halite vein. One could simply shrug it off as slander, but the problem was that the note detailed the vein's exact location. Count Salzberg calmed his raging heart and mulled over Ryoma's words carefully.

Damn it... What idiot informed him of this? Was it Christof's girl...? Yes, it must be. She's a shrewd little minx, so she probably has a handle on what we're up to...

Few people would oppose Count Salzberg and Lady Yulia in Epirus. Among the few who would was the Christof Company, who had the position of union head stolen from them. It was currently led by Simone Christof — and Count Salzberg saw her as his most potentially dangerous rival.

Count Salzberg, as the governor, backed the Mystel Company. And thanks to that, Epirus's economy was moving with the Mystel Company at its center. It was very much at the peak of its momentum at the moment. By comparison, the Christof Company was at the lowest it had ever been. Count Salzberg's pressure made them lose many clients, reducing the scale of their business.

But the Christof Company had served as head of the trade union, and that long history gave them some breathing room. Count Salzberg knew they weren't to be looked down upon even now.

It's been three years since Mystel became the head of the union. In just a few more years we'd be able to squeeze the life out of Christof's girl, but... No, that's actually exactly why...

Up until now the Christof Company could only struggle to survive the Count's pressure, but now they made an attempt to counterattack. That seemed like the most probable option.

So if the one to leak that information to him was the Christof girl... The question is why did he come to me about it? And what was she trying to achieve with this?

The fact Simone Christof was able to find out about the halite vein was understandable. She could have noticed something was wrong with House Salzberg's revenue and the amount of their transactions and looked into it. It

was possible given the girl's business sense. She looked young, but was able to keep that crumbling business together. This proved how good her business sense was. But the real problem was with what she did with that information.

If she knew about the vein, why didn't she do something about it? Why go to him?

The best way of using the information would be to report the fact Count Salzberg possessed an illegal halite vein on the Wortenia peninsula to the royal family. Right now the peninsula belonged to Ryoma, but things were different a few months ago.

While they did nothing in terms of actually governing the land, the royal family held the rights over Wortenia before it was granted to Ryoma. House Salzberg had been embezzling the salt for over five years. No excuse would lighten the fact they were misappropriating resources from territory that belonged to the royal family.

If that information were to be made public, Count Salzberg and his entire family would be finished. The crime of embezzling resources from the royal family would result in his entire clan and associates being executed. So why give that information to this upstart noble? Count Salzberg couldn't see the meaning behind that choice.

But it's fine... Everything's fine... There's no need to panic... I can just hear what this boy has to say... We're in the middle of my territory, after all...

Count Salzberg's gaze grew sharper and more vicious, glinting coldly. He was about to bare the fangs he'd kept hidden so far. The same fangs he once used to bite his own father dead...

Ever since the Kingdom of Rhoadseria was established, House Salzberg had dominion over the lands that bordered the Kingdom of Xarooda. It had been driven to near bankruptcy due to having to repeatedly increase its military funding.

They had to increase the number of soldiers. Acquire new equipment to arm those soldiers. Build fortresses. Once one began counting the expenses there seemed to be no end to how much money they had to squander over defending the border.

And yet, the royal family did nothing.

They left the matters of managing House Salzberg's territory entirely up to the Counts' discretion. And that was an implicit way of saying that while they wouldn't interfere in his affairs, they wouldn't aid him financially, either.

However, since it was a matter of national defense, the royal house couldn't afford to not augment the military. But at the same time, augmenting the military didn't mean House Salzberg could neglect the land's internal affairs.

Their taxation was already much more severe than other territories'. They weren't keen on coddling their commoners, but pressuring them so hard that open rebellion breaks out wasn't wise. A rebellion could be quelled using military might, but the frustration would just build up and eventually erupt again. And so, to prevent that, they granted the commoners some preferential treatment that served as a venting device of sorts.

The former heads of House Salzberg tackled that issue by cutting down on their own personal convenience. They economized time and again, living off more frugal meals, cutting down on clothing and the management of their estate... They cut down costs wherever was possible. And of course, it was hard to express just how difficult of a road that was.

House Salzberg struggled to retain its appearance as a noble house until the day Thomas Salzberg became Count. They lived a life of such destitute poverty one could mistake them for commoners. They held no lavish dinner parties, and their estate wasn't furnished by famous artisans from the capital.

They cut into their very living flesh in the name of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. But despite giving everything they had to protect the country, the only emotion others regarded House Salzberg with was scorn. Many of the nobles living in the capital mocked House Salzberg, calling them country bumpkins. The only ones to show them sympathy were the other members of the ten houses of the north.

And despite this, House Salzberg had withstood that shame for generations out of loyalty for Rhoadseria. For years they grit their teeth in frustration, tolerating the shame. But those attempts would eventually fail.

The current governor, Thomas Salzberg, was different from his predecessors.

He was a man who wouldn't hesitate to use anything if it would satisfy his desires. Perhaps it was a matter of his very nature as a human being. Or perhaps some incident in his youth distorted his heart. Whichever it was, the end result was the same.

Thomas Salzberg learned of the existence of a halite vein in the lands of the Wortenia peninsula — which at the time belonged to the Rhoadserian royal house and now belonged to Ryoma — some five years ago. It existed on a mountain range to the northeast of Epirus, a mere day's walk away.

The Wortenia peninsula didn't originally have any residents, as it was a land populated by dangerous monsters and savage demi-humans. But that didn't mean that no one lived there at all. There may not have been any residents inhabiting the peninsula, but there were certainly people there. There were criminals, exiles and other undesirables sent out into that land, as well as people employed in a certain profession.

Adventurers and mercenaries. The kind of people that made combat their tool of the trade.

To them, Wortenia was a battlefield to hone their skills in true combat and a place that allowed them to earn money. After all, it was a breeding ground for powerful monsters whose fangs and furs sold for a pretty sum. So long as you had the skill, this land offered a chance to put one's life on the line for a chance to make a small fortune quickly.

In truth, the halite vein was discovered in one corner of this land by coincidence. A group of adventurers entered Wortenia, their hearts full of ambition and hope, and they happened upon the deposit. But that wasn't to say they could use the vein on their own. Salt was a necessity for life, there was no doubting that, but it didn't make for much profit unless it was mined out in large amounts.

The adventures knew this, and didn't see it as much of a chance to make money. But when they brought back their spoils from the peninsula to the guild, they accidentally let slip that they discovered a vein. Normally, that report wouldn't elicit much attention, but Count Salzberg caught wind of it.

It was hard to tell if it was a good thing or not that he learned of it. But for

House Salzberg, who had been tormented by needing to increase the military funding yet again, the whole affair was a godsend. At the very least, this was a golden chance for one young Thomas Salzberg.

At the time, Thomas was only the legitimate first son and heir of the family. He desperately implored his father, the then-Count, to go forward with this idea, claiming it was their family's last chance to turn their financial troubles around.

They'd just learned there was treasure buried within arm's reach of them, after all. No one would be able to restrain themselves in the face of such an opportunity. Of course, had the vein been deeper into the peninsula, Thomas would have hesitated. Only the highest ranking adventurers and mercenaries would brave the deeper areas of Wortenia, and even they weren't guaranteed to return alive from that danger zone.

Dispatching any miners that deep into the peninsula would accomplish nothing, save for providing additional food to the monsters roosting there. And the longer the distance they'd have to go, the greater the chance they'd be detected by unwanted eyes.

But the vein was a stone's throw away from Epirus. It was still in that cursed no man's land creeping with monsters, but it was only the very entrance of it. The risk of being attacked was much lower.

But Thomas's father, the former Count Salzberg, ignored his proposal. No, he didn't just ignore him — he regarded him with outright disdain. From his father's perspective, this was obvious. He was proud to have defended the border with Xarooda for many years. His loyalty to the royal family was unwavering.

The vein may have been as close as it was, but the Wortenia peninsula was without a doubt the territory of the royal family. Adventurers and mercenaries came and went freely, but that was something the royal family ignored as a minor inconvenience.

But if a respectable noble family were to enter the territory uninvited, they wouldn't tolerate it tacitly. Thomas's desire to use the halite vein to reorganize their finances was effectively the same as stealing resources from the royal

family.

Thomas's father knew perfectly well how bad House Salzberg's financial standing was, and realized Thomas's plan was meant to turn their position around. But his loyalty and pride toward the royal house drove him to firmly and cruelly reject his son's proposal. He told his son of the pride and devotion House Salzberg harbored for generations. He believed his son would walk down the same way.

But those words did nothing to move Thomas's heart. In his eyes, the Rhoadserian royal house was the reason behind his frugal, destitute childhood and life. He saw no value to be had in harboring pride or loyalty to them.

House Salzberg's territory was a border zone distant from the capital, and the royal family knew little of what went on there. They were indifferent to the point of neglect. They would send reinforcements if Xarooda were to attempt a full blown invasion, of course, but handling small skirmishes fell entirely to House Salzberg and the surrounding nobles.

His father regarded this as a source of pride — proof that the capital trusted him, but Thomas saw it differently. In his eyes it was an absurd demand that was not worth the price in any way. It was a situation that brought them nothing but losses.

Thomas cared little for intangible things like trust and pride — the only thing he abided by was tangible profit. Namely, money, resources and privileges. And so, his discussions with his father took place on entirely parallel lines. As it were, neither of them were willing to compromise on their respective principles.

Profit versus pride. The two could coexist for as long as they didn't clash, but at that time one had to be chosen over the other.

And the end result of that was Thomas Salzberg's act of patricide. That was his only method of seeing his aspirations come to fruition.

The crime of killing one's parents was as severe on this Earth as it was in Ryoma's world. No, given that this Earth still operated on a system of patriarchal inheritance, it was perhaps even graver of a sin than it was in Rearth.

I won't let anyone get in my way... Count Salzberg whispered in his heart.

He couldn't let go of the life he led now. Not when he had to slay his own father to obtain it...

"You... What are you after?" Count Salzberg said slowly after a long, glaring silence.

He had no intention of keeping up the facade of noble dignity. Count Salzberg's tone was one that talked down to Ryoma as if he was some kind of lesser human being. He'd completely discarded the mask of friendliness and all notion of suspicion and caution.

He could imagine who leaked the information about the vein to Ryoma, but he had no idea why Simone Christof did that instead of acting on it herself. The information was more than enough to set up Count Salzberg on its own, but she instead handed it over to someone else. And that someone came not to the royal house — but to him.

With all that in mind, Count Salzberg came up with a possibility.

Is he trying to blackmail me?

Lowly commoners often resorted to that when they came upon information that might be worth good money. And the man sitting before him now was presently a noble, but was originally a commoner. It wouldn't come as a surprise if he came here to extort money out of him.

Idiot... You really think I'd pay for this? No, even if I do pay, what do you think will come after that?

If he wanted to blackmail Count Salzberg, Ryoma shouldn't have come to meet him directly. The one making the threat earns nothing by exposing themselves. Helena Steiner was a good example. When her beloved daughter was abducted, she only accepted their demands because she didn't know who the kidnapper was. Had she been more convinced that General Albrecht was the one behind it, she may have taken other measures.

But Ryoma went on to say something that defied Count Salzberg's expectations.

“Well... I actually wanted you to buy something, sir.”

A long, lengthy silence settled over the room. Ryoma didn’t flinch at being exposed to Count Salzberg’s glare. He met his gaze directly.

“Buy something? What would you have us buy? I was under the impression you came here to blackmail us.” Lady Yulia regarded Ryoma with a suspicious glare.

The way he said the word ‘buy’ could have been taken to hold the implication of blackmail, but Count Salzberg could only perceive Ryoma’s words at face value. The same held true for Lady Yulia. The suspicious looks they directed at Ryoma were proof they understood his words properly.

“Blackmail you...? I’ll admit I considered it, but that isn’t my intent here. After all, if I do that, you wouldn’t hesitate to dispose of me and my entourage.”

Count Salzberg’s lips contorted into a smile at Ryoma’s shameless words. He was absolutely right. A person who’s being extorted would never leave the ones blackmailing them to their own devices. Who was to say the culprit wouldn’t try to extort them again in the future? Even if they were to swear to God they wouldn’t try again, who would believe them?

Danger past and God forgotten, as the saying goes. The culprit may easily try to extort them a second or third time. And Ryoma could try to blackmail Count Salzberg time and again before driving him to ruin. Count Salzberg knew this and would never let anyone who would try to blackmail him walk away alive. He might pay the money once, but it would only buy the time needed to have them killed.

“I see... So you realize where blackmailing me would land you. Considering you’re a commoner, you’re clever enough.”

In the few years since Count Salzberg began embezzling the halite vein, there were a few people that learned of its existence despite his attempts to hide it. And yet the royal house hadn’t learned of it so far. That was because Count Salzberg ruthlessly and thoroughly had those people eliminated. The Count knew full well just how thin the ice he was treading on was, and knew to be both cautious and merciless.

“Beloved... I’m interested in hearing what the Baron is trying to sell us.” Lady Yulia said, her eyes flashing with a dangerous, bewitching glint.

“Yes, of course...” Count Salzberg met her gaze with a slight nod. “Very well. What are you hoping to sell us?”

His tone was still condescending, but it wasn’t as oppressive and full of scorn for Ryoma’s humble origins. Right now, Count Salzberg was curious. What did Ryoma, who apparently had such a strong grasp on his personality, want to sell him?

“Look at this, if you will.” Ryoma slid a document toward the couple.

“This is...”

“A contract, yes?” Lady Yulia asked.

She was indeed a merchant’s daughter — she keenly recognized the document.

“A contract for transferring ownership of the halite vein.” Ryoma explained.

The couple quickly checked the contents.

“Yes, it really is...”

“But, this doesn’t make sense. The contract doesn’t specify a price.”

Their confusion was understandable. How could he sell something without mentioning how much it would cost?

“I came to sell the vein, but I don’t want to give it away for money.”

The couple regarded Ryoma’s statement with puzzled gazes.

“Then what are you selling it for?”

“I want you to function as my sponsor, sir.”

“What? What do you mean, ‘sponsor’?” Count Salzberg asked. “I already told you I would be of assistance to you last time we met.”

Ryoma shook his head. That gesture alone made the two guess at his intent. True, Count Salzberg and Lady Yulia welcomed Ryoma warmly during that dinner party and promised to help him. But those promises weren’t honest

ones. Queen Lupis ordered the Count to keep an eye on Ryoma, and he himself was wary of the young Baron because of the halite vein.

His promise of help was very much an empty one. He had no real intention of helping Ryoma. At least, until now...

I see... He wants a real promise of assistance.

Count Salzberg accurately grasped Ryoma's intention.

Hmm, helping him isn't such a bad idea... If nothing else, he knows more about honor than that stupid woman sitting back in the capital and barking orders at me... And for a commoner, he's got wits... He's no fool. And the fact he didn't demand any money is especially interesting...

Ryoma smiled softly, watching the tension drain from Count Salzberg's expression.

It was a good thing I chose to ask for cooperation and not money... I mean, he is occupied enough with earning money that he'd embezzle resources from the royal family... He wouldn't pay me a dime. And the Count already has effective control of the vein. I might be the rightful owner of that land, but he wouldn't pay me for something he already controls.

Count Salzberg embezzled the halite vein out of a need for money. No matter how justified Ryoma's claim to the vein might be, the Count wouldn't be inclined to pay for it. Ryoma concluded the Count was a man who was obstinate when it came to money. And he was right to think so — Count Salzberg's face made that clear.

"Baron Mikoshiba?" Lady Yulia asked. "I don't understand the value of this document. Could you kindly explain?"

Having been raised in a house of merchants, Lady Yulia was quite the skilled politician. She married Thomas Salzberg so as to help rebuild House Salzberg, and she certainly contributed to its resurgence. From her discerning eye, the contract was worth a thousand gold pieces. But she feigned ignorance as she asked Ryoma for an explanation.

There were two reasons for that. The first was to ensure he wouldn't size up the cost, and the second was that she suspected there might have been some

kind of wire puller behind this entire affair.

“Do I really need to explain that much?” Ryoma answered her question with a smile and an unwavering gaze. “You’re famous for being an expert on the topic. I truly and honestly wish for the Count’s assistance and cooperation. After all, I made you two displeased just the other day because I didn’t know much about this town... You can think of this as my apology for that.”

A silence settled over Ryoma and the couple.

So that’s his angle... It does make sense. And those unwavering eyes of his... He’s not just making this up on the spot. He really believes that.

The intuition she’d fostered over many years told Lady Yulia the man smiling before her eyes had planned this out ahead of time.

“Very well... I admit there is value to your proposal, Baron,” Lady Yulia concluded. “But we will need some time. I wish to talk this over with my husband.”

“Understood,” Ryoma nodded and rose from his seat. “Then I will be off for today... I’ll come again once you send your response.”

His expression didn’t have a trace of disappointment. He likely didn’t assume the discussion would be decided right there and then to begin with.

Makes sense. I imagine Count Salzberg would want to add some conditions of his own, too. I’d actually be a bit scared if he signed it on the spot today... Wouldn’t want him to change his attitude towards me later.

Ryoma scattered his bait, and caught Count Salzberg’s interest. All that remained was to wait for him to bite. And Ryoma preferred to be patient and wait quietly.

Take your time and mull this over... Yes... Take all the time you need...

“Yes... We apologize for the bother, Baron. Some other day, then.”

Ryoma bowed at Lady Yulia’s parting words and left the estate, escorted by a maid waiting near the door.

“So he’s gone... Are you sure we should have let him go, though?” Count Salzberg asked Lady Yulia, as he rose from the sofa and watched Ryoma walk

away through the window.

“Yes, he probably planned everything that happened today...” Lady Yulia shrugged. “Though he could have been acting. In which case, he’s a very talented liar.”

She had absolute confidence in her ability to discern other people’s nature. Both when she helped manage the Mystel Company in her youth and after she married into House Salzberg, she was always surrounded by sly, devious people. She had to acquire that insight if she was to contend with those types of people.

“Hmm... I think we should take Mikoshiba up on his offer... Yulia, what do you think?” Count Salzberg sat back down next to Yulia and shared his opinion.

But while the Count was the one to give the final say, he spoke to Lady Yulia with a hint of reservation in his voice. That was perhaps to be expected, since Count Salzberg was more akin to a warrior. He had an assertive, ruthless personality, but he knew he wasn’t flawless and infallible. There were some matters where he was average at best, namely diplomacy and strategy.

For that reason, he placed a great deal of trust on Lady Yulia’s opinion. She was his tool for ensuring his prosperity. Having spent years facing off against men enslaved to money made her into the ideal, most dependable partner in Count Salzberg’s eyes.

“There are still a few points I’m apprehensive about, but I agree, we should accept his offer. If nothing else, having that contract would only do us good...”

Rhoadseria’s laws weren’t as meticulously regulated as Japan’s. In a way, contracts were prioritized over everything and anything else. If that contract were to be signed and handed over, the halite vein would officially belong to House Salzberg. It wouldn’t undo the embezzling they committed in the past, but any evidence of that could be made to appear hazy and unreliable.

If they would end up going to trial over this matter, they could get away with a small fine. They could bribe the judge and have him rule them innocent over insufficient basis for reasonable suspicion. After all, they’d be able to claim the vein was presently theirs.

Even the royal family would find it hard to judge them over the question of when they began harvesting resources from land that was rightfully theirs. Not when their reign was still unfounded. And the more time that passed, the colder the trail of evidence and testimonies would grow, and the less suspicious Count Salzberg would seem.

Of course, Count Salzberg could only achieve this thanks to the finances and authority he already possessed, but that one sheet of paper would still be a powerful ace in his hands. As such, Lady Yulia believed they ought to accept Ryoma's offer. But there were still a few issues that prevented her from giving her immediate consent.

"Apprehensive...? You mean Christof's girl?" Count Salzberg asked.

To her, she was the most concerning point. The Christof Company had its position as the head of the trade union stolen away. With it, it lost its claim to having command over all of Epirus's economy. Normally, the Company would have completely collapsed by now, but they were somehow able to cling to life, albeit on a very diminished scale. However...

"Not quite..." Lady Yulia shook her head. "What bothers me is that man's true intentions."

"Mikoshiba's? I agree, it's hard to get a grasp on him... He's sharp. I have to admit I probably underestimated him, but did you see something else in him?"

Lady Yulia heaved a small sigh.

"No, I'm in the same boat as you. I don't think there's a catch to this offer, but..."

Lady Yulia's words trailed off. Count Salzberg eyed her with surprise in his eyes.

"But what? What's on your mind?"

"I can't shake the feeling that man might come to crush us sooner or later..." She uttered.

It was only a bit of vague, nondescript anxiety. She couldn't attribute it to any clear reason. But her intuition as a merchant was ringing like an alarm bell,

alerting her to danger. And she couldn't bring herself to ignore it.

Count Salzberg, however, seemed to feel differently about this.

"Pfft! Ahahaha! Yulia, I owe your wisdom a great deal, and that's why I've always trusted what you have to say. But don't you think this is a bit much?" Count Salzberg burst out into laughter at Yulia's confession. "You do realize how major of a gap exists between Mikoshiba and me, yes? Maybe given a century he'd be able to cover that gap, but even a decade or two wouldn't be enough."

He didn't believe it was possible, and Lady Yulia couldn't very well argue against his opinion. The difference in power between Ryoma and Count Salzberg was clear. In all fields that were relevant to ruling over territory — economics, political influence, diplomatic power and military might — Count Salzberg had the upper hand.

And the biggest difference was the territories they possessed. True, House Salzberg's land was along a border zone, but it had plentiful trade, coupled with the halite vein. By contrast, House Mikoshiba had the Wortenia Peninsula, which not only lacked any citizens to populate it, but was also crawling with monsters and demi-humans.

There could be no comparing the two houses. Like Count Salzberg said, this was a gap that would take not decades, but centuries to truly overcome.

"Yes, you're... you're right." The more she thought about this logically, the more reasonable her husband's words felt.

"Yes, Yulia, you're worrying about it too much. I swear, woman... Heheh... Well, no matter. If you're that worried, we can send that maid from last time as one of our conditions for the contract and have her leak information for us. We did prepare her for this, and I doubt Mikoshiba will complain. Will that curb your fears, darling?"

Lady Yulia nodded. She did acknowledge the truth behind his words. And that was why she decided to stop worrying about it. The human intellect couldn't fathom just how high the price that decision would go on to cost them was.

"Yes, that's fine. Let's do that... Then, I'll add a few clauses and sign it. Once we legally own the vein, we should be safe."

“Mmhmm. I’ll leave handling that to you. Heh, didn’t imagine I’d hear you say something like that, though... That man’s future is something to look forward to.”

He spoke with the arrogance of a man in power looking down on the weak. But those words would go on to seal House Salzberg’s fate. And several days later, the two of them officially sealed the contract. Count Salzberg gained possession of the vein without paying a single coin, and Ryoma gave it up for free.

And yet, no one could accurately say which one of them truly profited from this transaction. Not until the day the two of them locked blades, at least...

Chapter 2: In Search of New Power

“C’mon, you can do better than that! Your swings are weak! Put more force into it! Swing like you know you’re gonna cut through the enemy even if they’re in full armor!”

Twenty children swung their swords in practice, sweat rolling off their bodies as the sun’s rays poured down on them. They’d had their breakfast and were now two hours into their training. Another group of children was training a short distance away. Each group of children was instructed by a member of the Crimson Lion group.

“Our lad may be easy on you, but that doesn’t mean you can slack off! After all, he’s not the one who’s gonna die when it’s time for war! That’ll be you! Imagine someone you hate is right in front of you! There, you imagining it?! In that case, cut them down, kill them! Put everything you have into it!”

Shouts and battle cries echoed through the plain. This was indeed the sight of soldiers being trained. Battle cries were important in real combat, as it both roused oneself and rattled the enemy. And even during training, it served to rouse the children’s emotions. As soon as they began showing fatigue, the volume of the instructors’ shouting rose up at once.

The mercenaries training the children knew all of this from first hand experience. As soon as the children’s battle cries grew weaker, they shouted at them.

“Mike! How’s it going?” Ryoma called out to one of the mercenaries.

“Ah, it’s you, lad. Doing the rounds?” Upon hearing Ryoma’s voice, Mike let the scowl on his face relax. “All right, all of you, take a break! Don’t try to cool off with your sweat, wipe off and line up once you’re done!”

At those words, the children cheered happily.

“Go on, on the double!”

The children realized this amicable man only scowled and shouted at them because this training would have implications on their lives. One couldn’t

function as a teacher if their students made light of them.

And while the mercenaries didn't see physical punishment as an optimal solution, it was at times necessary. If it would truly lead to their survival, they didn't mind being feared and hated by these children. They would beat and put them in their place if the situation called for it.

Well, it would be a huge scandal if this was Japan... Ryoma cracked a bitter smile as that thought crossed his mind.

"Oh, looks like each squad's training is going smoothly... We should be starting comprehensive combat training tomorrow, right? I've been wondering about it."

It was roughly a month since Ryoma divided the children into squads of five, and organized them into platoons of four squads each. Of course, each platoon was led by an experienced member of the Crimson Lions.

In other words, he had the mercenaries teach groups of twenty, with those that weren't allotted to any platoon patrolling and helping with training exercises. Ryoma did all this to make sure the children acquired real experience on the battlefield as fast as possible. He concluded that discarding training their individual skills in favor of building up their teamwork would increase their chances of survival.

He saw Helena as a living example of this. By casting aside the dignity and pride knights boasted, she elevated herself to the rank of Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War. In other words, she focused on safe battle in numbers rather than the individual strength of each soldier.

Ryoma decided, then, that casting aside individual training to begin with would allow them to learn faster. Of course, they would have to focus on their individual skills in the future, but if they were to rear them up to become an immediate army, he decided it would be better to focus on one aspect.

They were split into groups of five, and they all ate and slept in the same place. Living like that for a month formed a sense of fellowship between the children. And that feeling of camaraderie filled them with a desire to keep one another safe. The results were exactly what Ryoma hoped they would be.

The only question that remained was how much of the basic combat training really sank in within this one short month.

“Well... You should probably ask old Boltz and Sis too, but if you ask me, they’re doing well. They’re putting their voices into it, and they seem to get along as a group, too... All that’s left is to see them do all of that without turning to look at us.”

The children still held some suspicion and fear toward Ryoma and the mercenaries, but at the very least they weren’t apathetic anymore. They gladly ate their food and had their clothes washed. They slept within tents Ryoma’s group had erected, and while it wasn’t as soft as a real bed, it was much better than how they were treated when they were slaves.

But most importantly of all, their expressions became brighter, likely owing to the fact they no longer had to fear the whip. Or, at the very least, they knew they wouldn’t be beaten for irrational reasons.

As proof, the children didn’t seem to be eyeing Mike with terror. Even as he shouted at them with a severe expression on his face, the children realized he was treating them as equals. This was something Ryoma firmly instructed the Crimson Lion mercenaries to do before the training started. And thankfully, the Crimson Lion’s members were all of commoner background, so they easily understood Ryoma’s intentions.

Most adventurers and mercenaries were of common birth. They all thought, at one point or another, that had luck not been on their side, they may well have ended up slaves themselves. Had Ryoma told someone of knight or noble pedigree to treat the children with respect, he’d be scoffed at for trying to treat slaves kindly and ignored.

“That’s good, everyone seems to be getting by... I looked around the other squads, and they all seem to be working on their sword swings.”

“Aye, we’re having them train that way. Their form’s getting better, given it’s only been a month...”

The children were gripping swords meant for adults, provided to Ryoma’s group by the Mystel Company. Following the negotiations they had a few days ago, Ryoma gained connections with the Mystel Company with Count Salzberg’s

recommendation. Count Salzberg did know about his meeting with Simone, but apparently Ryoma was able to successfully convince him nothing came of it.

Everything's going according to plan for now. Ryoma nodded with satisfaction at Mike's report.

It had been only a month. They were given proper meals, sufficient time to sleep and moderate training. Thanks to that, the children's adolescent bodies gained muscle mass at a steady pace. Of course, one month's worth of training wasn't enough to elicit any kind of dramatic change.

But little by little, ever so gradually, the children were maturing. When the slave merchant handed them over to Ryoma, they were all emaciated from malnutrition. But the slaver didn't lie when he said he picked healthy slaves.

"But really, giving them round candies as rewards for good behavior really does work... They all practice with a different light in their eyes. Having them train while dangling prizes over their head. That's the kind of idea only you come up with, lad! The kids are working with an entirely different kind of fervor, you know?"

"That's good... Well, I guess commoners don't get to taste sweets too often, either. I figured this would be effective."

"Yeah... I mean, they're slaves. Even if you gave them money, they wouldn't have any idea how to spend it. I think it was a good idea." Mike concluded his words and cast a kind glance behind him.

There, the children were wiping off their sweat and lining up.

"Well, if you'll excuse me..." He rose to his feet and grabbed hold of a small sack dangling from his belt.

"Sorry, Mike," Ryoma suddenly stopped him. "Let me do it today."

"Huh..." Mike seemed surprised by Ryoma's order. "Well, all right..."

"Thanks, Mike." Ryoma said, taking the bag from Mike's hand.

He then approached the first child standing in the column.

"Your name is... Coile, right?" Ryoma kneeled down, looking at the boy at eye level. "I saw you train. You grip your sword a bit too hard. Try holding it a bit

more softly.”

Referring to the boy by name, Ryoma then dropped three gumdrops into the boy’s hand and gently ruffled his hair. The boy, Coile, regarded the fact that Ryoma knew his name with surprise.

“E-Erm... I...” Coile was so shocked he couldn’t properly put his gratitude into words.

“But I know you tried real hard,” Ryoma smiled at him softly. “So today’s special. Go stand in the shade and have your candy.”

The boy lowered his head deeply in gratitude and sprinted off. Healed by the sight of the boy running along happily, Ryoma motioned for the next child to approach him. At the end of each training day, the instructor would give his squad members a gumdrop. If the instructor thought they really put in their best effort that day, they gave them two gumdrops.

So long as they didn’t slack off, they got rewarded — this system made the gumdrops into the single sweetest carrot imaginable. It didn’t require that they tug at each other’s feet to be successful, and made sure they were always motivated.

In this Earth, where sugar was hard to come by, a gumdrop was something most commoners didn’t get to taste often. Ryoma continually bought them from Epirus and handed them out to the children.

And the effects were dramatic, to say the least. In Japan, a gumdrop or two wouldn’t prompt this much joy out of a child, but it was a much stronger stimulant in this harsh world. One could very much call this a revolutionary idea.

And yet, Ryoma’s heart was overcome with a tinge of guilt. It didn’t matter how you tried to prop it up — he was using candy to force children into harsh, rigorous training. And yet, Ryoma knew that bringing his own world’s values into the picture was pointless.

I just gotta remember that this isn’t that world anymore...

And so, still weighed down by a guilty conscience, Ryoma gave each child candy, referring to them by name and giving them a few encouraging words.

Once the last child in the column ran off, Mike cracked a wry smile.

“Well, damn... I just can’t match you, lad. This’ll make their morale go even higher.”

No one would call a labor slave by name. After all, a slave’s owner only saw them as tools. But Ryoma referred to them by name, and likely did the same to children from the other squads. He memorized the names of over three hundred people. This was a difficult endeavor to take up.

It was like this when we joined him, too... This man really is something else...

He was a lord the likes of which was hard to come by in this world. And that was why serving under him felt like the right choice. But despite the emotion rising up in Mike, Ryoma interpreted his words differently.

“Hmm? Well, yeah, they cost quite a bit... We’d be in trouble if it didn’t work. Mike, keep working hard on training them tomorrow, too.”

Mike bowed his head deeply at Ryoma’s words — the highest form of honor he could show toward his king.

“You can count on me, lad!”

Accepting Mike’s enthusiastic response, Ryoma walked away.

All the squads are doing well for now... It all depends on how tomorrow’s training will go... The problem is...

Ryoma was relieved with the results of his check on the children, but there was still some anxiety brewing in his heart.

I’m going to start learning thaumaturgy myself tomorrow... I’ve heard about the risks, but I’ll have to accept it, anyway. I can’t take too much time away from Laura and Sara, after all...

Thaumaturgy was a field that was still unknown to Ryoma, but he wouldn’t be able to move forward without learning how to use it. Gaining this new power was absolutely necessary if he was to survive in the Wortenia peninsula.

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The next day, the Malfist sisters approached Ryoma as he was resting after

breakfast. Being able to teach Ryoma thaumaturgy seemed to have put them in quite the good mood. They were already smiling and clearly enthusiastic, but there was also a bit of a shadow hanging over their expressions. As if something was also worrying them.

“Master Ryoma... Today we’ll start working on helping you learn thaumaturgy. Are you prepared?”

“Yeah. Thanks, you two. I appreciate your help.” Ryoma bowed his head to the sisters.

When it came to thaumaturgy, at least, Ryoma was their disciple, and saw it as natural to treat the sisters with due respect. Sara, however, regarded his behavior with doubt. They were slaves, and he was their master — the fact he lowered his head before them left her bewildered. But upon seeing Laura shake her head, Sara opted to leave her doubts unsaid.

The three of them had worked together for nearly a year now, and overcame many challenges alongside Ryoma. They knew his personality very well. Ryoma Mikoshiba was never one to be haughty and underestimate others, and adhered to decorum and politeness. It came to him naturally, and he did so completely unconsciously.

That was a problem, given that he was in a position that commanded slaves, but that was also what earned him the Malfist sisters’ sincerity.

“Then let us begin. Master Ryoma, do you remember the different types of thaumaturgy we’ve taught you before?”

The Malfist sisters had Ryoma sit in the center of the tent, intending to review his knowledge on the subject.

“Yeah. Verbal thaumaturgy — the one that requires chanting. Martial thaumaturgy, which doesn’t require any chanting, and endowed thaumaturgy, which allows you to seal spells within objects to have them exhibit certain powers. Right?”

The sisters had already taught him a bit about thaumaturgy while they were still wandering adventurers. They didn’t teach him how to use it at the time because they were traveling, which didn’t give Ryoma the leisure to learn.

“Correct. And, all types of thaumaturgy consume prana — one’s life energy — in order to exhibit their effects.” Laura said, to which Ryoma nodded wordlessly.

All of these were things he already knew.

“Prana is a type of energy that exists within all living things. As such, since thaumaturgy feeds on this power, anyone should be able to control their own Prana and learn thaumaturgy to make use of it.”

“Figures... That’s why even the kids can learn it, right?”

Anyone could learn thaumaturgy, regardless of gender or age.

“Precisely. Anyone can be taught this, even if different people acquire the skill at different speeds. At the earliest, it would take a couple of months to learn the basics, and at the latest it could take six months. I do mean the very basics of thaumaturgy, but that alone can put you head and shoulders above those who haven’t learned it at all.”

“Yeah, I’ve already told you this, but I’m not expecting to learn how to use it perfectly within just a couple of months. Right now I just want to have the basics down. If that alone should give a child enough manpower to match several adults, after all, then that’s all I need for now.”

Ryoma didn’t think thaumaturgy’s utility was limited to just battle. It could make even a single child as useful as several adults in terms of sheer working capability. They could cut down trees, ferry stones from quarries and erect houses. And it could be made useful in many ways during everyday life. Ryoma couldn’t see himself ever afford to not capitalize on that power, even if that way of thinking deviated greatly from this world’s perception of common sense.

The people of this Earth saw thaumaturgy as a unique power granted to them by a god. The name of that god was Menios — the God of Light. He was one of the six gods that were said to have created this world, and considered the central, chief deity. It was said that he granted the power of thaumaturgy onto mankind.

Not an uncommon narrative.

Ryoma was raised in Japan, a country that was overall quite secular. Ryoma

had also experienced many different kinds of subcultures, which made him pinpoint all sorts of holes in this myth.

Many polytheistic belief systems in the past worshiped gods which represented individual concepts, seeing them as the building blocks of all creation. Meanwhile, supernatural powers like sorcery and magic were worshiped as special powers granted by gods, or perhaps feared as demonic influence.

In that regard, the faith in the god of light matched many common threads with ancient religions in the history of Ryoma's world. Or, put another way, this religious narrative employed many well-used and familiar elements.

But the problem wasn't the authenticity of this myth, but rather that it was well-known and believed in throughout the western continent. Many people practiced the Church of Light's doctrine throughout this land, trusting in the perhaps classic dogma that only those who believe will be granted salvation.

Several months ago, Ryoma had his men use thaumaturgy to form a bridgehead across the banks of the river Thebes. He only saw it as a convenient power that filled the role of machinery, but this idea would strike the people of this world as shocking, if not blasphemous. The mercenaries were one thing, but had it not been for the greater cause of building fortifications on the battlefield, the knights may have adamantly refused his order.

Mercenaries and commoners didn't cling to the faith that much, but for the more privileged knights, nobles and royalty, this was a major issue. They were grown since youth with the belief that they were given the right to rule over others, and that the God of Light granted them the power of thaumaturgy to do so. They perceived it only as a power meant to defend themselves, and only used it in battle.

Ryoma felt there was a stark contradiction in the idea of using a power granted by god only for battle, but religion was rife with such illogical ideas. That said, he had no intention of calling those beliefs into question. The only thing that mattered to him was whether something could be of use to him. If something wasn't useful, he would simply ignore it.

And having come from Japan, Ryoma saw no need to pay any respects to this

world’s gods. They were only tools, and the question of whether they could be used or not was far more pertinent than the question of their existence. This was perhaps how the Japanese belief system influenced Ryoma’s outlook.

“Then if you’re done with the lecture, shouldn’t we begin?” Ryoma asked, to which the sisters nodded and walked around him, standing at his back.

“This should do for the preface, yes. We will begin. Are you sure you’re ready, Master Ryoma?”

“Yeah. Go ahead.” Ryoma sat cross-legged, as formerly instructed, and nodded.

He felt the sisters’ palms press against his back.

““Then we begin!””

The moment the twins made that exclamation, Ryoma felt something hot spill over his back. It spread from the sisters’ hands and gradually crawled up his spine. Ryoma was overcome with the tingling, almost frightening feeling of something creeping up his body.



“Try taking deep breaths, through your nose,” Laura instructed him. “And exhale slowly through your mouth... Calm your heart and try to relax your body... Can you feel something warm spreading through your back?”

Ryoma nodded shortly and closed his eyes, abiding by Laura’s words. He directed his consciousness to the warm sensation spreading from his back, as if trying to control the heat running through his body with his own will.

“It’s like my body’s on fire...” A small whisper left his lips.

His face contorted in pain, and labored gasps escaped his mouth. How long did this all last? Several minutes? Dozens of minutes, perhaps? Whichever it may have been, it felt like eternity to Ryoma. But the fact even Ryoma’s usual stoic facade made way for an expression of pain likely stood as testament to the agony of it all.

What started as a warmth that spread out from the center of the Malfist sisters’ palms had become a burning heat that rushed through his back like wildfire. Ryoma desperately withstood the urge to scream out from the heat and pain. It was then that he noticed the taste of rusty metal filling his mouth — he’d likely clenched his teeth too hard in his attempts to hold back the pain.

“We are now sending prana directly into your body from our hands, Master Ryoma. Put up with it for a while longer... Now, try to manipulate that heat.”

Nodding at Sara’s instructions, Ryoma focused on his back again. The prana spilling from their hands was eating away at Ryoma’s body, and it had only been several minutes. The heat ran through him from the tip of his head down to his feet.

The sweat pouring from his body made his shirt cling to his skin, and formed several wet spots over the blanket he was sitting on.

“How do you feel? If it doesn’t seem like you can withstand the heat anymore, say so.”

The two’s expressions were also contorted in effort and pain. So long as Ryoma couldn’t control his own prana, the Malfist sisters had to continually supply him with their own prana. It was like trying to fill a leaking bucket. And so it was a race against time. Which would come first — would the twins run

out of prana to supply him with, or would Ryoma successfully break through the first level...?

“Yeah... It’s... pretty hot... But I can take more. Keep going.” Ryoma stuttered out a reply.

The moment he parted his lips, droplets of sweat flowed into his oral cavity. The taste of the salt in his sweat and the raw taste of blood in his mouth made him reflexively contort his face in disgust.

But he also realized a part of him was enjoying the salty flavor. All that sweat made Ryoma’s body crave water. As well-trained as his body may have been, this was still straining him. But he couldn’t afford to stop this now. Stopping now would mean the sisters would have to start tomorrow’s session by once again forcing prana into his body.

Gaius... Kael... My body has the prana I stole from them... I should be able to do this... I should be able to get my chakras to move...!

Ryoma desperately tried to hold the image of all the heat coursing through his body gathering in his abdomen. He tried to force his still-unmoving chakras to move. The very basics of thaumaturgy lay in using your prana to reinforce your own body.

Sensing one’s own prana and channeling it as martial thaumaturgy opened the way to other forms of thaumaturgy. Be it to have other existences lend him their strength in the shape of verbal thaumaturgy, or to channel it into something and imbue power into an object through endowed thaumaturgy.

And that was because even the latter two methods of thaumaturgy used his own prana. And so long as he couldn’t control the prana coursing through his own body, he could never hope to channel and control it outside his body. It was for this reason that martial thaumaturgy was considered the basis for all other methods.

Acquiring martial thaumaturgy required breaking through three barriers. The first was to recognize your own prana and being able to manipulate it. The second was to manipulate one’s prana to open the chakra said to be the root of all bodily functions — the muladhara chakra, or the root chakra. And the third and final barrier was to be able to willingly close the muladhara chakra after

he'd opened it.

Martial thaumaturgy essentially meant opening the chakra within one's body. If one were to liken the human body to a machine, the chakra could be likened to an engine. A vehicle in operation naturally needed to have its engine active, but once it had finished, it needed to have its engines shut down. Otherwise, the vehicle's engine would continually consume gasoline. The same held true for thaumaturgy.

Yeah, the logic behind it is simple enough... But I'm struggling just with the first step... If it's this bad now, I'm scared to think about what comes next... That thought crossed Ryoma's mind.

Activating his chakra made his body exhibit more power than his muscle strength normally allowed, which became exponentially higher depending on the number of active chakras. A total of seven chakras existed in the human body. The idea was developed in ancient India, where it became part of Brahmanism, Hinduism, and went on to be integrated into Buddhism and Yoga.

But of course, the stark difference between those ideas and thaumaturgy is that mastering the latter would indeed grant one superhuman strength. Ryoma tried to activate the first of those chakras, the muladhara chakra, with the help of the Malfist twins. But things weren't going as smoothly as he would have liked. Impatience and anxiety tormented Ryoma's heart.

But his concerns turned out to be unfounded. Ryoma couldn't tell how long it took, but the anxiety and fear gradually began to fade away, and his heart became clear. It was like he became capable of hearing something he couldn't make out before — as if the outlines of something were coming into view. He could feel a certain throbbing. First from his breathing and breath, and eventually emanating from every single cell in his body.

He could tell — something about his body was changing.

I can feel something... This isn't my blood... And it's not something coming from their hands. There's something hot circulating through my body, and it isn't blood... Is this... my prana?

The moment he realized this, a change took place within Ryoma. Something awakened from the depths of his body, which was stimulated by the Malfist

sisters' prana. An intense throbbing was raging through his body, and Ryoma desperately tried to restrain it. The way it raged felt like a chained beast trying to chew its way through the fetters holding it in place.

The twins' hands felt a sensation of resistance — as if Ryoma's body was trying to fight back against the prana they were pouring into it. As soon as they felt that, the sisters let go of his back.

"How does it feel?" Sara asked, her voice full of concern.

"Yeah... I can feel it... It's like there's an... animal raging inside me... Ugh!" Ryoma replied cautiously.

Right now, the muladhara chakra, located in Ryoma's perineum, was jolted into action by the stimulus of the Malfist sisters' prana. Ryoma felt as if, if he wouldn't keep his wits about him, he could very well pounce on the sisters like a bloodthirsty animal. Ryoma's instincts were spurring him onward.

An urge to hurt others. To ravage others. To kill others.

Urge. Instinct. Impulse.

The lust bubbled up from the bottom of his heart. This beast of desire was normally chained up, bucking and heaving in an attempt to tear the bindings of common sense apart. This was what yoga described as a kundalini awakening. An explosion said to be likened to the awakening and uncoiling of the serpent of creation.

Calm down, take a deep breath... Like that... Slowly...

But Ryoma's body ignored his will, and was activating on its own. His muscles were throbbing and his heartbeat was accelerating. The sensation of his skin became much more acute, and it felt like every cell in his body had gone into overdrive.

The Malfist sisters nodded at each other wordlessly and left the tent. There was nothing they could do even if they were to stay there.

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"So, how's the boy looking? I just came over to report that we're done with the little ones." Lione called out to the twins, who stood guard at Ryoma's tent,

after concluding the training with the children.

Today's training was concluded with a simple explanation of thaumaturgy and with the mercenaries pouring a bit of prana into each of the children. Now they were back to their lectures. Lione had concluded her share of the work for that day, but Ryoma — the one to whom she was to report — was still in the midst of his own training.

"Lione... Master Ryoma is still inside..." The sisters said simply this and shook their heads.

Seeing this, Lione peeked into the tent and nodded in understanding.

"He's taking a while, isn't he... He's been going at it since morning, right?"

It was already three in the afternoon.

"Yes... Five hours already." Sara affirmed, to which Lione's eyes went round with surprise.

"Since you two are outside, that means his chakra..."

"Is still open, yes." Laura nodded, her gaze full of anxiety.

Lione's expression stiffened. She was concerned about the same thing.

"Five hours, huh... The boy did absorb a lot of prana from all the people he killed... I guess it makes sense... That might be dangerous... That's why I was against it, actually..."

Laura's expression contorted at her words. Both Ryoma and the children were going through the same process to learn thaumaturgy, but Ryoma's starting conditions were radically different. At least in terms of the aggregate amount of prana they'd absorbed, the children had no experience in taking the lives of others and only took in the amount necessary for their bodies to survive. There may have been some individual differences, but most of the children only amounted to that.

But Ryoma, by contrast, was far too different in that regard. He slew both Gaius Valkland and Kael Iruna, men capable of thaumaturgy, as well as countless monsters. As a result, the sheer amount of prana residing in Ryoma's body was nearly double the ordinary amount.

Normally, having more prana would be a good thing, but when it came to mastering martial thaumaturgy it actually became a disadvantage. It made it harder to control one's chakra.

It was as if Ryoma went to learn how to drive, but his training car was modified to have a race car's performance. It was the same car and the driving method didn't differ much, but trying to drive it couldn't be compared to a training car.

This was of course all impossible. No beginner starts with a task only an advanced student could tackle, and no teacher would approve of letting their student do that. Much the same as how, regardless of what world you're in, no one would leave a vehicle costing a fortune in the hands of an amateur.

But when it came to mastering thaumaturgy, there was the small probability of this happening. An apprentice with no control over their chakra might be forced to conquer the large amount of prana residing in their body.

The common sense of this Earth was to wait for the chakra to begin operating normally. That was how most mercenaries from a commoner's background learned thaumaturgy. But Lione and the others warned Ryoma ahead of time that this might happen, and Ryoma chose to ignore those warnings and forcibly learn thaumaturgy.

He wasn't overconfident in his talent, and it wasn't that he didn't believe in Lione's words. But he was pressed for time. He couldn't tell if his chakra would naturally open by the time they were to head for the Wortenia peninsula.

"I guess there's no point saying that now, though... You two should rest, too. You had to use a lot of prana to open his chakra, right? I'll keep an eye on the boy, so get something to eat." Lione said out of consideration for their health, directing a kind gaze at the twins.

"We appreciate your consideration, but... you must be tired too, Lione." Laura said.

"Laura is right. You had to pour your prana into a few of the kids, right?"

Lione broke out in laughter at the sisters' suggestion.

"You little idiots. Seriously... Sharing prana into even ten or twenty kids ain't

gonna change much for me. And we only gave them a little taste today. Unlike the boy here, it doesn't take much to fill their bodies with prana."

Lione truly wasn't very fatigued. She had roughly the same capacity as either of the twins, too. This only meant Ryoma's prana was that much larger than the children's.

"It's fine! You two res—"

Just as Lione was about to implore the Malfist twins to rest again, the sound of something toppling over rang out from inside the tent. The three of them went pale at once and hurried into the tent.

""Master Ryoma!""

"Boy!"

Lione picked Ryoma up, who was lying face down on the ground, and placed a hand against his mouth to check that he was still breathing.

"It's fine. He's only out cold. I swear, I told him this was reckless... Laura, prepare a place for him to lie down. Sara, go fetch him some water!"

Ryoma's pulse seemed to be in order, too. It seemed they escaped the worst possible scenario. Concluding he passed out from symptoms of light dehydration and fatigue, Lione swiftly gave the sisters instructions.

""Understood! At once!""

Despite being quite tired, the sisters swiftly followed Lione's instructions.

"Dammit, boy... I told you not to do this..." Lione whispered, smiling bitterly after concluding his life wasn't at risk.

Lione knew very well that they had little time to waste, but even if Ryoma alone couldn't use thaumaturgy, everyone around him could have covered for him anyway. That was all the more crucial because he was the head of House Mikoshiba — in chess terms, he was the king. And the king isn't meant to fight on the frontlines. Ryoma honestly had no real reason to insist on learning thaumaturgy.

But despite her sarcastic tone, Lione was actually happy, on the inside. Despite being the head of the house, Ryoma insisted on acquiring thaumaturgy.

It was proof he wanted to live while staying on the same level as his comrades. A show of his readiness to dirty his own hands with blood.

She only knew Ryoma for so long, but she understood his personality well enough. And still, seeing Ryoma lying unconscious gave her newfound appreciation of the young man's resolve.

Boy... I'm glad I gambled on you... If it's you... You might be able to change our fate...

The fate of a mercenary was clear to see. They would either be betrayed by an employer, or lose their lives on a battlefield. And if neither happened, they would accumulate enough injuries to eventually die.

Whichever end they met, their future was bound to be bleak. There was not a single mercenary that washed their hands of this bloody business's karma and spent their golden years in peace. Only the luckiest of mercenaries were fortunate enough to have their exploits immortalized by the minstrels.

And this was why mercenaries never feared death. A man who feared death wasn't fit for the business. But the one thing they hated more than anything was the idea of dying a meaningless, forgotten death. If death was unavoidable, then they chose to die for a purpose.

And at that moment, Lione once again confirmed that she had found a purpose to live, fight and die for.

If it's you... If it's for your sake...

She wrapped her hands around Ryoma's limp body and gently brushed her fingers through his hair. Like a mother cradling a beloved child.

Chapter 3: The Invasion of the East

While Ryoma Mikoshiba was camped out in Epirus's outskirts and training to acquire thaumaturgy, clouds of war were brewing over the neighboring Kingdom of Xarooda. The O'ltormea Empire, ruler of the continent's center, bared its fangs against Xarooda. In doing so, it commenced its invasion of the eastern regions of the western continent.

One country fought for the sake of expanding its borders and developing its country. The other fought to maintain its own borders and ensure the stability of its regime. The Notis plains, located along the border of these two countries, would serve as the stage for a battle neither side could afford to lose.

Shardina commanded the battle from her headquarters at the rear of their forces' formation. She glared over a large map of the region as she began to speak to Saitou, who sat opposite of her.

"What of the status of our units?"

Multiple game pieces, colored in black and red, were arranged along the map in the shape of each army's formations.

"Yes, ma'am. According to the runners, our main force is advancing along its route as scheduled," Saitou said, dragging one group of red pawns from the capital to the eastern border. "We also received reports that the units we sent out to scout the Notis plains are currently in battle with the Xarooda knight force located on the east end."

Each of those game pieces represented a friendly or enemy unit. The red pieces represented O'ltormea's forces, while the black ones were Xarooda's. There were fifteen red pieces near the Notis plains' position on the map. There were five more pieces — units detached from the main force — each to the north and south.

Each piece represented one thousand soldiers, which meant their overall force stood at twenty-five thousand men.

"And how many troops does the enemy have?" Shardina asked.

At her question, Saitou began shifting the black pieces to the mountain region adjacent to the plains. A total of twenty pieces stood poised to block the path of O'ltormea's main force.

"Their corps consists entirely of knights, and numbers twenty thousand strong." Saitou replied.

Shardina's lips curled upwards, forming a sneer. It was the grin of a hunter, confident their foolish prey had stepped into a trap.

"Good. Xarooda was quick to mobilize all its forces to strike us down... Splendid. Exactly as we've planned." Shardina proclaimed in satisfaction.

"Well, we did pressure them in such a way that left them no other choice." Saitou shrugged.

"It's only been five days since we declared war," Shardina nodded. "That's not enough time to conscript their commoners."

O'ltormea successfully and thoroughly blocked the enemy's intelligence, and thanks to that, Xarooda's side was completely blind to their movements. Xarooda's territory was a natural fortress protected by steep mountains. But now, when they were utterly blind to the invading army's movements, this fortress actually impeded their movements.

The steep mountains that divided their lands yielded them a treasure of mineral deposits, but were at the same time poor terrain for deploying soldiers. If they weren't prepared for an invasion and given time to capitalize on these natural fortifications, the mountains became a shackle that held Xarooda back. That made it especially difficult to deploy a large force.

"You intentionally leaked the size of our main force to the enemy, fooling the Xaroodian royal family into believing that mobilizing their royal guard will put them on equal footing with us. Doing that made you draw their forces out onto an open field... Perfectly played, Your Highness."

Saitou complimented Shardina's tactic with pure honesty. It was this ingenuity that enabled her to lead the armies while also acting as the royal princess. This was something Saitou knew all too well.

Xarooda's total forces numbered seventy thousand men, but that number

included their conscripted commoners and the soldiers attached to their nobility. The only force Xarooda was capable of deploying at a moment's notice were the knights belonging to the royal house — a total of twenty-five thousand.

Of course, there was a reason as to why Xarooda wasn't able to muster its full army, despite the fate of the country hanging in the balance. Considering her failure to capture Ryoma Mikoshiba, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Shardina's very existence hinged on her victory in this war.

She mobilized the knight order under her direct command, the Succubus Knights, to obfuscate their movements and cut off all the intelligence regarding her movements to the Xaroodian side. This would assure she would net herself the merit of winning this war.

Shardina's objectives were twofold. The first was to minimize the time between their declaration of war and the moment the fighting broke out. This would afford Xarooda no time to consolidate their forces. The second was to leak false intelligence to the enemy, which would fool them into thinking O'ltormea's forces were smaller than expected. That would plant the idea in their minds that by marching their forces onto the plains, they would have a chance to end the war quickly.

This was an act that wasn't viable in normal strategy. From a strategic standpoint, it was always better to have the fighting break out while marching into enemy land. That was because the surrounding industries and economic conditions would be negatively affected, tilting the odds in the invading army's favor.

But Shardina elected to drag Xarooda's army out into the open plains.

For the time being, everything's going as planned. All that's left now is...

The Xaroodian military fell for her ploy. The kingdom was caught completely unaware and didn't have the time to send runners to its nobles, requesting that they send forces to aid in pushing back the invasion. In other words, the royal family was forced to send out only their knights to handle the task.

Knowing that likely left Xarooda's military authorities in quite the panic, leading them to scramble for any information pertinent to the enemy that

might help them break through this situation. The name of the enemy army's general. The army's size. Its planned route. Countless bits of information which, when properly analyzed, could allow them to come up with a countermeasure.

And the result of that scramble for intelligence was that they realized that Shardina's forces weren't as vast as they imagined. If they were to mount all of the forces under the king's command, they stood a fighting chance.

If enemy soldiers were to march into the kingdom, Xarooda would take a crippling blow even if they did win that war. At first, Xarooda's military authorities were willing to risk some losses and drag O'ltormea's army into their land, but if Shardina's numbers were slim, then things were different. A fight near the border would only cause negligible damage to the kingdom.

No one would willingly let great damage come to their country. And if they could pick an option that was much safer and avoided that scenario, they would be inclined to pick it. And so, Xarooda's military left a mere five thousand knights to guard the capital and sent the rest of their army to the frontlines.

But this was all Shardina's trap. The certain victory they envisioned was simply a carrot on a stick in the guise of hope, which was dangled before their eyes like bait. And even if they realized Shardina's plot, it wouldn't change the end result. Lethal poison was already eating away at the heart of Xarooda.

"What about the detachments to the north and south? Is everything going according to schedule on their end?" Shardina directed a sharp gaze at Saitou.

So far, their trap had worked as intended. But past experience had taught her that the slightest sign of carelessness could make the situation reverse and put them at a disadvantage. And so, she didn't leave any room for negligence. Her experience and talent as a commander mingled with her failure to capture Ryoma and the valuable lessons it taught her. This helped her mature into a daring, cunning, and indeed, ideal commander.

"Yes, both units have sent runners informing us they're in position." Saitou answered.

Shardina was likely satisfied with that, since she regarded him with a smile and a slight nod.

“Good... You’re aware of the plan, yes?”

“Of course. I will handle it, Your Highness.”

Saitou’s tone was as collected and polite as ever. He then bowed at Shardina and left. He was calmer than one might ever expect a man about to lunge into a savage battle might be. But Shardina could handily feel the fighting spirit hidden in Saitou. Looking at him from behind, she could almost see the fire of resolve burn around him.

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“Everyone, are you prepared?!” Saitou called out to his aides after he got up on horseback.

“”””Ready!””” Their swift but vigorous reply rattled his eardrums.

Ten thousand heavily armored knights followed Saitou. This was the entirety of their main force, excluding the three units dispatched as a forward force. A small force of two thousand would stay behind to defend Shardina in the back of their formation.

Leaving a minimal force to defend their commander and charge with almost all of their forces was the very image of an all-or-nothing assault. The fate of this battle — and the rest of this campaign — rested on Saitou’s soldiers.

Saitou’s gaze was fixed on the sight of their forward force, which was now engaging Xarooda’s knights.

“Your orders, vice captain?” One of his aides asked Saitou to give the word.

Saitou wordlessly unsheathed the sword from his waist and held it up to the sky.

Now, I should finish this job for Princess Shardina...

On the surface, he needed to win this battle to secure Shardina Eisenheit’s position. And in effect, it would also further his hidden masters’ intentions. But none of those reasons mattered to Saitou at that moment. His heart was stirred by a maddening craving. Everyone stood wordless, waiting for him to issue his order. They were all intoxicated — drunk off Saitou’s silent bloodlust.

It’s been so long since I’ve last felt the thrill of battle... and I intend to enjoy

this.

Feeling the bloodthirst of the soldiers at his back, Saitou silently swung down his sword — directing them toward the enemy soldiers ahead.

“““Oooooooooooooooooh!”””

The soldiers rushed past Saitou’s side, raising their voices in an echoing battle cry as they did. They were unleashed, like an arrow that had been nocked and strained to its absolute limit. Knights clad in full armor and brandishing the banner of a lion charged toward the enemy.

Even their horses were armored, making them this world’s equivalent of a tank. With thaumaturgy augmenting both their physical prowess and the strength of their horses, they trampled foot soldiers and sprung forward, their lances piercing through the enemy.

“Kill them! Slaughter them!”

“Hold your ground! Don’t turn your backs on these O’ltormean dogs!”

“Aaah, dammit! My arm! My aaaaaarm...!”

“Shut up! If you have time to scream, use it to cut someone down!”

Savage screams and curses echoed incessantly through the field of battle. The empire’s cavaliers washed over a battlefield dominated by the foot knights’ melee skirmishes, trampling over Xarooda’s soldiers. But the knights of Xarooda weren’t going to allow themselves to be one-sidedly overwhelmed.

“Foot knights, move into formation! Stop their cavaliers!”

“You hear?! Ignore your platoons and move into formation, quickly!”

The commanding officers quickly picked up on the situation and began giving orders. Rather than charging their own cavaliers against O’ltormea’s, they chose to arrange their foot knights into a formation that would block the horses’ advance. With the chain of command in upheaval, Xarooda’s knights quickly abided by their officers’ orders and formed a formation.

“Foot knights, step forward!”

Sensing the enemy commanders were recovering from the confusion of his

cavaliers' charge, Saitou ordered the cavaliers to fall back and the infantry to push forward. This Earth's horses were larger and packed more horsepower than steeds one might find in Japan. But even still, their stamina had its limits. Even with harnesses imbued with endowed thaumaturgy that increased the steeds' speed and curbed their exhaustion, the horses were still susceptible to fatigue.

The greatest advantages afforded by being on horseback were weight and speed. But put another way, a horse that couldn't freely roam around was nothing but a large, sitting target. In a way, soldiers had a power balance that wasn't unlike rock-paper-scissors. There was no such thing as a perfect soldier.

"Now listen here!" The commander of Xarooda's knights raised his voice upon confirming his men were prepared. "We will drive out the O'ltormean invaders! There's no falling back! Charge!"

Standing in an organized formation, Xarooda's knights moved forward with synchronized steps. As worthy of knights in service of a militant country, they excelled at both individual combat prowess and their organization as an army.

But of course, the same could be said of O'ltormea's forces. The elite soldiers of a powerful empire that consolidated the center of the western continent were gathered in this place. The officers commanding at the frontlines aptly adjusted themselves to the changing currents of this tumultuous battle.

"You mustn't falter before Xarooda's soldiers! We are proud knights of O'ltormea! Scatter them away!"

Knights were sent out to the front one after another at the officers' commands. The orderly columns of the formation began to waver as knights from both sides clashed. Both sides were made up of knights clad in armor made of metal plates, armed with swords and spears and strengthened by thaumaturgy. Each individual knight wasn't stronger than another. For every Xaroodian knight that fell in battle, an O'ltormean knight died as well. It seemed to be a fruitless battle of attrition.

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And yet, the winner of this battle had already been decided. The difference in the officers' ability to command made the difference. Shardina's objective was

to wipe out Xarooda's main force. With the palace's knights destroyed, the only army Xarooda would have left would be the personal forces of the country's nobles. With this, O'ltormea's forces would quickly suppress Xarooda.

Yes, we have to occupy Xarooda's territory as quickly as possible. Before the beast of the north awakens...

And to that end, Shardina employed a few tactics, and thanks to that, victory was within her grasp.

But... Really...

Shardina stood inside a large tent in the center of her headquarters, gazing down at the map on the table. The image of a single man's face crossed her mind.

I was careless back then... I anticipated Mikoshiba's movements perfectly, but at the very last moment I let him get the better of me... But in a way, it was a lesson I needed to learn. It taught me to guard myself. That no matter how advantageous a position I might have, the slightest bit of carelessness could put me in danger of death...

That mature-looking boy. At first sight, he gave off an amicable, collected impression, but his true face was that of a savage, ruthless beast. His eyes were cold and cruel when he faced off against her and Saitou. He was a man with a strength that was like steel. The sole person to escape her net and find refuge in another country.

And what if he was the enemy commander...?

That meaningless hypothetical thought nudged at Shardina's mind. She'd thought this tactic through, time and again, and had pulled it off impeccably. But the shadow of this man who wasn't even present for this battle coiled around her heart like a shackle.

"Your Highness, the time is nearly right. Shouldn't we send the signal?" The words of her aide yanked Shardina out of the quagmire of her thoughts.

"Y-Yes... Right you are... Have them send the signal." She said, stifling the hesitation eating away at her so it wouldn't be seen by her subordinates.

No good... I almost repeated the same mistake. I need to stay focused on the battle.

This battle was as good as won. She'd prepared and worked hard to ensure that. But the chance of the slightest lack of caution turning the tide of battle was always looming. She couldn't assume she'd won so long as the battle hadn't concluded. The lesson the past had taught her ordered her heart to remain vigilant.

I won't lose here...! I absolutely will not lose!

Shardina was poised to win this battle. She'd conspired and arranged for this victory, and had done everything perfectly so far. All that remained was to apply the finishing touches, and yet her heart wavered.



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“Vice commander! The signal! Headquarters has sent out the signal!” One of Saitou’s aides raised his head, catching the sound of a gong ringing in the distance.

Saitou nodded and listened intently. It was hard to hear through the roars of the knights and the sound of clashing metal, but true enough, he could make out the sound of the gong.

“Yes, that’s it... The signal we’ve agreed on. You’re all aware of what to do next, yes?” Saitou asked, directing a sharp gaze at his subordinates.

“““Yes, at once!””” The men immediately scattered in all directions.

“Hear ye! We now fall back! Ring the bell and have everyone move back!” Saitou shouted, and soon enough the bell informing the soldiers to retreat rang out in a shrill voice through the battlefield.

“Let’s move! We fall back!”

“Remember, no panicking! Cover for each other as you move!”

Even if a force wasn’t to be too mindful of its formation, acting on one’s own initiative on the battlefield wasn’t acceptable. Saitou’s men began retreating in a disorderly fashion, guarding each other’s backs all the way. They were mindful of their surroundings, and any friendly soldier that looked like they might be in risk of being slain was immediately guarded by a nearby knight.

They had no need to kill the enemy right now. The moment the order to retreat was given, the two armies had been clearly demarcated as a defending army and an attacking army. The retreating O’ltormean army had but one objective — to retreat while bringing back as many of their allies as possible.

By contrast, the Xaroodian knights were intent on killing every enemy knight they could get their hands on. Reducing their numbers, no matter by how little, was crucial. And the knights on both sides wielded their weapons, with each army trying to achieve opposing objectives.

“General Belares! The O’ltormean invasion force has begun to retreat!”

The moment the runner sent from the front burst into the tent and shouted

the words, the tumult that governed the place so far had gone momentarily quiet. But as soon as the meaning of those words settled in, the residents of the tent began talking once again.

“What? Are you sure?!”

Everyone present was well aware the fate of their country depended on this battle. And Xarooda was well aware of the difference O’ltormea held over them in terms of national power. In their eyes, they were at an overwhelming disadvantage. And yet, the enemy chose to retreat? Did an unexpected golden chance just fall into their lap?

The general’s aides were all clamoring, believing that if they didn’t gamble on this opportunity they wouldn’t have another chance to win.

“The O’ltormean soldiers are retreating! If that’s true, this is our chance! We must pursue and strike them down!”

“General Belares, please, give us the order to strike! This is proof the gods are still on our side!”

The aides were enthusiastic at this development. Even as he nodded at his men’s words, Arios Belares, the supreme commander of Xarooda’s forces, stroked his long, white beard in contemplation. Despite the voices urging him to give the word, he alone remained still and pensive.

“Pops... What are you going to do?” One voice, slightly different in tone than the other aides’, asked him.

Someone who did not so much want to have their opinion stated as they wanted to hear the general’s own stance. It was a man in his early twenties who was the splitting image of General Belares in his younger days. And the moment that man spoke, the noise in the tent once again died down for a moment.

That silence was not for a positive reason, however. The aides fell quiet and eyed the young man with bitter, stabbing glares. Scorn, mocking and all manner of negative emotions were being directed at the young man.

Any person of ordinary sensibilities would shrink away from those gazes, but this young man was bold — and not necessarily in a good way. Even with them glaring at him, he didn’t so much as flinch. No, he was giving off even more

scorn than the people around him.

“What do *you* think I should do, Joshua?” The general looked upon his third son, who was reclining at the lowest seat at the table.

“Hmph! I shouldn’t have to explain this,” Joshua replied, carrying a cigarette roll he had pinched between his fingers to his lips. “Pops, if you truly intend to chase them down... You should go all in to wipe them out, and claim Shardina’s head. Don’t you think?”

“”””Huh?!””” The aides all exclaimed in a stupefied manner.

Joshua’s words came across as utterly unexpected. But contrary to the surprise on the aides’ faces, General Belares’s lips cracked in a satisfied smile as he nodded. Meanwhile, Joshua lit a small fire over his fingertips and lit the cigarette. He composedly indulged in a long puff, despite the fact that smoking was forbidden during war councils. The fact he was so calm only made the extremity of his suggestion all the more jarring.

“Hmph... And what would you do, were you in my shoes? Retreat?” General Belares asked in a testing manner.

“I’d pull back if I want to make sure we survive...” Joshua shrugged casually at his father’s question. “If we fall back into our borders, we can turn this into a protracted war. That way, we guarantee the country doesn’t fall immediately.”

Joshua then trailed off and looked around with a sharp gaze. The lethargic attitude one could sense from his gestures was gone now. In its stead was a passionate fighting spirit and bloodlust.

“But if we really want to defend Xarooda... I’d say we should press forward. We need to win this battle.”

The sound of someone swallowing nervously filled the tent. The general’s aides, experienced as they were from countless battles, were overwhelmed by this young man.

“Sir Joshua... If I may, can you explain what you mean?” The oldest aide timidly asked.

Up until now, Joshua Belares was only a nuisance in their war councils. He

showed no honor to his elders, and anyone who lived in the capital had heard of his drinking habits and handling of dirty money. Night after night he would frequent the slums' bars, creating some new epic story of gambling or a brawl. Many times things were brought to bloodshed over someone arguing Joshua stole his woman or vice versa.

He could very well be considered a latent criminal. Which begged the question, what was such an uncouth hooligan doing in a war council? He was only there due to the will of his father, Arios Belares.

The aides were all aware that General Belares had ordered his son Joshua to join them on this campaign. But they believed that this was simply his way as a father to force some weight onto his uncouth son and straighten him out. To that end, they never paid any mind to his opinion during the council. They simply thought of him as a waste of space, after all.

And it wasn't as if Joshua did much to foster any trust. Not only did he not consider other people's opinions, he would fall asleep or smoke in the middle of meetings. Seeing him speak his mind for the first time in these meetings caught the aides by surprise.

"Don't you see? It's a trap... They're intentionally luring our army in for a pincer maneuver. Oldest trick in the book, but that's only because it's a trick that works. All right, lemme ask you this," Joshua said, eyeing the aides with contempt. "The enemy commander we're facing here is Shardina Eisenheit. Right hand woman of the big bad lion emperor, Lionel Eisenheit. The first princess and celebrated general. And you're seriously just going to chase her army down?"

"That's foolish... What basis could you possibly have to...?"

"You're overthinking this!"

"General, he's an amateur who's not used to the ups and down of the battlefield. Ignore his nonsense. Are you going to ignore such a golden chance?"

The aides turned to look at General Belares. Some of them did begin suspecting the possibility of an O'ltormean trap because of Joshua's words, but admitting that was difficult. They weren't keen on believing a person they'd constantly mocked until now. They insisted on pressing the attack — not for the

sake of defeating O'ltormea, but in the name of their personal dignity.

"Quiet, all of you... Joshua." General Belares quieted down his aides. "You spoke of two choices earlier. What was that about? Why would you suggest we press forward if you assume there's a trap in place?"

If there really was a trap, there was no choice to make here — their only option was to retreat and regroup at their headquarters. And yet, Joshua gave conflicting advice, and even gave the disturbing implication that it was necessary for defending Xarooda. One couldn't help but be drawn in by those words.

"Pops... You don't really need me to say it, do you? You know it as well as I do." Joshua shook his head in what felt like an exasperated gesture.

"I'll say it again. Explain to everyone what you meant." General Belares directed an intense gaze to his son.

"Fine..." Joshua sighed. "See, it's simple. From a strategic standpoint, we've already lost this battle to O'ltormea."

Joshua's words made the silence in the tent feel that much heavier. No one could believe what he'd just said.

"How dare you! Do you have any idea what you just said?!" One of the aides broke the silence by angrily raising his voice.

He got to his feet, knocking back the chair he was seating on, and cast aside all the fake respect he'd held so far toward the general's son. The frontlines were already stained with blood. Their men had put their lives on the line to protect their homeland from the invading army. Saying they had already lost the battle was an insult to the soldiers that risked their lives for this victory. It was perhaps natural that the aide's hand jumped to his sheathed sword.

"Wait, what are you doing?! We're in the middle of a meeting!"

Seeing the man's hand clutch the grip of his sword, the other aides quickly grabbed his arms and pinned them behind his back. Of course, they all understood his anger, but they couldn't stand by and watch him cut down an ally in the middle of a war council.

Especially since this was, despite how insolent he may be, the general's son. They all kept their mouths shut, knowing that should they speak, the only thing to leave their lips would be insults toward Joshua.

The only one to not budge a muscle at Joshua's proclamation was General Belares. He simply gave a small, satisfied nod.

"Hmm... Your words are lacking in etiquette, but you're not wrong." He whispered.

Even so, his words echoed all too clearly in the silent tent. As if he'd just proclaimed someone's death...

The color drained from all the aides' faces. None of them expected to hear the supreme commander of this operation admit that they were defeated.

"S-Sir..." One of the aides muttered, shivering with shock.

War in this world was focused on melee engagements of physical combat, and the soldiers' morale was a crucial factor that decided victory from defeat. Having trust toward one's commander was essential for maintaining that morale. Soldiers could only throw themselves into battle and stake their lives because the commander believed victory was achievable. And put conversely, few people would gamble their lives on a general that couldn't win.

On top of that, General Belares was the highest ranking military official in Xarooda. Victory or defeat very much hinged on his perspective. An army could lose any number of soldiers, but so long as its commander believed victory was achievable, it would not be truly defeated. One might lose a battle, but so long as the will to fight remained, the war would not end.

And put another way, no matter how many troops a commander had left, a battle was lost from the get go so long as they lacked the will to fight. A military commander was required to have an unyielding force of will. One's talent in strategy or lack thereof could be augmented with a choice of skilled subordinates. But the true mettle of a commander was in their ability to keep the will to fight lit in the hearts of their men.

In that regard, General Belares was a commander like no other. The Empire of O'ltormea was the sovereign of the western continent's center, and the

Kingdom of Helnesgoula was its match, ruling over the north.

And the man that held both of these great countries' ambitions in check for many years was Arios Belares. A seasoned general that led Myest and Rhoadseria to coalition, forming an alliance in the east that staved off the great powers' aspirations time and again. He was seen as equal to Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War, Helena Steiner.

He was very much the guardian deity of his country.

Hearing that man admit that they were defeated left the aides gripped by despair. Any idea of blaming Joshua for his arrogant words had left them altogether.

"S-Sir... Don't you think saying that is too much?!" One of the aides exclaimed, his face red with emotion. "We have knights out on the frontlines even now, risking their lives for victory... You cannot admit defeat here!"

Such an outburst would normally be utterly unacceptable, but no one blamed him for it. The other aides all felt the same way. General Belares simply silenced him by raising his right hand, and turned an intense gaze at everyone else.

"When did I admit we lost the war?" He asked in a calm voice.

His tone was full of the pride and dignity of a warrior who had won countless battles, and was utterly devoid of fear and doubt. His will was unshakable.

"Huh? But sir, just now, you..."

"I've said nothing about us losing this war... And neither did Joshua."

None of the aides could immediately fathom what the general was saying. They definitely heard him affirm that they had lost. They did not imagine that.

"I merely said that we lost this battle in terms of strategy... Albeit, losing on that level does make the battle tilt greatly in the enemy's favor. The conclusion of this battle could very well be set in stone already." The general sighed, a self-deprecating smile spilling upon his lips. "O'Itormea has employed many tactics in this battle, and has successfully restricted our options... Do you understand how they've done so?"

No one spoke up to answer his question. They all awaited his answer. Perhaps

one couldn’t fault them for not knowing the answer. A knight’s role was to lay down his life in the field of battle, and they weren’t expected to think of strategy on a national level. Understanding this, General Belares continued his explanation.

“What was the reason we chose to take to the battlefield to begin with?”

“Well... Because O’ltormea’s forces were smaller than expected, and we presumed the royal knights would be enough to match them.”

“Precisely. Now then, has O’ltormea ever fought our country alone?”

Everyone shook their heads. In the past, O’ltormea had only fought Xarooda when it was in coalition with its neighbors. In every war they had with the empire, they were always supported by reinforcements from other countries. Xarooda may have excelled in defense thanks to its terrain, but the gap in national power was too great.

“In that case, why didn’t we call out to the others for reinforcements now?”

At those words, the aides came up with a possibility. Coupled with their general’s words, they came to a single conclusion.

“““Aaah!”””

“It can’t be... Rhoadseria’s civil war...” One of the aides turned a questioning look at General Belares.

“Exactly. Of course, we can’t make that assertion for sure. And still, this invasion feels like it is tilted far too much in O’ltormea’s favor. They’d likely planned this for years... All to make sure no reinforcements could be dispatched to our country.”

The size of their land, their population, their economics. O’ltormea stood head and shoulders above Xarooda in every way. But Xarooda had retained its independence so far thanks to its alliance with the other countries of the east.

The fact they could rely on reinforcements from Rhoadseria and Myest in their time of need had allowed Xarooda to survive for as long as it did. Of course, their assistance wasn’t out of good will. They only assisted Xarooda because they knew the moment it fell, the flames of war would quickly spill

over to their territories, and they would be next in line to be invaded.

“The recoil of the civil war prevents Rhoadseria from dispatching aid to another country. Even if they are inclined to help, they physically cannot afford to do so. And with the chaos in Rhoadseria, Myest’s troops cannot cross through their territories to reach us, either. And with that said, crossing the sea to reach us is dangerous as well. Trying to reach us from the south would take too long, and if they were to take the northern sea route they would have to cross the Wortenia Peninsula... I do not know who thought of this strategy, but by paralyzing Rhoadseria with the civil war, it rendered both of our allies incapable of acting... It is impressive.”

Everyone here realized their neighboring countries could not send them reinforcements. But if it were truly all because of O’ltormea’s plotting... The aides could only swallow nervously at what General Belares was suggesting. It made it perfectly clear just how dangerous the position they were in truly was.

“So the truth Sir Joshua was referring to earlier is...?” One of the aides asked with a thin, fearful voice.

He’d realized that perhaps Joshua wasn’t simply riding on his father’s coat-tails. Perhaps the words of this young man they’d scorned so much were true.

“Do you truly believe an enemy that had planned everything so meticulously would simply retreat? They’re hiding their forces from us, that much is certain... All in the name of choking the life out of us.”

No one objected to his words. The prospect of a golden chance presenting itself to them with O’ltormea’s forces being on the retreat blinded them. But once they’d regained their composure, they weren’t so foolish as to not realize the trap being set before them.

“Then we no longer stand a chance... Are you saying this whole battle is pointless...?” One of the aides said, his voice heavy with profound despair.

They could only fight because they thought this could win. They could only lay down their lives because they believed doing so would safeguard those they held dear. They’d believed the general would guide them to victory, and so the truth he and Joshua had thrust before them hurt them deeply. The aide that muttered those words was likely heartbroken.

But General Belares shook his head.

“Perish the thought. I’ve merely been speaking of things in terms of who had the advantage. But while this situation borders on being hopeless, we still have a chance at victory.”

“Truly?!”

“What do you mean?!”

People overcome with despair can be acutely susceptible to the sweet allure of hope. They had come to realize just how bleak the situation was, and were suddenly offered a chance to survive. No one could fault them for lunging toward it. But the path to that hope was one of bitter death.

“We must claim the head of the enemy army’s supreme commander, Shardina Eisenheit...” General Belares uttered a sentence that froze the very air within the tent.

His suggestion was one that was exceedingly unlikely to succeed. An operation that bordered on suicide. Indeed, if Xarooda were to claim Shardina’s head, they would be capable of winning. They had suffered a bitter strategic defeat, and needed the great strategic victory of slaying the enemy commander to offset it.

Theoretically speaking, General Belares’s words were correct.

“But sir... Isn’t that too reckless...?” One of the older aides worked up the courage and asked him.

Ambushing troops were usually positioned either in the flanks or the back of the enemy formation. And once an ambush begins, chaos ensues and the chain of command crumbles. Things were different if one expected the ambush, though; if they were to press the pursuit and break through the encirclement, they may be able to reach the rear of the enemy’s formation and slay Shardina.

So in that regard, pushing forward and trying to break through the enemy lines with brute force wasn’t a purely foolish move, but a high-risk, high-reward play. Except that turning the tables on an enemy trap and claiming the head of their commander was much easier said than done. It was as delicate and minute as trying to thread a needle.

But despite all that, the aides felt General Belares's resolve and fell silent.

"I know... If we are to break through the enemy trap with sheer force, the enemy could very well wipe us out entirely. But this gives us the slightest of chances to save this country... If our entire army were to fall back and regroup now, O'ltormea would not be bothered by it whatsoever. They'd simply use their reserve forces to invade and form a base within the kingdom. Given their greater national power, if they were to form a frontline base within our territory, we would likely never be able to retake it."

Xarooda was protected by steep mountains that formed natural fortresses. Their terrain stood in the way of an invasion from another country. But if the Empire were to form a frontline base within their territory, that very same terrain would go on to impede Xarooda's attempts. And if said base would be stationed with a great number of guards, the kingdom would truly be unable to do anything about it.

It was often said that to lay siege to an enemy stronghold, one needed a force three times the size of the garrison. But with Xarooda being inferior to O'ltormea in so many ways, they likely would not be able to muster those numbers. And it would only be a matter of time before the entirety of Xarooda crumbled like a sand castle washed over by a crashing wave.

"A tactician's ploy is a trap that's awfully easy to wander into. So far, everything went according to their designs, and as wary as they might be, they should be confident they've won... And we must use that overconfidence of theirs to our advantage."

The aides nodded at his explanation. They had no other choice but to cling to that single ray of hope.

"Sir... You're already resolved to do this, aren't you?"

"Aye. My apologies, friends. You may all have to die for this..." General Belares muttered coldly.

He'd just ordered them to take a strategy that had little to no chances of survival. And yet, none of them showed any fear at accepting his order. At first, his aides were overcome with despair. No one wished to gamble their life on a battle of guaranteed defeat. But General Belares managed to use their

emotions wisely.

Nothing was more dangerous than a man fighting while prepared to die.

“Very well... We will now give chase to the enemy using all units in our disposal. No falling back! Am I clear?!”

“““Yes, sir!”””

Their bodies burned with tragic, heroic fighting spirit. It was the manifestation of the resolve of men who had come to know of their predicament, but chose to lay down their lives in the name of their country over dying in vain.

The Empire of O’ltormea and the Kingdom of Xarooda. The battle between these two countries was now approaching its climax...

“““Chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarge!”””

The cavaliers raised their voices in a battle cry as they charged one after another into O’ltormea’s ranks with lances in hand. The foot knights followed in their wake, using their spears to widen the gap the cavalry created.

“What are you doing?! Hold up your lances! Surround and kill them! Don’t let them escape!” The O’ltormean commander in charge of the frontline forces raised his voice angrily.

He gave explicit orders to his confused soldiers, allowing them to think rationally even in the face of the enemy cavalry’s charge. His order was passed on to the frontline officers via runners.

“Surround them! Don’t allow them to disengage!”

Having realized the situation, the officers rebuked their subordinates, and the soldiers turned their spears to face the Xaroodian cavaliers.

“Those fools don’t even know the basics of battle!” One of the officers sneered upon cutting out the cavalry’s route of escape. “A cavalier’s true worth lies in their mobility and charge! A horse standing still is nothing but a large, conspicuous target!”

While cavaliers excelled in mobility and attack, they were lacking when it came to stamina. Having to ferry a knight clad in metal armor and wielding heavy weapons was strenuous enough to exhaust even a horse. Steeds were

living beings, after all, and their stamina wasn't bottomless.

Plus, not only did they plunge into enemy lines, they chose to stay where they were and stand their ground. That was by no means a wise choice. And indeed, as the cavaliers fought, they gradually tumbled off of their horses. Even those that still remained on horseback couldn't get the distance necessary to fight at close range, and resorted to simply standing still and swinging their spears.

The cost for such a reckless charge would be a grave one. The foot knights following the cavaliers were overwhelmed by the enemy's size and reduced to half their original numbers.

"Good! Keep it up and crush them! The merit of this victory is ours for the picking!" The O'ltormean commander smirked greedily.

As one might expect, only high-standing knights were allowed to ride on horseback. Claiming the heads of such distinguished enemy knights would likely factor in when the knights would be conferred honors after the war.

But his desire and aspiration would be nipped in the bud the following moment.

"Sir, another wave of enemies approaches!"

"What?!" The commander's thoughts froze for a moment upon hearing his subordinate's warning.

It was all too unexpected.

"What should we do, sir? At this rate, they'll bear down on us from both sides!"

The commander didn't need to be told that. He realized full well just how dangerous of a position they were in. To fight this new wave of enemies, they'd need to turn around and engage them. But if they do that, they'd be leaving themselves open to the Xaroodian knights they surrounded.

I've got no choice... I'll have to split up our unit...

There were only a few things one could do when surrounded from two sides, and the commander's judgment here wasn't wrong in and of itself. But he didn't have the time or the strategy to overturn reality's harshness.

The moment he was distracted by his subordinate's words and tried to think of a way out, he'd committed a fatal mistake.

He felt something cold gouge into his stomach. The cacophony of battle in his ears went completely silent, and he could feel something warm flow down his skin from his flank. He didn't feel any pain. Only surprise, and the sensation of all his strength abandoning him.

"You... bastard..."

The next moment, a spear was plunged into his stomach. As his consciousness cut off, the last thing he saw was the hate-filled eyes of a Xaroodian soldier, covered head to toe with blood splatter, as he was being attacked by the commander's subordinates.

†

A force of one thousand joined the battle against the O'ltormean forces. They joined forces with the first unit, and began charging against the confused O'ltormean soldiers. Contrary to Saitou's expectations, they didn't come to the first unit's rescue.

"Kuh! Why aren't they withdrawing their men?! What are they thinking?! Do they have a death wish?!"

Xarooda's knights simply kept driving their lances forward single-heartedly, as if not holding any regard for what might come next. They kept charging forward blindly, like wild boars stricken with bloodlust. No matter how many of them were injured or killed, they remained relentless.

Under normal conditions, a unit that's already charged in once would fall back and reorganize its forces. Of course, a scenario where this wasn't feasible since they were surrounded was possible, but willingly choosing not to retreat wasn't possible in most cases. And this held especially true when one mobilized mounted troops.

But of course, in war victory was all that mattered. The means one had to resort to in order to claim that victory mattered little. But to Saitou's eyes, this charge was nothing but an act of aberrant violence. It was as if Xarooda's commander completely discarded the prospect of winning and instead elected

to mindlessly slaughter O'ltormea's soldiers.

"What's going on here...? Why won't the speed of their charge fall? At this rate, Princess Shardina's plan will go awry!" Saitou bitterly glared forward.

His task was to draw Xarooda's forces to the point where his forces lay in ambush. And while he simply needed to moderately engage the enemy while keeping them occupied, he still had to preserve his numbers as much as possible.

He had to strike at the enemy without drawing their suspicion, and bring them to the desired spot without bringing things to a melee standoff. And despite that, Xarooda's army successfully drew Saitou into the quagmire of melee combat.

The O'ltormean army tried to withdraw, but the Xaroodian army locked its jaws on it and refused to let go.

And the most troubling problem was that Xarooda hadn't mobilized their entire army yet. Xarooda's army stood in a horizontal formation, but only roughly four thousand of their men from the center were attacking them repeatedly. The units on both sides of them didn't step forward to engage the enemy, but rather kept it pinned down.

"Vice captain Saitou!" One of the Succubus Knights shouted toward Saitou, after having been relayed messages from runners approaching from the frontlines. "Both our left and right wings are being pressured! Not only did they say they can't send reinforcements to the middle, they've actually asked us to send reinforcements instead! Xarooda's forces aren't moving forward, but whenever we try to fall back, they charge forward and refuse to let go. It's like they're trying to keep us here at all costs!"

"Ugh, what are they trying to pull here...?!" Saitou whispered.

This entire situation came across as utterly unnatural to Saitou. Xarooda's central unit simply kept up their suicidal charge. They kept pressing down on the left and right wings of their army so as to not allow them to escape. The O'ltormean army was being forced into a V formation, while the Xarooda army was taking on a herringbone formation to counter it.

It can't be... Are they...? Saitou came up with a hypothesis. *Are they after Her Highness...?!*

The idea made a shiver run through Saitou's body. He realized just how desperate and firm Xarooda's fighting spirit was.

Are they insane? Going after Her Highness... True, if they can kill Princess Shardina, this battle will end in a victory for Xarooda. But their chances of doing that are slim, and regardless of if they succeed or fail, these troops will be decimated... And they still took the gamble? Why? No... The reason doesn't matter. I have to reorganize our frontlines first...

Saitou shook off his doubts and began thinking of a countermeasure. Regardless of the reasons behind it, the Xarooda army's mad charge forced Saitou's formation to bend from a straight line into the shape of a V. If he didn't reorganize his forces quickly, the center of the line would be broken, and Shardina's camp would be exposed to danger.

Having deduced this much, Saitou quickly made his decisions.

"I have a directive! We're changing our plan. We intercept the Xarooda army right here. Runner, inform Princess Shardina of this situation at once! Understood?! Inform Princess Shardina that this army is after her life!"

Their regroup point with their allies was three kilometers away to the west, along a path that went around the southern and northern tips of these plains. There were small hills to the north, south and west of that region, making it a prime spot for an ambush. Saitou's task was to draw the enemy army there, and should he have managed that, the enemy force would have been slaughtered.

But given the situation, Saitou discarded that plan. What should have been a false retreat where they pretended to be pressed by the enemy had evolved into a situation where they actually were forced to fall back. Shardina's camp lay in the back of their forces, and if their formation was to crumble, the danger would extend to her. Of course, Shardina had elite soldiers guarding her, but there was no guarantee they wouldn't be broken through, either.

That left Saitou with one choice — to rescind the order to retreat and stop the Xaroodian offensive.

If we inform Princess Shardina of this, she would definitely send the detachments to attack Xarooda... All she would really need to do is have them attack the enemy army from a different location... But that said, we took more losses than planned... Damn them and their futile resistance!

They didn't need to just win this battle, but also minimize O'ltormea's losses. If they could do that, the Empire would be prepared for when the time came to face their true enemy. Saitou was well aware of this, and cursed at the Xaroodian commander in his heart.

"Inform all the reserve units waiting in the center that we'll be intercepting the Xarooda army here!" Saitou shouted, discarding his usual calm demeanor. "And have them send over reinforcements here! Until reinforcements arrive, we mustn't let the enemy break through us! No matter what!"

The situation was simply that tense, and his tone made it clear to his men. They all stiffened nervously.

"We're stopping them here! At all costs!" Saitou called out.

""""Yes, sir!"""" His men all nodded and got into position.

And so the conflict between O'ltormea's and Xarooda's forces escalated to an all-out war.

†

"They're actually going for it..." Shardina clicked her tongue upon receiving the report from Saitou, and shouted as she glared at the map spread out before her. "I suppose I should have expected that out of General Belares. I'll send a runner to the detachments. An hour... All right? Tell Saitou to hang on for that long!"

The moment she heard the runner's message, Shardina immediately guessed at General Belares's intent.

Like Saitou said, they're after my life... No, it's probably more than just that. What Belares is really trying to achieve here might be...

"At once, Your Highness!" The runner darted out of the tent like a startled rabbit, overwhelmed by Shardina's anger.

“Someone! Send runners out to the detachments, and have them march to regroup with Saitou’s forces at once!” She called out.

“Have no fear, Your Highness. I’ve already sent the runners on their way.” A man’s calm voice echoed through the tent.

Just when did he arrive? Shardina turned her gaze to the tent’s entrance, her gaze falling on Sudou’s smirking face. With his plots in Rhoadseria mostly concluded, Sudou took part in this war as one of Shardina’s escorts. His talent in plotting and subterfuge allowed him to fill the role of tactician during a war.

Sudou and Saitou. The fact Shardina brought these two talented Japanese otherworlders with her to this war was proof of how desperate she was to win this time.

“Sudou... Hmm, did you now? Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it. I would do anything in my power to help you, Your Highness.” Sudou shrugged with the same jesting expression as ever.

He surely realized the severity of this situation, but his mannerisms hadn’t changed any.

“Hmph... Aren’t you a little too composed, Sudou?”

Shardina knew full well that what she was implying here was a false accusation, but she couldn’t help but let her sarcasm show. The more aware she was of how critical the situation was, the more it filled her with anxiety and a sense of urgency.

“Well, panicking would do nothing to help here... Though I perfectly understand your anxiety, Your Highness.”

Sudou remained rather unfazed in the face of Shardina’s sarcasm. In fact, his tone seemed even more leisurely than before.

“I suppose we can simply sum it up by saying that Xarooda’s army wasn’t foolish altogether... I believe it is being led by General Belares. Truly a seasoned hero. I took him for one who was overly influenced by the king’s and the ministers’ stances, but in the end he chose this approach... Ahaha, I’ll admit I’m impressed.”

“I’ll remind you you’re being impressed by their decision to come for my head.” Shardina said, leveling a probing glance in Sudou’s direction.

Sudou simply curled his lips into a smile.

“It was said in jest, Your Highness... I was merely praising what comes next. After all, I doubt Belares ordered this charge out of the belief they’ll actually succeed in killing you.”

Sudou’s answer made Shardina confident that her suspicions were correct.

“It’s like I thought... So you think that’s their angle, too?”

“Yes... Judging from the way they fight, they’re hoping to take us down with them. I can’t see them trying to make this a battle of attrition. Xarooda should never elect to do that, since our national power is so much greater than theirs. The fact they chose to do so anyway on their own means...”

“A third country... They want the Kingdom of Helnesgoula to join the fold.”

“In all likelihood, yes...”

At this point, Sudou wasn’t smiling anymore. His gaze was like a cold, sharp blade, carrying an intensity only a man who’d survived countless battlefields could give off.

“They likely realized they will not be able to overcome their strategic inferiority, and decided to risk everything on this charge. So reckless...”

“It was probably General Belares’s one-sided decision,” Sudou concluded. “Xarooda’s ministers would never agree to take such a dangerous gamble.”

“I tend to agree, yes...” Shardina nodded bitterly. “No king would ever approve of such a reckless plan. It would mean drawing Helnesgoula into their territory just to have them engage us.”

“What comes next depends on how much we can minimize our losses... Should our numbers fall below half our original forces...”

“Yes, I know. Should we lose that many soldiers, our suppression of Xarooda will take that much longer.”

“And Helnesgoula won’t sit idly by, I imagine... They’ll invade Xarooda and

take advantage of our invasion to further their own ends. Or perhaps Xarooda will go to them for help. Helnesgoula cares little of what will become of Xarooda, so long as they oppose us."

Occupying Xarooda wasn't all that difficult, in fact. Considering the Empire of O'ltormea's strength, one could even call it simple. Even if Rhoadseria and Myest were to send in their reinforcements, the Empire would still likely win.

"What do you think Helnesgoula's Vixen will choose?" Shardina asked.

"Well... She is one for seizing victory without dirtying her own hands..." Sudou replied, the image of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula's young queen surfacing in his mind.

Her appearance was, honestly speaking, average at best. She was very much a plain woman when compared to Princess Shardina or Rhoadseria's Queen Lupis. Sudou wouldn't quite say the disparity was like night and day, but the comparison certainly wasn't favorable.

But appearances were, in this case, quite deceiving. Helnesgoula's queen was a terrifying presence. A cold-hearted, cruel woman. A born sovereign that would willingly sacrifice her own family if it would promote her goals.

In fact, Grindiana Helnecharles, the Queen of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, earned the crown resting upon her head by slaying her own kinsmen, her blood siblings included. Of course, at the time the situation in Helnesgoula necessitated that this be done. But even to this day, that extreme choice was still an unforgivable act in the history of the country.

Sudou had only met the woman twice before, but the intensity of her personality burned a lasting impression into his heart. This wise, cunning and scheming queen was known as the Vixen of the North. And she wouldn't easily overlook this perfect chance to strike a blow against O'ltormea.

"I don't doubt she will march troops into Xarooda," Sudou said. "She won't allow us to be the only ones to annex more territory... Though I can't say if she will do it as an invasion or as part of a mediated agreement with Xarooda."

"And in the process, we will surely clash with Helnesgoula's army, and that would give Xarooda the chance to negotiate with them... I swear, they're so

obstinate...” Shardina whispered angrily.

“Even weak countries have their own ways of ensuring their survival.” Sudou shook his head silently.

“Fine, so be it. For now we need to win this battle. Everything else hinges on that.”

Right now, they had to beat the Xaroodian army. All of their speculations would be meaningless unless they did that.

“Yes, unlikely as it may be, there is still a chance our forces will be overwhelmed by the Xaroodian army.” Sudou said.

And therein lay their greatest concern. Would Xarooda’s fervent charge break through their lines or not.

“I... will take to the front, too.” Shardina said, directing a gaze at Sudou.

Her expression was stiffened with suspense and fear. She didn’t need to be told how foolish of a choice that was. If the enemy was after her life, why would she expose herself to the enemy? But despite this, Sudou didn’t outright veto her decision. He had sensed her firm will, and also realized the advantages her proposal offered them.

“I see... So you’re willing to make that gamble.”

“If I take to the frontlines as well, the two thousand knights meant to guard me will also join the fold. And besides, my joining the battle will also serve to elevate our soldiers’ morale.”

O’ltormea’s forces on the frontlines already matched Xarooda’s, and thus there could only be one reason they would be overwhelmed. Xarooda’s knights were burning with high morale and didn’t fear death. That morale could be described as a sense of elation, but put more concisely, it was also a sort of frenzy, or perhaps bloodlust. The knowledge they had no other choice and their sense of duty to their country dominated their hearts.

Heart first, then technique, then body. And true enough, when it came to battle, one’s emotional condition was the most critical factor. And should one’s heart break, it wouldn’t matter how polished their skill may be or how strong

their body was. Shardina only had one way of beating Xarooda now, and that was to light the fire of morale in her soldiers' failing spirits.

"I'm sure the soldiers' morale will rise should you join their ranks. And with your guards taking part in the battle, they should be able to hold on until the detachments arrive, but..."

Sudou trailed off. In terms of probability, they were likely to win. With their commander entering the front, O'ltormea's knights would fight with renewed vigor. But from the perspective of being a field officer, Shardina's offer was all too dangerous.

It was a question of risk versus safety, but whichever she might pick wouldn't offer any absolute assurances. It was a situation where one couldn't discern that she would absolutely win or lose this battle.

"I realize the danger involved in this..." Shardina said.

Those words made Sudou prepare himself for whatever might come as a tactician.

This is one of her finer points as a person... And for all the Organization and even O'ltormea itself are concerned, losing here is a minor setback... I suppose I should ready myself for whichever way this might turn out.

If they were to put off this decision, they would end up losing before they would decide anything, and that would be a foolish conclusion. All that remained was to believe in Shardina's choice as their supreme commander.

"Very well, understood. I'll have your escorts dispatched to the frontlines promptly." Sudou said and bowed his head to Shardina.

That was the greatest honor he could exhibit toward his commander's brave choice.

On that day, the battle of the Notis plains ended with an O'ltormean victory when their detachments caught the Xaroodian knights in a surprise attack and decimated their forces. However, it couldn't be called an absolute victory for the Empire of O'ltormea.

O'ltormea gained victory by claiming the life of the Xaroodian general,

Belares, but that was only the result of Shardina's ploys. The Xaroodian army lost 16,000 men, while the O'ltormean forces lost 17,000 men. Their losses were roughly equal, but the casualties forced the Empire of O'ltormea to temporarily halt its invasion of the Kingdom of Xarooda.

Having seized control of the noble territories along the Xaroodian border, Shardina made the region her stronghold, where she hoped to rebuild her forces, but she could not immediately re-commence her invasion of the kingdom. As she'd initially suspected, the Kingdom of Helnesgoula — also known as the monster of the north — crossed Xarooda's northern borders, baring its fangs against the empire's forces.

It was the start of a three-way battle between the three countries of O'ltormea, Xarooda and Helnesgoula.

The fact the Kingdom of Xarooda became a crucible of turmoil would go on to grant Ryoma Mikoshiba much-needed time. Precious time that would ensure his survival...

Chapter 4: To the Peninsula

A dull sound, like that of a moist fruit being crushed underfoot, echoed through the dark forest. A rusty, sickeningly-sweet stench wafting up from the forest's trees tickled Sara's nostrils, prompting her to slightly contort her fair face.

"How do you feel, Master Ryoma? Does anything feel off in some way?" Sara asked, handing over a towel to the dark shadow standing before her.

"Everything seems fine, for now," Ryoma replied. "But I gotta admit, martial thaumaturgy is really something. It's like my body's turned into some kind of wild animal's."

"You've already learned the basics. All that remains is to gain experience in using it through real combat."

"Gain experience, huh... I can already kill beasts with my bare hands. I can't even imagine what I'll be able to pull off if I become skilled at this." Ryoma said, his lips curling up in a satisfied smirk.

His expression was not unlike the ghastly visage of a sneering demon. His face was covered in dark red splashes of blood. Both his arms were coated in red up to his elbows, and the red fluid was dripping from his fingers steadily down to the forest floor.

Scattered all around them were the remains of dead wolves — fifty-four of them in total. They were large creatures, each of them standing over a meter tall and weighing sixty kilograms. Giants, as wolves went. These beasts no doubt stood as rulers of this forest, but they now lay dead at Ryoma's feet.

Such was the fate of those who lost in the struggle for survival.

Blood was flowing endlessly from their carcasses and pooling over the forest floor. Their savage faces were crushed to bits.

"Honestly, I didn't think I'd kill them so easily bare-handed," Ryoma said in an almost exasperated tone, gazing at the corpses at his feet. "It's not just that my muscle strength increased, my senses are sharper too and my body feels so

much lighter.”

Besides the elation rising up from within his body, he couldn’t help but feel that the sight before his eyes was some kind of illusion conjured up by his mind. There was a stark difference in muscle strength between humans and animals. Humans could only safely hunt down beasts when armed with firearms or a blade. The gap between man and beast was simply that vast.

But Ryoma slew such animals with his bare hands, and he was able to do so while handling many of them at once. And as Ryoma wiped his body clean with the towel, it became apparent he wasn’t injured in any way. This stood as proof that, once using martial thaumaturgy, Ryoma was stronger than a wild animal.

His hand felt vividly warm from having pierced through the stomachs of the wolves, crushing their entrails in the process. His fingers could still feel the shredding sensation from when he tore apart the jaws of a wolf that tried to bite down on him. And these weren’t normal animals, either. They were fearsome creatures, categorized as monsters.

Ryoma was filled with a feeling of definite achievement. He could do something he wasn’t capable of before. That sensation filled his body with elation.

“That is not something anyone can achieve, of course,” Sara said. “Your body is well-built and trained as it is, Master Ryoma, and you have combat experience.”

Ryoma’s body was well-tempered thanks to his grandfather, Kouichirou Mikoshiba’s training, and he’d braved dangers the likes of which he’d never be able to experience in his world. All of those aspects intertwined with him gaining the new power of martial thaumaturgy, and that synergy’s result was this newfound strength.

“And you can see it yourself. The children have also gained martial thaumaturgy, but... Hmm... It seems they’re very much struggling...” Sara said, her gaze wandering into the dimly-lit depths of the forest.

The way she trailed off carried an uncharacteristic tinge of criticism toward Ryoma.

“Struggling, huh...? Does it bother you?” Ryoma furrowed his brows as he looked at Sara.

He could tell she was displeased with his decisions, and Ryoma wasn’t foolish enough to believe his choices were inherently correct. But even if it was the wrong thing to do, Ryoma had no choice but to make that decision. Even if Sara were to judge him for it, there was no other path he could have chosen. He was in no position to save the weak right now.

Faced with Ryoma’s unyielding gaze, Sara looked away. She understood the problem perfectly well, but her emotions weren’t so easily convinced.

“I know why you brought the children here, Master Ryoma... And I... I understand why it was necessary, but...” Sara muttered hesitantly.

This was something that didn’t seem to affect Laura as severely as it tormented her, but their past as slaves was a great source of trauma for Sara. The lustful, lecherous expression on the slave merchants’ faces. The anxiety of not knowing when they might be sold away. The despair of being treated the same as livestock.

Every time she saw the children being trained, those memories flooded her heart. But when Ryoma ordered that the children be taught how to fight, Sara didn’t openly object to it. This wasn’t so much due to her debt of gratitude toward him, but simply because she realized that, as much as she might hate this, they didn’t have another choice.

The rule of this Earth was survival of the fittest. Even one’s right to life had to be earned by one’s own strength, and being weak was very much a sin. Perhaps one could be allowed to remain weak so long as they didn’t mind being trampled on by the strong. To bear being pillaged, ravaged and killed.

So long as one realized those things could befall themselves and those they wished to keep safe, they didn’t have to be strong. So long as one could accept having their safety and fortune threatened by bandit raids, having their spouses and daughters raped as part of the nobles’ oppression, having their children devoured by monsters... If one chose not to earn the means to fight while being aware of all this, perhaps they could be forgiven for staying weak.

Most people in this world, and namely the commoners, chose this fate for

themselves. Or rather, they had no choice but to make that choice. But if one wished to claim their human rights, to live with pride and be able to defend what they held dear, there was only one option.

To grow strong. Power came in many forms. It could be through money, through violence, through wisdom or through authority. But might, and might alone, made right. And from the perspective of those that understood this truth, Ryoma's actions came across as almost kind.

The slave children were weak. But he made them literate, taught them how to fight and granted them the power of thaumaturgy. His actions gave weak people a thread of hope to cling to, and that held true even if Ryoma only did it to suit his own ends. His actions, in and of themselves, didn't call for criticism. The children were lucky. They were weak, but were given a chance to become strong.

And right now, those children were straddling the line between life and death as they were about to make that transition. By surviving in this monster infested forest, they would either die as weak people, or be reborn as strong ones...

Sara once again looked into the dim forest, and prayed for the children's safety.

Ye gods, grant these children even a sliver of your power...

Sara's wish was to see as many of these children as possible survive this trial.

†

"Melissa, what are you doing?! You'll die if you keep your head in the clouds! Keep your sword up, it's coming at you again!"

Melissa couldn't react to the boy's shout in time. The sight of a large, dark beast and its furled fangs filled her field of vision. Standing before her was a black-furred tiger. A pair of large, curved fangs stuck out of its mouth as it rushed toward her with the intent of tearing her apart. This large beast, exceeding three meters in height, rushed toward Melissa like the wind.

"Aaaaaaaaah!" A scream of terror escaped her lips.

Her grip on her sword reflexively tightened, but the terror prevented her from doing anything else. The tiger's gaze. The glint of its fangs. A body mass that far exceeded her own. All of those facts coiled around Melissa's inexperienced heart like shackles.

"You idiot...! Cran, pull Melissa back! Coile, help me block it!"

Pushing Melissa, who was frozen in place, aside, one of the boys tried to ward off the tiger with a swing of his sword. His body gave off bloodlust, meant to intimidate the tiger. It did not come across as much of a threat to the tiger, of course, but it was enough to change the way he perceived the children. They weren't just prey anymore. The tiger stopped advancing, instead electing to circle them, waiting for a moment where they would show a sign of weakness.

"Melissa! Hurry, get back!" The boy called Cran wrapped his arms around Melissa's body and pulled her back forcefully.

"O-Ouch, wait, stop it!" Melissa raised her voice in pain as he grabbed her a bit too hard.

The boy facing off against the tiger reflexively responded to her yelp, tensing up for a moment. Seeing this as its chance, the tiger lunged at the boy like an arrow launched from a strained bow.

"Damn it!"

The next moment, the boy thrust his sword into the tiger's opened mouth. The boy was pushed down under the tiger's weight, but the other boy, Coile, sank his blade into the tiger's stomach. The moment the tiger lunged at them, the children thrust their blades forward. It was a reflexive act done to guard themselves, but the goddess of fate elected to spare their lives.

The sword sank deep into the tiger's open mouth. But with the creature bearing down on him weighing several hundreds of kilograms, he was knocked down to the ground and hidden from sight by the tiger's body.

"Kevin, are you all right?!" Coile called out to the boy lying under the tiger.

Coile's sword already killed the tiger, but he didn't have the time to take pride in this achievement. Coile's heart was full of concern for Kevin.

“Cran, come on, help me move the tiger! Melissa, you keep watch, all right?! More monsters might show up. Don’t let anything creep up on us!”

The fact the enemy before their eyes was defeated didn’t mean they were safe. This forest was infested by countless monsters, and the dead tiger’s blood could easily draw them out.

“A-All right.” Melissa said with a nearly inaudible voice as she gave a frail nod.

Coile and Cran turned their backs to Melissa and pressed their hands against the tiger’s body.

“Ugh, it’s so heavy...! Cran! Put more force into it!”

“I know!”

The boys raised their voices at each other as they lifted up the tiger’s body.

“Kevin! Kevin! Now! Crawl out of there!” Cran called out to Kevin the moment they were able to lift a gap between him and the carcass.

They may have mastered martial thaumaturgy, but their ages ranged from twelve to fifteen. They weren’t fully physically matured yet. This, coupled with their harsh lives as slaves, meant their muscle strength was still relatively underdeveloped. They were only able to barely lift the tiger’s corpse thanks to the several months of training they’d received.

“Damnit! Cran, it’s no good! I think Kevin fainted under there!” Coile shouted upon noticing Kevin wasn’t moving.

“Melissa! Drag Kevin out, hurry!”

“Huh?! W-Wait!” Melissa squeaked in surprise.

“Hurry up already! We can’t keep it up for much longer!”

The boys’ angry shouts jolted Melissa, making her freeze in fright.

“What are you waiting for? Are you trying to get Kevin killed?! Hurry up and get him out of there!” The boys only grew more annoyed at Melissa freezing in place.

Ever since that fateful day four months ago, they lived together as a squad, sharing the good and the bad. Their bonds were tight, and they weren’t trying

to be maliciously cruel to Melissa. They were honestly worried for Kevin's safety.

"I-I'm fine..." A voice suddenly spoke out from the tiger. "I can get out... Can you just... lift it up a bit higher?"

"Kevin!" Coile couldn't help but shout at the sound of his friend's voice.

Kevin eventually managed to wiggle his way out from under the corpse.

"Are you hurt?" Coile asked.

"Yeah... My shoulder hurts a bit..." Kevin replied, grabbing onto his left shoulder.

His left arm dangled down limply. When the tiger crashed down on him he probably dislocated a joint, or at worst even crushed his scapula. He could be considered lucky to have gotten away from being attacked by a tiger without being fatally harmed. But the fact their group was now down one battle-capable person meant their overall chances of survival were that much lower.

"We'll handle lookout, Melissa, so lend Kevin your shoulder, all right?" Cran said, as he gripped his sword and looked around warily.

This was a soldier's habit, acquired through months of training. Even when concerned for their friends, they kept a careful grasp of their surroundings. Coile nodded wordlessly and kept watch in the opposite direction from Cran.

Melissa, who was still standing around aimlessly, hurriedly rummaged through her backpack and pulled out some medicine. Thankfully, she examined Kevin's injury and found his shoulder had only been dislocated. She fixed a piece of wood to his shoulder, applying the first-aid skills the mercenaries taught them, and had him drink some medicine. Given a few days, he should be able to move his shoulder normally.

In that regard, their loss of combat potential had been minimized. But that didn't make Melissa rejoice. She was filled with guilt from the belief that her blunder got Kevin hurt.

"I'm sorry, Kevin..." Melissa said as she bandaged his shoulder.

When the tiger attacked her, she simply froze up. And when Kevin was stuck

under the body, she couldn't bring herself to pull him out. She wanted to apologize to Kevin for all of those things put together.

But her apology only made Kevin's expression contort in annoyance.

"What are you apologizing for, stupid? We're friends." He scolded her bluntly.

And yet, those words were full of affection.

"B-But..."

"Didn't we tell you already? We're a team. We live and die together... Right?" Kevin smiled as he gently patted Melissa on the head.

His kindness stemmed from absolute trust and affection.



"Let's go!" A crimson-haired woman shouted, straddling a horse as she led the convoy, holding a spear up high.

Abiding by her call, the company left the citadel city of Epirus's north gate and began marching along the road leading into the Wortenia Peninsula. Over 200 men were riding along the highway silently. It was a grave, solemn sight. Upon seeing the convoy, the merchants and farmers walking along the sides of the road stopped in their tracks and fell silent. Not a single one of them dared say a word.

They were all so overwhelmed they couldn't even so much as raise their voices to cheer. The convoy's gear was all too strange and drew their gazes. It was black.

Pitch black ebony...

Their leather armor, their shirts and shoes, the scabbards of their swords and their spear handles. Even the armor of their horses. They were all dyed black. The sole exception were the horses themselves, as not all of them were black, but even so, the ensemble as a whole was strange to behold.

The next thing to draw their attention was the banner the convoy was carrying. A black flag with a single sword drawn upon it, with a two-headed serpent with gold and silver scales coiled around it. The serpent's eyes alone glared menacingly forward with a crimson color.

None of the aspects of this design were exceptional in and of themselves. Swords and serpents were commonly used in banners. But anyone who looked at the banner carried by this convoy felt as if a fist had clenched down on their hearts. It left a vivid, lasting impression on people — as if they'd gazed into a darkness that bellowed up from the bottoms of the earth.

"So that's one of that man's associates..." A white-haired old man whispered, overlooking the convoy from a lookout tower set along Epirus's ramparts. "Her name is Lione, I believe? I hear she's an experienced mercenary... Yes, I see. I'd like to say she's nothing more than a mere woman, but... She's impressive."

The old man gave off a mild demeanor, and he was visibly quite wealthy. He wore clothes made of silk and wore rings set with gemstones, and his corpulent stomach seemed to exclaim the fact he was very well-fed.

"You're as prone to concern as Yulia is, father-in-law..." Count Salzberg, who stood next to the old man, replied with a tone that bordered on exasperation. "I'm sure they're all capable, but I doubt we need to be so wary of Mikoshiba and his lackeys."

In truth, he was quite fed up with the old man's assessment. Lady Yulia had prodded him time and again, urging him to exercise caution regarding Ryoma. Some of the mercenaries Ryoma hired in Epirus were under Count Salzberg's service, and he'd only resorted to that because Lady Yulia suggested it.

The Count himself believed there was no need to be so roundabout about the matter, and if he truly wanted to handle Ryoma they might as well mobilize their army and kill him. Lady Yulia, however, didn't accept that. She was so cautious of the prospect of antagonizing the young Baron it almost felt like she was terrified of him.

But from Count Salzberg's perspective, Ryoma's influence was as good as trash. He didn't even have a stronghold of his own. The Count had no intention of doubting his wife's skills, but he truly couldn't understand why she was so cautious about this man. That doubt turned to displeasure, which filled his heart with ugly pride.

The old man, however, shook his head silently.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. That convoy's soldiers were all originally

unskilled slaves. But do the soldiers of that organized file of troops strike you as untrained slaves? It's only been a handful of months since Baron Mikoshiba purchased those slaves and began educating them, but they're already so disciplined... Count Salzberg, I will be honest. I fear this man."

The old man was confident in his discerning gaze. He took the Mystel Company, which at the time was by no means influential in Epirus, and made it into the most successful business in the northern reaches of Rhoadseria. The fact the Mystel Company became the head of the merchant's union was the result of his talents.

And it was these achievements that granted him this confidence. And he could confidently say that from his perspective, this convoy heading north was a threat.

"Absurd," Count Salzberg turned a glance full of scorn toward the old man. "The gear he bought from you is of fine quality, I'm sure, but the forces using it are glorified mercenaries and slaves. They won't amount to very much. The way they feign unity using that black-dyed attire is a fine bluff, though; I will grant them that. I suppose it's more than good enough to plant fear in your heart, father-in-law, given your lack of combat experience."

This was his wife's father, and normally he'd speak to him with due respect. And yet, Count Salzberg regarded him with scorn. Perhaps part of it stemmed from his own self-dignity. Of course, if the old man were to demand his due respect as a father-in-law, Count Salzberg didn't have to pay any attention to it. And still, he treated his son-in-law with an overtly reserved attitude.

From the information Lady Yulia gathered, the slaves he bought and the mercenaries he gathered in Epirus amount to less than five hundred people. As a military force, they were moderately large, but it was formed by mercenaries and child slaves. Neither Count Salzberg nor any other noble would see them as particularly threatening.

The only thing he could honestly praise was that they dyed their gear black. But even then, he regarded it as nothing more than a surface level bluff that didn't reflect their strength as an army. It was perhaps natural his attitude toward this man would be so chilly, given that he couldn't even discern that

much.

The old man still seemed to think otherwise, though.

“You may think so, milord... But don’t you think the convoy is quite orderly?”

True enough, they marched in a perfect formation. Of course, their unit only numbered several hundred, so the commander’s orders traveled easily. But the old man still felt that a group of people who were completely inexperienced a few months ago could not achieve such an orderly march.

“Well, I’d imagine that given a few months they would be able to at least march properly.” Count Salzberg shrugged.

He himself commanded an army, and was gripped by the prejudice that soldiers couldn’t improve that much within just a few months. The convoy walked down the highway in an orderly march, but teaching a complete amateur how to do even that took a great deal of effort.

In fact, when people were conscripted for an oncoming war, they were first taught how to march in column, and most couldn’t manage it easily. And yet, anyone who was incapable of learning that had no place standing as part of a formation on the battlefield. At best they’d be good for charging headfirst into the enemy.

And perhaps one couldn’t fault them for it, since they never had to learn how to move with that level of coordination. They were mostly commoners, after all. And yet, Ryoma had trained slave children. They were more obedient than adults, perhaps, but slaves were closer to being living corpses. Trying to teach them anything was very much a hassle. And that just made the idea of this small army being in any way worthy of merit all the more unthinkable.

I understand the Count’s reservations, and yet I still can’t help but...

The old man had no military experience, and even he realized the Count’s reasoning. But the troubling thing was that *despite* understanding this much, he couldn’t shake off the inexplicable anxiety.

But he didn’t want to sour the Count’s mood any more than he already had. He realized that no explanations would change his mind.

“But these are just a layman’s ramblings. Pay me no heed, milord.”

“Then I’ll take my leave,” Count Salzberg nodded lightly and turned around. “I’m a busy man... Oh, but do come visit our estate the next time you can. I’m sure you wouldn’t mind having dinner with Yulia from time to time?”

“Of course, milord. Next time...”

Count Salzberg smiled at the old man’s words and began to climb down the staircase leading down from the lookout tower.

“Such a bothersome man...” The moment Count Salzberg left, the old man whispered to himself after confirming he was alone. “He is skilled, but his judgment is lacking when it comes down to it. And he looks down on commoners and slaves too much. But I suppose he’s better than most other nobles. Nothing would be worse for us than if this man were to fall to ruin...”

The old man’s expression changed just then. When he spoke to Count Salzberg, he had a mild, almost helpless air to him. He spoke to his son-in-law with almost distant courtesy, and didn’t seem to insist on anything. But if Count Salzberg were to see his face now, he’d completely change his perception of his father-in-law.

His eyes were now severe, and had a glint to them that seemed to reject the very prospect of carelessness.

“We mustn’t ignore that army... Not when they were able to perfect their military drills this quickly. But Yulia is right. At this stage, it would be wisest to simply keep an eye on them. Provoking them into opposing us could result in a great deal of trouble.”

The old man concluded his soliloquy, but his mind was still deep in fervent thought as he glared at the convoy marching north...

“May I, Father?”

The old man, who had fallen asleep while lying over the table, jolted awake at the sound of a voice speaking to him. Apparently he’d fallen asleep before he knew it. Last he remembered, it was still noon, but now pale moonlight was shining in through the window to his office, which was otherwise only lit by the light of a single candle. It seems he’d fallen sound asleep.

“Yulia...”

The candle she was carrying illuminated the woman’s face, making her features clear to him. She was clad in a black robe and hood, and it was hard to tell at a glance that this was indeed Count Salzberg’s wife. She looked far more plain and ordinary than one could ever imagine after seeing her usual attire.

“Yes. I’ve been told you called for me... Is this a bad time?”

She’d probably assumed it was urgent business.

“No, pardon me for calling you over on such short notice. There’s something we must discuss quickly... You’ve sent everyone away, yes?” He asked her with a tired voice.

Yulia nodded silently and used her hand to close the office’s door shut. She knew why she was called to this office, and didn’t need to be told to keep this matter private.

“What did you do? I thought we weren’t to contact each other outside of our regular correspondence so as to not draw his suspicion.”

“Yes, my apologies... But there is something we need to discuss immediately.”

“Ryoma Mikoshiba... Right?” Yulia asked with a hint of anxiety as she stood still in front of his desk.

The old man gave a slow, solemn nod. This alone told Yulia all she needed to know about her father’s mental state. She herself felt this unease, and now so did her father — the man who held control over Epirus’s economy.

“You think he’s dangerous too, don’t you?”

“He is...” The old man sighed. “I can’t quite tell to whom he poses danger to, but... He’s certainly a threat to Count Salzberg. I’d felt hints of it a few days ago, when Baron Mikoshiba spoke to me with regards to a delivery of rations. But when I saw his convoy today, I felt it so much more strongly.”

If a third party were to ask them just what it was they felt, the pair wouldn’t be able to come up with a tangible answer. But their intuition as merchants was warning them, alerting them that letting things continue as they were was dangerous.

“My husband did grumble about you... He said you’re as much of a coward as I am.”

Count Salzberg likely told her of his exchange with the old man atop the lookout tower. The old man cracked a bitter smile.

“Count Salzberg has a tendency to only acknowledge finance and military power as strength...” He said.

“Perhaps one could call him realistic.”

“Yes, I understand that much. He is by no means an incompetent man. If he was, I would not have allowed him to marry you... I would not have needed you to marry him.”

The old man clasped both hands together tightly and brought them before his face.

Yes, if Thomas Salzberg was an incompetent man, I never would have let a man like him marry my darling daughter.

This man was in control of Epirus’s economy, and so he knew painfully well just how vile Count Salzberg’s temperament could be. He was a philanderer, dealt with dirty money and was an arrogant noble. None of those were traits a father would find to be desirable in his daughter’s groom.

But there was one reason that pushed him to allow for the marriage. He simply had to do it. But on the other hand, he never wanted to see her marry him. And if that man was about to sink into trouble, he had no intention of sinking along with him.

After all, any trouble that befell this man would also fall upon his daughter, Yulia.

“It should be all right for the time being,” The old man said. “The Wortenia Peninsula is known for being a cursed territory. Developing it would take him a long time. Ryoma Mikoshiba won’t be able to make his move for some time, and I’ve sent a number of spies to mingle among his people. You’ve done the same, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I’ve pushed a few of our estate’s maids onto him. They’ll be sending me

letters every so often. They're not spies so I don't think they'll be able to actually steal any substantial secrets, but they should be able to pick up on something."

She'd prepared the girls in secret ever since Ryoma visited Count Salzberg's estate a few days ago. Their families were living in territories and villages under Count Salzberg's jurisdiction, so they were unlikely to betray them. They would do as spies.

"Yes, opposing him openly right now would be a poor play... But we can't leave him as is, either. We'll have to keep an eye on him and gather as much information as possible. The question of how his side will handle the girls' letters should give us some idea of what they intend to do."

They didn't expect them to expose any major secrets. What they wanted from them was information like whether they had enough food or water, the peninsula's climate and weather, who Ryoma Mikoshiba met with. That kind of simple, day-to-day news.

But when properly arranged, that banal information could be priceless in the hands of those who knew how to make use of it. And if Ryoma were to do something to stop the girls from sending their letters, that would be one way of telling he was hostile toward Epirus.

Whichever way things turned out, they'd gain something.

Relieved by her father's calm judgment, Yulia put an anxiety she had left unsaid so far to words. A secret she'd kept hidden for as long as she was Count Salzberg's wife.

"If Ryoma Mikoshiba's intentions are what we think they are..." Yulia directed a probing glance at him. "Father, if that happens..."

The old man nodded.

"I know. But for now, it's too early to say... Whatever the case, we can't make a move yet. I'm sorry, Yulia."

The old man then rose from his seat and embraced Yulia, who remained silent. It was a strong embrace full of silence, like that of a parent trying to calm a crying child.

†

“Everything’s gone as planned so far.” Ryoma said.

Everyone seated around the table nodded firmly in affirmation, with indomitable, savage smiles on their lips.

A territory of their own. A kingdom of their own. And aside from the craving and aspiration for this wish, they were full of absolute confidence that they had successfully braved this dangerous region.

They’d entered the peninsula and were attacked by monsters dozens of times. Even a hunter that assertively pursues their prey rarely encounters their mark within a day. Compared to that, the rate with which they encountered the monsters was alarmingly high.

In addition, the monsters that attacked them were all dangerous ones, categorized as medium-level or even high-level by the Adventurer’s Guild. Those encounters did result in a few injured people, but the fact they wiped them all out without any casualties was a tangible accomplishment they took pride in. They couldn’t help but be elated.

“Tomorrow we finally... we finally get to that spot, right?” Ryoma asked.

“Yes, at our current speed we should arrive around tomorrow at noon.” Gennou nodded.

It had been three days since they entered Wortenia. The trail extending from Epirus had long since disappeared, and Ryoma’s convoy was walking through unpopulated hinterlands. The grass grew tall and the foliage was thick, as if to impede people from progressing. As the convoy marched, they had to constantly cut branches that got in their way and step carefully.

But as harsh as the environment was, they had no shortage of water sources, nor did they struggle to find suitable campsites. This would normally be the hardest part of such a journey, but Ryoma had spent months researching the topography of the Wortenia Peninsula’s inner regions. Thanks to that they knew to pick efficient routes to march across, and through making stops to rest every now and then, they successfully managed to reach the back regions of the peninsula.

Right now, they sat around a map Gennou made of the Wortenia region as they planned their policy going forward.

“We owe our progress through the peninsula to the quality of our soldiers, of course, but your orders to look into the region’s topography were also important. The information from Epirus’s guild would have been insufficient.” Sara said, to which everyone nodded in agreement.

The depths of the peninsula were indeed unexplored regions, but that wasn’t to say no one had ever been there before. Some adventurers did enter the peninsula in search of a way to make quick money. The information they provided was collected by Epirus’s Adventurer’s Guild.

But owing to Gennou’s advice, Ryoma requested the Igasaki ninja clan to conduct a thorough investigation of the Wortenia Peninsula. The results of that request were clearly evident now. The map spread out before everyone now detailed forests, valleys and rivers. It was hard to imagine how much harder their march would have been without this map. If nothing else, they would not have gotten this far without losing a single soul.

“Yeah, the fact Gennou and his group found all the good sources of water and locations for campsites was a pretty big boon. We owe you big time, Gennou.”

The fact of the matter was that groups of a dozen adventurers didn’t look for things an army — albeit a small one of several hundred — might be on the lookout for. Like large sources of water. A trickle of water flowing from between the rocks would do little to satisfy all of Ryoma’s forces. The same held true for campsites for when they stopped for the night. Larger numbers naturally required bigger campsites.

Gennou gathered that information ahead of time and planned an ideal route for them to march through. Everyone was as thankful as Ryoma was toward the old ninja. Of course, they could produce a stable supply of drinking water through verbal thaumaturgy. That could also be done to secure a large enough space for a campsite, but even so, it saved them the trouble and bother of having to do so.

“I’ve had the most skilled members of my clan handle this matter...” Gennou replied. “But even so, getting through this land is no simple matter. Two of

them were injured upon investigating the depths of the peninsula and have yet to recover. The same holds true for the pirates, but we will have to be wary of... *them*."

"Them...? You mean the demi-humans?" Sara asked.

At that question, everyone present seemed to tense up. They were already aware of the demi-humans' existence, but hearing of them a second time after entering Wortenia shocked everyone once again.

"The demis, eh..." Boltz said, rubbing his chin. "I've heard they're still alive somewhere, but I didn't really think they still existed."

"Same here, Boltz," Lione nodded grimly. "Those things are still alive... And apparently they even have a colony here."



Boltz and Lione were in charge of teaching the slave children, and had only heard of their future plans in broad terms so far. Aside from that role, they had many other issues to handle, like matters of managing the supply line, choosing where to set up campsites and deciding which routes they were going to take. As such, the two of them didn't know how Ryoma was going to handle the demi-humans.

To begin with, what even were demi-humans? Demi-humans, or demis for short, was a general term given to bipedal, non-human species that seemed to uphold what was ostensibly a civilization. One could describe them like beastmen, that had an animal's head but a human's body, or elves and dwarves. All of those civilized species could be generically categorized as demi-humans.

But while in the fantasy novels Ryoma knew those kinds of species were considered famous and popular, most of the people in this world hardly ever left their cities, and had never so much as seen a demi. In fact, aside from adventurers that braved the unexplored regions of the western continent, it was safe to say hardly anyone had seen them.

And that was because legend had it that the demi-humans that were residents of this continent were driven to extinction many years ago by human hands. There were several reasons that led to the presumed extinction of the demi-humans, but the biggest one was believed to be the Church of Light and its faith in the God of Light, Menios.

According to the faith, six gods created this Earth. Of the six, Menios was considered the chief deity. And the religious group that worshiped the God of Light Menios was the Church of Light. Their doctrine was simple. The God of Light and creator of mankind was the chief deity of this world. And as such, humans, being the chief deity's creations, were the supreme species.

This could be said to be true of all religions to some extent. One could very well say religion was a convenient tool developed by people, meant to position themselves as a special existence in this world. This normally wasn't much of a problem. Religion inspiring a sense that one's group is the chosen people usually posed no issue in itself.

And indeed, according to the Church of Light's documents, the organization had existed for over a thousand years. The extermination of the demi-humans, on the other hand, only took place four hundred years prior to Ryoma's generation. Which was to say that the Church of Light didn't make any moves to exterminate the demi-humans until several centuries following its founding.

Yes, had two men not surfaced and changed the history of the western continent four hundred years or so ago, perhaps the kinds of elves and beastmen the modern Japanese idea of fantasy seems to romanticize would have existed and flourished on this land.

But things were not so, and the reality of things was that the demi-humans were driven to near-extinction many years ago. The only traces of them still existing were rumors that claimed that small numbers of them still lived in the most remote regions of the continent.

"So... Are we gonna attack them?" Lione asked.

It felt like a natural question to her, but Ryoma shook his head in denial.

"We'll be keeping a careful watch on the demi-humans for now. We don't intend to voluntarily engage them for the time being. I've already told this to Gennou, but I'm not interested in attacking their village in the northern forest."

Lione and Boltz's eyes widened with surprise. Regardless of the circumstances, the subordinates they sent to investigate the peninsula returned injured. Lione and Boltz couldn't help but feel that choosing not to do anything about that was an odd choice.

Judging by Ryoma's personality, they assumed that even if he didn't resort to force, he'd at least send a messenger to complain.

"And honestly, I don't think provoking them now is a good idea... We're better off keeping an eye on Count Salzberg and Epirus, so I don't want us to have more enemies on our hands for now. Besides, the blame is on us for sneaking into their village. So for now I figured we should leave them alone."

Concluding his words, Ryoma drew a large red circle on the map around Wortenia's north — a circle that surrounded roughly one fourth of the peninsula. In other words, this circle was their border with the demi-humans'

territory.

“I guess that makes sense...” Lione nodded deeply. “The Kingdom of Xarooda’s in a state of chaos right now, so we’re better off not going around and making enemies, eh? And I guess we can’t be too angry when we’re the ones that walked into their territory...”

The Church of Light’s teachings posited that the demi-humans were tainted existences that were to be killed on sight, but Lione didn’t harbor any particular dislike for them. She was willing to fight the demi-humans if the need called for it, but had no intentions of voluntarily antagonizing them.

And most of all, Ryoma’s way of thinking was very rational and impartial. The way he admitted that they were wrong in this case and didn’t seek retribution for what was done to his subordinates was a decision Lione viewed favorably. With the matter of the demi-humans put aside, Lione touched on the next problem they had to resolve.

“What about the pirates, though? We’ll be in trouble if Simone finishes her preparations but we don’t have a port to accept it, won’t we?”

The pirates’ presence was a major hindrance to Ryoma’s secret pact with Simone. Handling them was a major problem, regardless of if they were to be persuaded to leave or forcibly removed. Lione didn’t have the leisure to ask Ryoma about it because of her workload, but she did want to hear about how he’d decided to deal with the pirates.

“I can only say one thing about that. Honestly speaking, my country has no need for pirates.” Ryoma answered her question with a slight shrug.

There was a small fire lit within the large tent, which helped keep the place warm — but despite that, everyone felt a cold shiver run down their spines at Ryoma’s words. This was despite the fact he was as calm and collected as ever. But none of the people in this tent mistook the meaning behind what he’d said.

“So we’re gonna have to wipe them out, huh...” Lione murmured.

It was a whisper, but everyone heard it all too clearly.

†

“You all right, Melissa?” Coile asked her with concern in his voice, noticing the girl was restlessly stirring the stew in her bowl without ever carrying it into her mouth.

They were sitting around a bonfire as they ate their warm dinners. The sense of pressure that hung over them during their march had mellowed down already, and the area was full of the kind of laughter one might expect out of a large group of children.

But in contrast to the joyful tumult around her, Melissa was sitting quietly. No... a bit too quietly.

“I’m... I’m fine.” Melissa replied gloomily.

“Fine, huh...?” Coile directed a questioning glance at Melissa. “Lemme guess. You’re thinking about Hanna.”

“How did you...?!” Melissa looked back at him with surprised eyes, as if shocked he’d seen into her heart.

Coile sighed. They’d lived and worked together as part of the same group for months, so he could handily pick up on the way her emotions swung.

“It’s not like thinking about someone who bailed on us is gonna help anyone, right?” Coile spat out in a slightly disgusted tone. “If she’s lucky, she found her way back to some city and she’s safe now.”

In his eyes, Hanna was an ingrate and a traitor. He didn’t intend to go after the girl and kill her, but he did resent her enough to not care if she had died on the roadside. That emotion seeped into his words somewhat.

“Don’t say that...” Melissa raised her voice somewhat at those words.

Hanna was a slave girl who was part of the same team as Melissa. But there was no sight of her nearby anymore. She couldn’t bear the strain of their training and fled the group with a few other children. No one doubted that Hanna was at fault, and Melissa knew this.

And yet she couldn’t carry this warm stew to her lips right now. An escaped slave’s fate was set in stone.

“I mean, what can you do? She ran away because she couldn’t handle the

training, right?" Melissa's angry words only made Coile's emotions flare up in turn. "Or did you forget our debt to Master Mikoshiba for setting us free and want to side with the ones who ran?"

It was the night before they reached their objective in the Wortenia peninsula, a turning point for their leader Ryoma Mikoshiba's aspirations. This was clear from the ingredients in the stew they were given, along with the fact that everyone was permitted to drink alcohol that night.

And during what was a day of celebration, Melissa ignored her master's goodwill and worried over a girl who escaped and betrayed their group. Coile found that difficult to tolerate.

"They're traitors, Melissa!" He shouted, as if spitting the words out.

He'd probably been too loud, because the tumult around them suddenly cut off and everyone directed a questioning gaze at him. Coile ignored those stares, though, and let the emotions he'd kept hidden so far bubble to the surface because of Melissa's attitude.

The training was harsh. The slaves had to overcome the fear of being in real combat, and it wasn't something every single one of them could reasonably clear. Coile understood that. But the one that elevated them out of their status as slaves was Ryoma. Of course, he knew this wasn't done purely out of good intentions, but he still gave them the chance they needed to claw their way out of slavery.

In this world, chances to rise up from weakness were few and far between. And that only made it harder for Coile to forgive the ones who chose to run. They were granted this precious chance, and still chose to turn their back on the one who gave it to them...

"I..." Melissa couldn't find the words to talk back against Coile's cold reasoning.

"Hey, Coile, leave her alone."

"Kevin..."

Kevin, who had stayed out of their exchange so far, stepped in. He likely felt Coile had grown too emotional. Kevin was the leader of their team, which

meant Coile had to stop. He didn't intend to blame Melissa, after all.

"Sorry, I went too far..." Coile said and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Kevin eyed him suspiciously.

"I'll go sit with people from some other teams." Coile replied and stared back at Kevin with an unflinching gaze.

Kevin immediately understood what those eyes were trying to convey.

"Fine... Cran, you go with Coile, all right?" Kevin turned the conversation over to Cran, who was the only one to sit quietly by and eat his stew.

Kevin thought he needed to speak to Melissa privately right now. Prompted by his firm gaze, Cran got to his feet and walked off, following Coile. Confirming the two had left, Kevin turned to Melissa and gathered the courage needed to ask that question.

It was a suspicion he hesitated to even put into words. Even if this doubt was wrong and off the mark, if the others were to learn he suspected Melissa like this, it would make them lose everything they'd built up together so far...

"Are you... holding a grudge?" Kevin's expression was far too stern for her to assume this was some kind of a joke.

"Huh?" Melissa asked back.

But she clearly heard what he said. He'd spoken quietly, so everyone else wouldn't hear him, but his words reached her ears. Still, she couldn't quite understand what he'd meant, so she could only answer his question with a question of her own.

"Are you... holding a grudge against Master Mikoshiba because of the people that ran away?" he said with a hint of hesitance in his voice.

Melissa looked at Kevin with surprise. She clearly didn't expect this question, but the meaning of what he'd just said was registering in her mind.

"No! Why would I?" Melissa raised her voice.

Why? Why would I hold a grudge against him for that?

Melissa truly asked herself that question. In her eyes, Ryoma was a kind king,

a savior that freed her and her friends from their life as slaves. She couldn't imagine holding a grudge against him. Her body trembled with anger at the very notion of it. A greater anger than anything she'd likely felt in her entire life.

Kevin looked at her expression wordlessly. It was as if his gaze was sharply, unflinchingly trying to look into her very heart. The two kept looking at each other for a long moment, during which the sound of the fire crackling in the kindling felt that much louder to Melissa's ears.

"I guess you really don't hold a grudge against him." Kevin eventually said, the tension draining from his face.

He'd likely judged, by looking at her expression, that those were her true feelings. But Melissa ignored his words and shouted at him. And she couldn't be faulted for it. The accusation he'd just leveled against her was that sudden and appalling.

"Why? Why would you ask me that?!" She raised her voice with an indignation one wouldn't expect out of her usual demeanor.

But rather than be taken aback by her anger, Kevin simply sighed heavily.

"Melissa... You really don't understand, do you?"

Seeing her reaction made his expression darken in an exasperated, but somehow convinced manner. As if something he'd been vaguely aware of had just been confirmed.

"What do you mean?"

"I meant exactly what I said... You don't understand the position you're in."

Melissa furrowed her brows.

"I understand how much Lord Mikoshiba did for us too, you know."

She would never forget the day she survived their final trial and was recognized as a full-fledged soldier. At first there were three hundred or so of the slaves, but on that day their numbers were reduced to nearly two hundred and fifty. Roughly twenty percent of the slaves went missing during the final trial.

And as promised, those of them who survived were freed of their slave status.

They were all gathered in a square, where their slave contracts were burned before their eyes. For Melissa... No, for everyone present there, that sight was an act of benevolence that could not be matched by anything else. Their very lives had been returned to their hands. This was something she would never forget for as long as she lived.

Kevin shook his head, though.

“No, that’s not what I meant... I’m talking about what comes next.”

“What comes next...?” Melissa parroted him in clear misunderstanding.

They were indebted to Ryoma Mikoshiba, and they were aware of it. What else could there be besides that?

“All right, listen. Lord Mikoshiba is a benevolent man. He freed us from slavery. We were just labor slaves, but he gave us a means to fight, taught us so many things and gave us everything we need to live... But he’s not doing it out of good will. I mean, I do think good will is part of it, but I think he gave us power so we can help him with something.”

This was something Melissa was somewhat aware of. He spent a large amount of money on the slaves and put in time and effort to teach them how to fight. She realized he hadn’t done that entirely out of mercy or the kindness of his heart.

“He’s testing us...” Kevin whispered, looking around anxiously.

“Testing us?” Melissa whispered back. “What is he testing us for?”

“He’s trying to see if we’re really going to obey him.”

Teaching slaves how to fight meant granting them the tools to oppose their master. This was why slaves typically weren’t given an education. Heavy seals were applied to war slaves that inhibited their power unless their master gave them explicit permission. But Ryoma didn’t place any limitations or seals on the children he bought in Epirus. In fact, this was why so many slaves escaped from their severe training early on.

Ryoma initially had the children divided into teams of five for their basic training. The members of each group always acted together. They ate together

and slept in the same tent.

“See, right now we’re a group of five, including one of the mercenaries they hired in Epirus. Do you understand what that means?”

The structure of the teams had changed since they began their thaumaturgy training. What was once a group of five children was broken into a group of four children and one mercenary. Of course, the experienced mercenaries served the role of commanders for the teams, but things didn’t boil down to just that.

A certain suspicion surfaced in Melissa’s heart.

“Is he there to... monitor us?” Melissa whispered, to which Kevin nodded wordlessly.

This made Melissa understand what Kevin and Coile were anxious about.

“You see? They filtered us out before, and they’re filtering us out even now.” Kevin said.

Those words struck into Melissa’s heart like a wedge.

Maybe I said too much... Kevin thought to himself, a sense of guilt coming over him as he saw Melissa’s petrified, guilty expression. *No... I feel bad for her, but she needed to hear this.*

In their eyes, Ryoma was a king worthy to lay down their lives for. When they were put up as slaves, no one reached a helping hand out to Kevin and the others. All that the people passing through the slave merchants’ shops in Epirus’s back alleys provided were gazes of pity and scorn, if not outright sneers. But Ryoma alone treated them differently.

We made an oath that day... The day he called our names...

The events of that day were still vivid in Kevin’s mind.

†

The following day, Ryoma Mikoshiba and his convoy reached their objective. It was an inlet. They pushed their ways through the thick trees and shrubbery, moving along the bank of a large, 400-meter wide river. They followed the current as it made a sharp turn west, when the scenery suddenly changed before their eyes.

The first things they noticed were the white dunes of shores extending to the north and south of them, and beyond it, the transparent, cerulean waters of the sea. The waves washing against the shore were gentle, and the salty scent of the wind tickled their noses gently. Further into the gulf, they could make out the shadows of a few islands.

This land was completely untouched by man. It was the very incarnation of the dichotomy between the rough essence of the wilderness and the beauty of nature. The region was surrounded by low, triangular mountains, forming a natural fortress. But if they could clear this forest and make use of the river flowing into the sea, they would have everything they'd need to be self-sufficient.

"I see... I saw the report, but this really is a good plot of land."

Standing atop a cliff that stuck out and overlooked the inlet, the two looked down on the region. The two of them came to survey the region. Gennou sat on horseback, while Ryoma stood beside him, squinting under the intense light of the sun. Gennou spoke with a satisfied smile, proud to see the report his clan had delivered was accurate.

"Yeah, an ideal plot of land if there ever was one," Ryoma nodded and looked around. "Be sure to serve them some of your finest alcohol."

A large river and a forest, as well as a slightly open area near the shore. Within that area, a large number of people were going to and fro, busily setting up camp. Logs were thrust into the ground so as to set up tents.

Ryoma regarded the sight with a satisfied smile. The river flowing out toward the gulf offered them a supply of drinking water. They could also use it for agriculture and for a moat, should they build a castle. They had plenty of lumber from the nearby forest, and the more trees they would clear out, the more farmland they could acquire. The four-day walk from Epirus was just the right distance, and the location was perfect in terms of defenses, too.

Gennou's smile broadened at Ryoma's words. He was proud to have his accomplishments praised. Ryoma, on his end, knew how important it was to reward his subordinates for their accomplishments. And that didn't have to mean a monetary reward. The truly important part was being thankful and

considerate of the effort they put forth to achieve it.

I appreciate your efforts. You've done well. Thank you. Those small words of consideration went a long way to solidify interpersonal relationships.

"I'm grateful for your words, milord. I'm sure they will be happy to hear of your praise as well."

"I mean, being able to freely choose our base is one of the few advantages we have. It only makes sense we'd look for the best land possible. But I didn't imagine this area would be this good. We'll be able to build a village in no time with this."

The fact this was an undeveloped land that hadn't been touched by man meant Ryoma could build his base wherever he desired. Were there even a single, small settlement on this peninsula, Ryoma would not have had this freedom of choice. The need to ensure the citizens' safety would mean he'd have to develop around that settlement, no matter how disadvantageous its position might have been.

After all, he didn't have the military to defend an existing settlement while developing a new base of his own.

"Lad! We've set up the camp!" Boltz's voice called out to him. "Come, over here."

Apparently, their camp was ready. Starting tomorrow, they would cut down the forest and begin building their village.

"So this is where it really begins, huh..."

Ryoma turned a challenging glance to the south. As if glaring at a yet-unseen opponent...



Chapter 5: Merciless Hellfire

“Huh...? Me eyes ain’t playing tricks on me, are they?” The man whispered, looking away from the telescope.

He couldn’t believe what he’d just seen and rubbed his eyes time and again. His hair had turned bright brown from exposure to the salty winds, and his skin was dark red and tanned from the sunlight. His appearance made it clear he was a seasoned sailor. The same could be said for the man helming this vessel.

Approaching either of them would fill one’s nostrils with the scent of salt, proof of the countless days they spent at sea. And along with that scent, the metallic scent of blood wafted up from them — proof that they were no ordinary sailors.

“Naw, I see the same thing... Not that I can believe it, aye?” The man helming the ship replied, glaring at the coastline.

Their ship was sailing the deeps over two kilometers away from the shore, scouting over the shoreline. But despite the considerable distance, these men had spent years at sea and had gained a name among their fellows for their keen eyesight.

And yet, the two of them doubted what they were seeing. The cape of the peninsula stuck out toward the sea like a bull’s horns — and sitting between those two so-called ‘horns’ was undoubtedly a settlement. No, not just a settlement — it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call it a small port town.

Large bonfires were set up to serve both as watch fires and to stave off the darkness of the night, with two of them sitting on each end of the port, as if to keep the coastline illuminated.

“But, I mean... is that even possible?” The lookout asked.

“Who gives two coppers about if it’s possible? It’s there, right in front o’yer eyes...” The man helming the ship spat bitterly.

“Well, aye, but what do we tell the boss? No one’s gonna believe this.”

They could hardly believe it with the facts staring them in the face. If they

were to report the truth, they doubted anyone would trust their report. Everyone would just say they drank themselves to sleep and had some intoxicated dream.

“But still, man... Whatcha gonna do, lie to the boss? If you get found out, they’ll skin you and feed you to the sharks... Sorry, I’m not sticking my neck out here.”

It was a rather chilling method of execution, meant to strike fear and make an example to anyone who might consider breaking the rules. And indeed, a number of people were subjected to this severe punishment. The men’s body shivered with terror at the memory of that sight.

“Then what are we supposed to do?! It’s not like this isn’t yer problem too!”

The two of them knew full well just how cold-hearted and unforgiving the person they were talking about was, especially when their subordinates lied to them. But if they were to report the facts as they saw them, no one would believe them.

Shit... Talk about pulling the shortest fucking straw.

Had he simply been an onlooker, the sailor helming the ship would have snorted at his comrade and told him he was out of luck. But he was involved in this, and that changed things. Namely, his life was equally on the not-all-too-proverbial chopping board.

“Well, we only got one option here. First thing tomorrow morning we land on the cape and check things out from close up.”

“Did all the booze finally pop something in yer head? The boss ordered us to scout and nothin’ else.”

And going against the boss’ orders meant becoming shark feed. Such were their rules. But the man at the helm shook his head.

“We’ll be shark feed either way now, won’t we? Then we’re better off breaking orders and getting more accurate information. Or do ya want to just turn tail and run?”

“Don’t be stupid... We can’t run anywhere on a vessel this small.”

The vessel they were on was one of the small boats supplied to larger ships for boarding purposes. It was more than enough for cruising along the coast, but it couldn't cross long distances. Not to mention they only had enough food and water for another day — just enough for the return trip to their mother ship, docked to the north of the gulf.

If this was an ordinary place, they wouldn't have much to worry about if they ran away, but they were in the no-man's land that was the Wortenia Peninsula. If they were to land in the wrong place, they'd simply be eaten by monsters before long.

The fact Wortenia was outside the jurisdiction of any country allowed them, the pirates, to move about freely without any risk of being apprehended. But at the same time, it meant they had limited ways of reaching the outside world.

"Then we've only got one option here. We tell the boss the truth and hope we get treated fairly," the man at the helm said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Ya really think he will?" The other pirate asked.

"Do we have a choice?"

The lookout pirate fell silent as his comrade replied to his question with a question. He realized that they didn't have any other choice. The problem was that neither option would land them in a favorable position. He let his gaze drop to the deck and fell silent.

Shit! We're screwed no matter what we do... Guess the only thing we can do is ignore the boss's orders and check the place out.

He heaved a heavy sigh and looked up.

"Fine. Let's take the boat to the cape. We should reach shore before dawn."

The pirate helming the ship nodded silently and raised anchor.

God damnit...

Lamenting their lack of luck, the two pirates maneuvered their ship silently toward the shore.

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“It wasn’t just our imagination... I can’t believe this! How the hell did this town show up here so quickly...?”

Upon reaching the northern cape, the two of them snuck through the dark night and climbed up the slope. Upon seeing the town lit up by the campfires, they gasped nervously.

“A town? No, this place is about as supplied as a small provincial city...”

The western coastline was entirely paved by flagstones, allowing it to function as a port. There were deep trenches dug in the eastern side that completely cut off the town from the nearby forest. To the south, they could make out the large shadow of what looked like a rampart. It wasn’t perfectly secured, but this settlement was more than capable of functioning as a port city.

But that alone wasn’t enough to elicit so much surprise from the two pirates. The problem was that this was the Wortenia Peninsula, and this town was only built over the last two months.

“Is that made out of stone?” One of them whispered, surveying the town through his telescope. “I mean, it’s definitely not made out of wood... How the hell did they build this? Did they carry all this stone from Epirus? That can’t be... But how else could they do it?”

They were able to get much more detailed information compared to when they saw the town from the sea, but it only served to create more questions. If this entire settlement was made of lumber, that would have still been comprehensible. Putting aside the question of where they got their workforce, the area was surrounded by thick forests. It was perfectly possible.

But the city was made of stone. And while there were small mountains surrounding this inlet, the terrain wouldn’t allow them to serve as a source of stone. Quarrying stone from the shore was possible, but there was a limit to how much one could take from there. And if that was the case, there would have been a stone pit near the shore, but there was nothing in sight.

In which case, one would normally assume they carried in their raw materials from a nearby city, but once again, this wasn’t a normal region. The road connecting to Epirus wasn’t maintained, so ferrying raw materials would be difficult. It would have been possible with a large number of guards, but if a

convoy like that existed, their allies in Epirus would inform them.

“Maybe they used a sea route...? No, there’s no way we wouldn’t notice that,” the other pirate mumbled to himself, as if answering his comrade’s question.

A sea route wasn’t an unthinkable option, but it would take multiple trips to ferry the resources needed to build a city like this. And if a fleet of large ships made multiple round trips, the pirates would surely have noticed that. After all, they kept a tight cordon on the surrounding ocean regions. Any ships sailing nearby would be sighted, and the same held true for any cities built along the shoreline.

“What the hell is going on?!” The pirate growled, his grip around the telescope beginning to shake. “It’s only been two months since that bastard came here. How did he and his men build a city in such a short time?!”

It was six months ago that their comrades within Epirus informed them the Wortenia Peninsula had been granted to some noble. Upon hearing that report, the pirates simply mocked the noble’s rotten luck. They knew all too well and from bitter experience that Wortenia was a unique environment, and believed that governing the place was a pipe dream.

And indeed, the aforementioned noble arrived in Epirus, but didn’t enter the peninsula for some time. The pirates thought it made sense that he wouldn’t. He might have been granted rights to the land, but upon realizing it had absolutely no value, he’d likely chosen to simply stay in Epirus.

And yet the city spread out before them made it evidently clear just how wrong they were to think so.

“Let’s head back for now... I really don’t know if the boss’s gonna believe us, but we gotta tell him what we saw...” The pirate said.

His grip on the telescope was still shaky. Cold sweat was dripping down his spine. But he himself didn’t understand what he was so frightened of. The two of them ran back to the cape, as if fleeing the place, and scrambled onto their boat that was moored against the rocks. They set their course north, toward their mothership.

But all the while, they were unaware of the presence gazing at them from the darkness...

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Dawn rose and sunlight shone over the town. The bonfires, which were kept lit to stave off monster attacks, had concluded their role and were put out.

“Good morning, Master Ryoma.”

It was dawn, but the time was a bit after five in the morning, perhaps too early to wake up. And yet, Ryoma answered Laura’s visit clearly, as if he’d expected her.

“Oh, good morning, Laura. What’s up?”

“Sakuya has returned.”

“So the smallfry finally took the bait, huh?”

Laura’s words alone gave Ryoma a clear image of the situation. Or rather, he’d prepared this bait for months. If his ‘prey’ wouldn’t bite, all that effort would have been for nothing.

“It is likely.” Laura answered in a detached manner.

Ryoma, by contrast, curled his lips up in a vicious smile.

“It’s time to clean this peninsula up, then.” He whispered, to which Laura nodded silently.

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“I see. Small wonder that those cretins had the gall to crawl back here,” the woman said, taking a swig from her jockey.

Her hair was a pale shade of blonde, dulled by exposure to the sun. One couldn’t call her ugly, but her facial features were extremely plain. She was short, and on top of that she wasn’t very endowed in terms of her bosoms, either. As such, she was quite a homely-looking woman.

And yet, not a man in this city dared look down on her for this reason. This woman had a confidence that allowed her to survive in a man-dominated society, and it manifested in the way her eyes glinted like blades and the sheer

pressure her gaze gave off.

Her name was Luida. She was also known by the pseudonym ‘The Sea Serpent,’ and was one of the rulers of this city, alongside Henry.

“I guess the sharks are gonna be full tonight, considering they have the balls to bring up this story here...” The bald man sitting opposite of Henry whispered, agreeing with Luida’s words.

This man’s name was Andre. His pseudonym was “The Tidal Wave,” and he was something of a hulking giant, boasting upper arms as thick as a woman’s waist. He tapped his cleanly shaved head and turned a questioning glance at Henry.



The three of them sitting around this round table were the rulers of this city, and each of them was a captain that led a crew of pirates. They each had a galleon as their flagship, as well as medium-sized ships — caravel-and carrack-type ships — plus a collection of small-sized vessels. Together, the three of them and their crews laid waste to the seas around the Wortenia Peninsula.

That day, they held their monthly meeting. And this time it was an important meeting, one that would decide the fate of their city. The biggest point of concern was the actions of the peninsula's new owner, Ryoma Mikoshiba. The pirates made their base in this land because it had been abandoned by the Kingdom of Rhoadseria for many years. But now, there was a new entity with legislative authority in Wortenia, and this wasn't something they could ignore.

"You really think so?" Asked a low, collected voice.

Henry wasn't one to usually remain silent after being told such an implausible story, but today he was different.

It makes sense they'd be suspicious. I wouldn't believe it either if I was them.

Henry himself couldn't believe his subordinates when they gave their report. Only after he tore the skin off their backs a few times and they screamed in agony did he agree to let them take him there to see the thing for himself. Seeing that their report was undoubtedly real, he had no choice but to accept they weren't lying.

"Lemme ask you again. Do you really think what I just told you is some kind of stupid horror story?" Henry asked.

Luida shrugged, while Andre simply held his tongue. It was a hard story to swallow. No one would believe that a city was built within a mere two months in a cursed place like the Wortenia Peninsula. But on the other hand, the two of them knew of Henry's abilities.

He was one of the bosses that operated this barren city with force, and they knew better than to doubt him. He wasn't protected by being born into privileged, noble status. If Henry were to show any sign of weakness or ineptitude, he would immediately be gutted and cast into a watery grave. The fact he was still alive was all the evidence they needed of his capabilities.

“I did everything I could given the situation. I considered landing and checking it out myself, but there was always the possibility of it being a trap.”

Henry glared at the other two sitting down at the table, as if asking if they had any complaints about his judgment. The gazes of the three intersected across the round table.

“A trap, huh... Yeah, I can see that.”

“The fact he’s prepared shows just how serious this Mikoshiba bastard is.”

“Exactly.”

With Henry’s final word, the three of them fell quiet. Andre and Henry had looked into what kind of person Ryoma Mikoshiba was. A long silence hung over the room. The critical question their lives depended on was what were they going to do going forward.

“I say we go for an all-out offensive,” Andre, the most aggressive and assertive of the three, suggested. “There’s around three or four hundred of them. But put together, we have over five hundred men. We should be able to brute force through them.”

His title of ‘Andre the Tidal Wave’ was given to him for the way he staged assaults. He tempted the enemy into range like a receding wave, and then crushed them with overwhelming force. It was more than just a simple charge of brute force. He studied the enemy carefully before launching a surprise attack —a tactic that wasn’t at all simple to perform. It was Andre’s ability to successfully stage such attacks that made him one of the rulers of this city.

Henry shook his head in denial of this suggestion, though.

“No, messing with them for no reason would be bad... If they were unprepared it would have been one thing, but they might be ready for us. They’re no match for us in numbers, but they have some experienced mercs there.”

Henry would normally be on board for Andre’s suggestion, but things were different this time.

“There’s just too many unpredictable factors... And yeah, fighting on land isn’t

our specialty, either. But what do we do, then?”

Andre himself had his doubts, and didn’t seem bothered or annoyed by Henry’s denial. True, the pirates had the numbers advantage and were experienced fighters. But that experience was mostly in fighting on the sea. They had won countless battles against countries or other pirates in naval combat. But when it came to combat on land, their experience was limited to raiding villages, where the objective wasn’t to fight, but to steal.

And on top of that, their greatest weapon always was the element of surprise. They were used to attacking careless citizens, but lacked the military prowess to stage a frontal assault on a city that was prepared to defend against them.

“Then, what? Decide to go with non-interference and stay here?” Luida spoke up, having watched over the conversation silently so far.

They might have been on the same peninsula, but the inlet where Ryoma’s base and this town were located was separated by a dense forest swarming with monsters. Their city was also built on an inlet surrounded by cliffs, and it was built so it wouldn’t be easily detected. Luida’s idea was a passive one, but not at all a wrong one. ‘Luida the Sea Serpent’ was a tenacious woman, and knew how to bide her time.

“And wait for a chance to present itself, huh...?” Henry muttered.

Luida smirked and nodded. Most people would choose to act and strike assertively, but few would consider waiting. Luida reigned as a superior to others because she knew to bide her time until those who were in power during her generation would grow weaker.

And she didn’t just wait. As she built up her strength, she also sabotaged her opponents, making sure their moment of weakness would come that much faster. Like a poison that gradually spread through one’s body... This was why they called her the sea serpent.

But Henry once again shook his head and gave his own answer.

“Yes, those are both options. But I think that in this case, we’d be better off if I negotiated with Baron Mikoshiba.”

Andre and Luida eyed Henry suspiciously. What he’d just said struck them as

all too unexpected.

“Negotiate with him...? Like, lull him into a sense of safety so we can attack him?”

“It’s not a bad idea, but we should probably assume Mikoshiba’s gonna be wary of us. ’Sides, he doesn’t strike me like the kind of man who’d let down his guard just because we invited him to cooperate... Assuming the rumors about him are true.”

While it was said brutes are never graced with wisdom, Andre was more intelligent than most. That was perhaps to be expected given his past as a trader who traveled across the different nations. Had that large, out-of-season storm not sunk his trade cog and left him in massive debt, he never would have become a pirate.

Of course, no one would really sympathize with him given that he killed three of the men who came to collect on his debt with his bare hands. But that just went to say that even if he wasn’t shying away from solving problems with brute force now, it didn’t change the fact he’d once built up a large fortune with nothing but his silver tongue. Of the three of them, he had the keenest eye when it came to discerning the nature of others, honed from countless business exchanges and negotiations.

According to what Andre’s spies had pieced together, Ryoma Mikoshiba was a man skilled in strategy who fundamentally didn’t trust other people. On top of that, he was cautious enough to not make himself appear too dangerous to those around him. Andre’s experience told him that Ryoma would have made for the best ally imaginable back in his merchant days. But conversely, opposing him meant putting one’s life on the line.

Earning the trust of a person like him with the hopes it would make him lower his guard wouldn’t be easy. At worst, their attempt to trick him would result in them being tricked instead.

But Henry shook his head yet again.

“That’s not what I meant... The negotiations are just a starting point. By the end of this, I want to make us work under Baron Mikoshiba’s wing. For real.”

“...Did you go crazy?” Andre asked.

Henry shook his head silently.

“I’m sure the two of you already know...”

Henry didn’t specify exactly what it was that they supposedly knew. This was something everyone who lived in this city knew in the back of their minds, and it was a much larger problem to the three bosses than Ryoma Mikoshiba was.

“Yeah... We don’t have much of a future right now. But still...” Andre let out a heavy sigh.

“I dunno about this,” Luida gave a small nod. “How do we know Mikoshiba will even be willing to negotiate with us?”

Henry met their skeptical gazes directly.

“But you both see where we’re going with this pirate business, right?”

The two fell silent. This was proof enough that Henry’s words had weight to them. In practice, they didn’t make much profit from pillaging. Looting a village could earn some money in a short amount of time. Despite being exploited by the nobility, commoners were capable of saving up some money, which was the prime target of any raid.

In terms of agriculture, it was like what happens when one sows all their seeds without leaving anything for next year, consuming all the crops. Nothing was left in the end, which meant this wasn’t a source of constant income.

So what were the pirates to do? One option was to pillage a village or town and leave it in shambles, only to extort tax from surrounding cities. Pirates were merciless, and would kill, rape and sell off to slavery any woman or child they might run into. That image would weigh down on the hearts of the powerless civilians and make them bend to the pirates’ demands and pay up. Anything to be safe...

The same could be said for attacking merchant ships. Any ship that crosses the sea routes could be attacked. Pirates appear out of nowhere, and take both one’s life and their cargo. But people rarely crossed those sea routes, since pirates often took a good share of each trade ship’s cargo as ‘tax’ for safe

passage. And any refusal to pay meant that ship's current trip would also be its last.

Of course, periodic sacrifices were necessary to keep up that menacing image, but pirates didn't always plunder until nothing was left. But the pirate crews led by Henry and the other two left only scorched earth in their wake. Whenever they attacked villages, they stole everything and killed everyone, and the same was true when they attacked ships. Any surviving passengers were sold off to slavery, and they took all the cargo for themselves.

They'd been acting as such with a quickening pace for the last decade, and whenever they came across new prey, they plundered it until nothing remained.

"Yeah, I know... Recently we have to sail too far to find prey." Andre spit bitterly, to which Luida nodded.

Ships sailing from the northern regions of the western continent had stopped using the northern sea routes. At present, the only ships periodically sailing through those waters were ships from the port town on the eastern tip of Helnesgoula. From there almost all the traders went via land route to the center of the continent, and from there on to the trade city of Pherzaad. When it came to ferrying a large number of supplies, going by land was much more bothersome and cost much more in labor costs compared to taking a ship. But it was still preferable to being robbed blind by pirates.

All of that could be attributed to Henry and his cronies' vile methods.

"Still, we can barely get by with the profits we make right now... We can't live as good as we did before."

There weren't as many citizens in this town as there were before. The population only increased by several people a year, and hardly ever by more than ten people. But people wandered into the city over the course of some ten odd years.

The reason for it was rather clear. The Empire of O'ltormea consolidated control over the center of the western continent and assertively invaded their neighbors. As a result, fighting became more rampant across the continent.

Following O'ltormea's example, the other large countries had also begun increasing their territories, absorbing the smaller countries that once dotted the western continent as a result. In the process, many people were forced to flee their homes. Of course, a large portion of those chose to live on as subjects to their conquerors. But many others refused to bend the knee to the invaders and sought their fortune in new lands.

In fact, many who were once in the privileged classes were forced to pick between exile and execution, and chose the former, effectively becoming vagabonds. Many of them died far away from home, but a few fortunate ones managed to reach new regions and make a new life for themselves.

And of those, a few of them wandered into the untamed lands of the Wortenia Peninsula, forming this nameless city.

"Our assumptions at the time were wrong. Looking at the situation, I don't think there's any arguing against that..." Henry said begrudgingly.

"Admitting that now isn't gonna get us anywhere." Luida told him in an attempt to come across as comforting.

At the time, they only had one choice they could take. And looking at it now in hindsight, when the conclusion was in plain sight, made it clear they'd made a mistake. One could understand their zeal at the time. Numbers meant strength, and even one or two more citizens meant their city was that much more resilient in the face of a monster attack.

Little by little, their population grew, and they naturally rejoiced at seeing their city grow and flourish. All the more so, when considering that it was hidden from the eyes of other people. At first they only accepted those who managed to get through the forest, but things gradually began to escalate. They sent their ships across the different ports, and invited promising people to join the pirate's life.

At first, everything went well. The numbers of the pirates grew, and the scope of the towns and ships they could attack grew. They no longer had to fear the units occasionally sent out to exterminate them. The seas around the Wortenia Peninsula quite literally became the pirates' territory.

But Henry and his comrades had no way of knowing that their actions would

go on to pry Hell's gates open.

Their city's population grew. Thanks to that, the attacks from the monsters infesting the area started to decline. Their population grew further. The scope of the cities they could raid grew. They were on cloud nine. And for that reason, they forgot one simple fact.

That they themselves did not produce anything. That their tolls and the taxes they collected from many towns were not bottomless.

And as they haphazardly let their population grow, the funds they received from tolls and took from the towns became incapable of supporting their numbers. And once the balance was broken, things would never be the same again.

They increased their numbers for the sake of gaining more profit, but having more people meant they needed an even larger income. And so their life as pirates became a cycle of barely being able to claw to life.

Their only choice was to go on raids more frequently. They built their hideout in Wortenia, a region in which being self-sufficient was exceptionally hard, and this left them with no other way of getting by.

"We went too far. No one passes through these waters anymore, except for a few brave fools, and we already took everything we could from any port town we can reach."

Andre and Luida were silent, but their eyes shined bright as they realized the meaning behind his words.

"But that's exactly what gives us the edge we need to negotiate with Baron Mikoshiba. We can sell him our strength." Henry said.

"Negotiations, huh...?" Andre said, stroking his beard.

His senses as a merchant told him Henry's idea had merit to it. He could hire them as a navy, or use them as guards for when he traded with merchant ships. But the question was whether Ryoma Mikoshiba was the kind of man who would realize the profit to be had in this. Pirates were a hated profession, after all, so it would require a great deal of magnanimity to tolerate the idea of employing them. People with hard-rooted perceptions of good and evil were

hard to negotiate with. So it all hinged on just how capacious his mind was...

We'd have absolutely no chance if this was any other noble... But it might be possible with him, depending on how we handle this. Andre thought.

"We'll need to give him something as a gesture of goodwill... And who knows if that bastard's gonna give us the time of day even if we do." Luida, who said little so far, gave her piece on the matter.

Henry nodded in response, as if agreeing that her doubts were natural. Normally they'd need some kind of mediator, but pirates like them naturally didn't have that kind of leisure. So if nothing else, they'd need to hand over some kind of gesture or present that would improve their image.

"What kind of gesture, though? Gold?" Andre asked.

The others couldn't immediately offer an answer. It wasn't a bad choice in and of itself. It was as unsophisticated a gift as they came, but everyone was always in need of more money and would always be glad to have more on their hands. One could use money however they saw fit, after all.

But on the other hand, the side that sent the money didn't leave much of an impression. Andre, who had come up with the idea, knew this very well from the many bribes he'd given in the past. Money had immediate effectiveness, but it didn't last. If they were to send him bribes on a regular basis it might have been different, but money wouldn't do as a gift for a person they'd never met before.

"We need something that'll leave a lasting positive impression on him and make him see how useful we are. And it needs to be curious enough to draw his attention, too."

Something that was both respectable and carried high monetary value, and preferably hard to come by; something not consumable that would preserve its form. That thought had mingled into Henry's voice.

"Something rare that would leave a favorable impression..."

"Well? Do we have something like that?" Andre asked.

Their warehouses had all sorts of trinkets and treasures they'd plundered

from trade ships. This Earth lacked the logistics for worldwide distribution, and goods brought in from other continents were fairly expensive. But on the other hand, many of the curios slumbering in their warehouses were rare, but didn't have much use in this situation.

Expensive spices, ornaments, outfits and assorted armaments were things with a clear use and high demand. On the other hand, antiquities like portraits and books would fetch a fortune from an enthusiast, but would be worth nothing to a person without interest in them. In other words, they had less demand compared to more general wares. Things were different if one had the connections to see those items sold to those who wanted them, of course, but this wasn't the case in this situation.

And most of the things remaining in their warehouses were indeed the latter type of antiquities — items that were hard to sell.

"If he's in the middle of developing this peninsula, I don't think he'd have much use for pieces of art..."

These treasures might have value to Ryoma Mikoshiba once he'd finished developing Wortenia, but any antiquities they sent him now, when he was still in the middle of building his land up, would only serve to take up space and collect dust. And what was the point of sending him a gift that wouldn't please him?

Silence settled over the room once again. Henry and Andre knew full well their fates hinged on the negotiations with Ryoma.

"I swear, you two have a way of turning dumb when it matters the most..."

A mocking voice broke the silence. Henry's sharp gaze turned across the table, where Luida was resting her chin on her hands with a smirk plastered over her lips.

"What are you saying?" He asked with a low, suppressed voice.

There was clear enmity to his tone. The three of them shared three things in common. A staunch will, a powerful body and the ability to overwhelm others with their sheer anger. They weren't ones to let another mock them and walk away whole.

“Hold it, Henry,” Andre held up an arm in front of his comrade, who glared at her with murder in his eyes. “What do you mean, Luida?”

Andre’s own gaze made it clear he was trying to understand her intentions.

“I mean, we’ve got just the thing, don’t we? Something that’ll make that bastard see just how much we’re worth. A real treasure, and the kind you can only find here in Wortenia.”

Andre and Henry exchanged a glance, pondering over Luida’s words.

“Something we can only find in Wortenia?” Henry whispered, mulling over it.

And upon hearing his whisper, Andre’s eyes lit up in understanding.

“Oh... You mean that.”

“Yep. I don’t think there’s any man who’d complain over getting that as a gift.” Luida said with a crooked, vulgar smile on her lips.



“You little... Do you have any idea how much we had to go through to get our hands on it...?!” Henry flared up at Luida.

His anger was understandable, as what they were talking about was indeed hard to come by. It took a great deal of effort, and more importantly, luck. Had they lacked any of those elements, they never would have gotten their hands on it.

“Of course, I am well aware. And that’s why it’s worth sending him that. A man would be happy to get that as a tribute.”

Luida was originally a slave who was brought into this nameless city as a prostitute. But since her appearance didn’t attract customers, she was given the role of overseeing the other prostitutes, which made her talents blossom.

Her true strength lay in her power to manage and manipulate people. And through her management of the other prostitutes, she gradually increased her influence. After all, this world had little by way of pleasure and entertainment. Controlling women meant that the countless pirates who couldn’t help but long for a woman’s body were also under her control. And so she clawed her way up, all the way to her current position as one of the three leaders of the city.

“Fine... I’ll take your word for it,” Andre said. “It’s not like we were going to find a buyer any time soon. Selling it here might be the right idea.”

“Tch... Whatever.” Henry clicked his tongue and nodded.

It was a priceless *thing* that no amount of money could replace. And if they were to send him that, Ryoma might give the pirates a chance to say their piece. That belief drove all three of them.

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As morning sunlight streamed through his window, the sound of wooden mallets hammering reached Ryoma’s ears, followed by the lively sound of countless shouts and conversations. In terms of total population their settlement was the size of a small village, but the lively voices outside gave the impression they were in a city.

That was the sound of people driven by a strong sense of purpose working

and building something up. As Ryoma looked over the people, he could see the hope brimming within them.

The city's coming into shape. We have a paved road and a harbor that can accept large ships, and our walls are mostly ready to block most attacks... The only thing that's left is that issue. Simone's cargo is ready. We just need to wait for Sakuya to give us her report.

They'd already begun building houses to accept immigrants. Once the final problem was resolved, the Wortenia Peninsula would be ready to be reborn into its new form. They were done with the preparations. All that remained was to wait for the right time...

A knock on the door jolted Ryoma out of his absentminded stare at the city, and he turned around to face the entrance.

"May I come in, Master Ryoma?"

"Oh, Laura. Sure. What's up?"

"I have a report."

Ryoma opened the door, only to find Laura with an expression of doubt and surprise on her face. Whatever it was that happened, it must have been unexpected to draw pause from her.

What could it be...?

Ryoma silently nodded for her to continue. And upon hearing her report, Ryoma's own features were overtaken with surprise.

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Ryoma's room was very much on the shabby side of things. The walls and pillars were made of wood, and while they were sturdily built, it certainly didn't give the impression that it was a noble's room. It was fairly large, however, as this was still a noble's official office. Still, the coarse wooden furniture and the desk and chairs devoted to the office only served to make the shabbiness of the place stand out.

This was perhaps to be expected, as Ryoma only used this room once or twice a day, for when he received his morning and evening reports. There were of

course on occasion other matters to attend to, like confirming the catalogs and invoices for Simone's supplies. But matters like those didn't happen all that often, and Boltz and the Malfist sisters often handled this detailed work for him. Ryoma only had to confirm what few documents they alone couldn't afford the payment for.

Ryoma's everyday activities consisted mostly of going out every morning to manage the scene as his men worked on this city. He would encourage them and actively took part in the building work.

He willingly moved his body. And while this was something of a crafty play, this was extremely effective in this world's hierarchical society. After all, nobles were mostly seen by the people as rulers and exploiters. Of course, the nobility had their own heavy responsibilities and prices to pay, but those under their rule didn't see those aspects.

And despite being part of that ruling class, Ryoma willingly mingled with them and engaged in physical work. Those ventures went a long way to diminish the distance between Ryoma and his soldiers. He would shed sweat and exchange words with them. Eat from the same pot as them, and sleep in an equally plain wooden bed.

Ryoma's attitude bought the soldiers' unyielding trust. Everything went smoothly and as planned. At least, until Laura brought him that report...

Dammit. What do I do...? Ryoma clicked his tongue bitterly as he glared at the parchment sitting on his table.

He'd repeated this question many times over already that day. It was already nightfall, and ever since hearing the report from Laura, Ryoma had shut himself away in his office. He kept questioning himself back and forth, without even bothering to eat.

The truth of the matter was, he had already come to his answer. The question simply remained, how was he supposed to make that answer a reality.

A demi-human...

The letter he'd received was a request for negotiations from the pirates. And the gift included with this letter as a gesture of good will was what tormented

Ryoma for half the day.

Demi-humans. A race that was presumed to be long since extinct, but was still rumored to exist on the Wortenia Peninsula. And that morning, a small ship arrived at their dock, and upon it sat a single demi-human carrying this letter.

Her skin was a glossy, dark brown, and her hair was a shining argent shade. Her ears were pointier than a human's. She was what Ryoma knew his world's stories referred to as a dark elf. A woman so beautiful she could be described as a living gemstone. Her fairness was enough to captivate any man, and perhaps even women weren't exempt from her charms.

Sara and Laura were of course subject to it, and even Lione, Boltz and the other people in their midst who were graced with life experience were taken aback by her beauty. She was, indeed, a gift unique to the land of the Wortenia Peninsula. And being a man, Ryoma was hardly displeased with the idea of receiving a fair dark elf as a gift. And in that regard, perhaps the pirates' judgment was sound.

But they made one fatal mistake. And that mistake would serve to throw the gears of fate out of order...

I can't abandon her...

Ryoma came to his decision, knowing full well the danger it contained.

"Sorry. Can you call Gennou for me?" Ryoma asked Laura.

She nodded silently and quickly left the room.

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Several galleons entered the dock's wharf, and soon lowered their anchors and folded their sails.

"Thank you for coming over, Baron Mikoshiba."

As Ryoma got off the galleon and onto the wharf, he was greeted by some ten odd men. Leading the group were Henry, Andre and Luida, and behind them were their deputies.

"I go by Andre," Andre took a step forward and bowed. "I am one of this city's leaders. This remote city of ours cannot offer much in terms of hospitality, but

we will do whatever we can to entertain you.”

As a former trader, he was experienced with these kinds of negotiations. Contrary to his rugged appearance, he spoke in a fluid, articulate manner. The others behind him followed his example and bowed. Apparently he’d instructed them ahead of time. Despite being pirates, they greeted Ryoma with perfect manners.

“No, thank you for sending a ship especially to collect me... I hope we can have good business today.” Ryoma bowed his head lightly in response.

In Japan, his gesture may have come across as slightly rude, but given the class system in this world, the fact he bowed at all left Andre and his group confused. Ryoma was a noble with a title, while they were mere commoners, and criminals at that. There was no formal reason for Ryoma to bow his head to them.

Andre’s expression turned suspicious for a moment, but he wasn’t foolish enough to comment on it openly. Instead, he regarded Ryoma with a pleasant smile and stood ahead of the rest of the group so as to guide Ryoma through the city.

“If I may, it seems to me you’ve brought very few attendants with you.” Luida asked, cocking her head toward the ship.

There were only twenty or so soldiers standing there. They were, however, all clad in black-dyed leather armor and armed with spears — perfectly armed for battle. But there were still very few — indeed the bare minimum — of them.

“Yes, but not too many, either.” Ryoma said as he passed her by.

“Huh...?” Luida was puzzled.

The fact he didn’t bring too many guards wasn’t a disadvantage for the pirates, of course. But it felt off. They didn’t plan to fool Ryoma, as they truly wanted to work under him. But those were the pirates’ concerns, and the question of how Ryoma would interpret things was a different matter altogether.

If she were to take what Ryoma said at face value, it could perhaps be interpreted as him not seeing any need to bring many soldiers when speaking to

someone he was in cordial relations with. But Luida felt like there was more to it than that.

Ryoma and his guards walked through the city as Andre led them to where the talks would be held. Luida watched their backs as they left as she stayed behind on the wharf, and then asked Henry.

“So what do you think?”

“Huh? About what?”

“What do you think, asshole...? About him. I got a bad feeling about that man.”

“Do you? I don’t think anything’s off. If anything, I think it’s going well so far, wouldn’t you say? He’s treating us like equals, and I don’t see any other noble doing that. Guess he really is a commoner who rose to noble status.” Henry said, stroking his beard.

Most nobles wouldn’t bat an eyelash at having people lower their heads to them, but Ryoma was willing to greet Henry and the other pirates that way. That came across as a shock, but didn’t leave a bad impression. If anything, they saw it as refreshing and admirable after being looked down upon by every other noble they met.

“Yeah, well, that’s what bothers me... Why would he go to the trouble of cozying up to us?”

“Well, because he knows he can use us. Didn’t you say we should send it to him because it’ll leave a good impression? Besides, what’s bad about having him approach us nicely?”

“Well... I mean, doesn’t it feel too convenient?”

That was where Luida’s doubts lay. Everything was going too well for them, and that applied to Ryoma’s attitude, too. Since he was a noble who rose from the common people, it would make sense for him to act overbearing toward them, to ensure they didn’t make light of him. But he didn’t show any signs of that.

“Huh? What are you saying? We sent him the prettiest demi we have just to

make sure we get on his good side... If getting her gave him a bad impression then we're at a total loss here. And it was your idea to do it in the first place."

Right now, Henry had captured a total of three demis. They were all black-skinned dark elf females, and they sent Ryoma the youngest, most fair of the three. They were exceedingly rare, though hard to liquidate into funds, but demi-human females were easily worth several hundred golds at the cheapest.

They were attractive and aged slowly, which meant they could be savored for decades. Henry couldn't imagine how a gift like that would do anything to sour Ryoma's impression of them.

"Well..." Luida fell silent.

"I'm not against healthy paranoia, but pick the right time and place, will you? Everything's going well for a change. What's the point of us stressing out over something trivial and making him angry?"

With that said, Henry left the wharf while shaking his head in exasperation.

"I suppose..." Luida muttered.

Everything was going as they imagined. Ryoma Mikoshiba showed up for negotiations, and judging by his attitude his opinion of them wasn't bad, and the fact he brought few guards meant he trusted them.

Left behind on the wharf, Luida swallowed her anxiety. Like Henry said, everything was going well for once. Saying something here might just ruin everything. That fear kept her heart bound.

"Go on, take a seat. We'll fetch you something cold to drink in a moment."

"Yes, thank you."

Prompted by Andre, Ryoma took a seat at the sofa. Just as he did — as if aiming for that moment — there was a knock on the door.

"Come in." Andre said.

The door opened, and a woman entered the room, holding a tray with drinks and light snacks. She looked to be in her mid thirties, and while she wasn't unattractive, something about her appearance gave off a vulgar impression. They likely took some woman working at a pub and hastily taught her basic

manners. She placed the drinks on the table in a clumsy, inexperienced manner and then gave a stilted bow before leaving the room.

She was probably desperate not to leave a bad impression on me... Poor thing. Ryoma stifled the cold smile rising up within him.

“What about your escorts? We can prepare something cold for you, too.”

“No, thank you.” Laura rejected Andre’s request with an expressionless face.

The Malfist sisters stood at attention behind Ryoma. The only ones in this room were Ryoma, Andre and the Malfist sisters, who assumed the role of bodyguards.

“I see... My apologies, then. We’ll have your other escorts rest in another room.” Andre said.

With the sisters curtly declining his offer, he resorted to a statement that was meant to signify he was in control of the situation. It was him that said everyone wouldn’t fit the room he’d be negotiating with Ryoma in, and that was why they had to be moved.

“Yes. I apologize for the trouble.” Ryoma simply smiled lightly and lowered his head, though.

“Not at all, we’re happy to offer you our deepest hospitality... Incidentally, milord...” Andre trailed off, as if wondering how to bring something up.

Ryoma’s smile deepened as he cut straight to the chase.

“You want to talk about your suggestion from the other day, right? The request to have your group join my forces.”

The letter he’d received the other day detailed the pirates’ wishes. Ryoma knew full well what they wanted, and today’s meeting was meant for Ryoma to inform them of his decision. There wasn’t much need for pointless banter.

“Y-Yes, milord. Exactly. The demi-human we sent you was a gesture of our good will toward you.”

“Good will, you say... Hmm, I see.”

“We know this might come across as presumptuous, but one such as her is

hard to come by. Their village is surrounded by a powerful barrier, and the only way to capture them is to wait for them to go outside the barrier on their own...”

And waiting for them to leave the barrier was difficult in the Wortenia Peninsula. It was infested with powerful monsters, so lying in wait for their prey to leave the perimeter of their barrier was a tiring task.

“I see, I see... So you sent me something you went to great lengths to obtain. My, is that so...”

To make doubly sure Ryoma would be inclined to accept, Andre stressed the effort they put into the gift they sent him. Presenting the danger they went through would improve the impression they made. This was something Andre experienced many times in his past as a merchant. If one were to sell something for a high price, explaining the rarity and difficulty in obtaining the goods in question was a common way of convincing them.

“Oooh. In that case?!” Andre smiled gleefully at Ryoma’s words.

He was clearly confident the result they wanted was within reach.

It’s like Luida said, he’s just a man... Sending him that woman was the right choice.

Andre was already convinced they’d won. Had Ryoma’s answer been negative, he wouldn’t come all the way here. But he did, and the meaning of that was clear.

But Andre’s hopes would soon be dashed.

“Yes. I’m going to make the lot of you disappear,” Ryoma said, a chilling smile on his lips.

The moment those words left Ryoma’s lips, Laura and Sara lunged from behind him and swung their swords at Andre. Caught by surprise by Ryoma’s unexpected words, Andre was helpless to resist.



“Then let’s begin. You remember the plan, right?” Ryoma asked the question as he coldly looked down at Andre’s corpse, which still had its eyes wide open in disbelief.

“Yes.” The sisters nodded silently.

“Do it!” Ryoma ordered them sharply.

“Fragments of sunlight, ye heavensent children of fire, sinful descendents of the God of Fire who were cast down to the earth. Sublimate thy sins and return to the heavens.”

Their chant reverberated in Ryoma’s ears like the reciting of a holy poem. With their chakras revolving as they chanted, prana rushed through the Malfist sisters’ bodies.

“Burning pillar!”

And with those final words, the sisters slammed their hands against the ground. At that moment, a pillar of flames burst through the estate’s roof with a rumbling sound. A massive fire pillar raged up from the center of the nameless city. This was the signal everyone that waited around the cliffside settlement waited for.

Men covered in black face masks silently rushed through the night. Sakuya sensed their presence and turned around.

“I know. Are you all prepared?”

The black shadows nodded at her words. They rolled up their sleeves, revealing leather belts that were tied against their arms. Attached to each of those belts was a small vase. It was a rather inconspicuous vase, with a roundish torso and a thin neck portion. An ordinary vase one could find anywhere.

But it was unusual in a few ways. Firstly, the vases didn’t contain flowers, but instead had a piece of cloth stuffed into it. And secondly, the sheer number of the vases was unusual. There were roughly two hundred of these odd vases there.

They were set up so as to not impede the black-clad men’s movements so they likely had some kind of purpose, but anyone who would look at them

would likely burst out laughing at how they looked. And yet, none of them showed any shame at their appearance.

Quite the contrary, in fact — their gazes were like cold blades. They knew full well what they were about to do, and why they were about to do it.

At first I didn't know why he gave each of the low-ranking ninja an individual explanation...

Explaining the details of the operation to the operatives carrying it out was a bothersome, time-consuming task. In fact, when Sakuya was ordered to take part in this job, she was not given any details herself. The elders simply told her to do it, and she had neither the reason nor the privilege to ask questions.

But this time was different. Ryoma used Sakuya, Gennou and Lione to clearly explain the objective and necessity of this operation. And Sakuya thought the ninja would not be any more anxious than they otherwise would be.

But their resolve is clearly different...

The way they cloaked their presence and retained their calm was no different from usual, but the clear sense of purpose heightened their mental condition and drove them to fight.

Perhaps that much is obvious... Our town is coming into place, and they refuse to let someone interfere with our new home... Even if that someone were the ruler of this land, Queen Lupis...

Sakuya thought back to their conference the night before. Seven men and women surrounded a round table as the sound of wooden hammers rang out from outside. Most of the people present listened to Ryoma's explanation with an expression of confusion.

"This is why I've called you all here..." Ryoma said. "I'm sorry I had to distract you while you were busy. Especially you, Sakuya."

"Ah, not at all," Sakuya shook her head. "It's understandable, given the circumstances... And not to worry, I've left a few men behind as lookouts."

Sakuya was ordered to wipe out the pirates, and had discovered the pirates' hideout a few days ago by stealthily tailing the pirates' recon unit as they

returned. She then performed a thorough reconnaissance of the area, researching the number of ships and personnel they had as well as the city's topography.

Her only remaining task was to set the groundwork for when Ryoma would give the order. And just when she'd completed those preparations, she received orders from Ryoma to return to their city.

"So... What do you intend to do, Lord Ryoma? Will you accept the pirates' fealty?" Sakuya asked.

"That's... a bit of a tall order," Lione replied. "The little ones might be loyal now, but if we do that, they'll become disgruntled and turn on us."

"That much is obvious..." Boltz nodded deeply. "For the children, pirates were the ones that burned down their hometowns and sold them and their families to slavery. Even if they're freed from that slavery now, their grudge toward the pirates wouldn't disappear that quickly."

Everyone nodded wordlessly at Boltz's explanation. The slaves became Ryoma's soldiers in exchange for being freed from slavery, but that didn't erase their past. If anything, their more fulfilled lives now only served to highlight how terrible and painful their time as slaves was.

"Still, refusing the strength of the pirates is a missed opportunity," Gennou said. "We only acted to wipe them out since we assumed they wouldn't obey us. Can we not find a use for their strength given that they wish to swear their loyalty to us?"

A silence fell over everyone at Gennou's question. There wasn't any true basis to deny his suggestion. The pirates' value didn't boil down to just their strength on the sea. Securing control over the waters was one advantage, and they could even help with trade. There were countless uses for the pirates.

Putting aside future prospects, farming and fishing weren't existing industries in the Wortenia Peninsula at the moment. Their only plausible source of funds was to sell reagents harvested from the monsters or by selling demi-humans to slavery.

But while the practical part of their minds realized this, they couldn't

emotionally accept this.

“That’s right, but... What, are you gonna spit on the little ones’ feelings?” Lione asked, with a dangerous edge to her voice.

If they were to only consider their immediate profit, accepting the pirates’ offer of fealty wasn’t a bad idea. But from a long term perspective, it was clear that they could expect some friction between their soldiers and the pirates. And even if it wouldn’t blow up immediately, it certainly would sometime in the near future.

One of Ryoma’s few strong points in this overwhelmingly disadvantageous position was the quality and loyalty of each and every one of his soldiers. Their freedom from servitude and the positive and personal treatment they’d been given since was meant to solidify their loyalty to Ryoma.

The problem was that should Ryoma accept the pirates’ proposal, a crack could run through that otherwise firm loyalty. This was something that Lione and Boltz — who were in charge of managing the soldiers — were greatly suspicious of.

Ryoma quickly cut that suspicion in the bud, though.

“I don’t intend to accept their oath of fealty.” Ryoma’s deep voice echoed coldly through the room.

“Are you sure, milord?” While everyone fell quiet, Gennou fearfully sneaked a gaze at Ryoma’s expression.

Gennou didn’t intend to insist on his opinion there. Ryoma had the final word in the end, and Gennou only brought up a point for consideration to help Ryoma come to the right decision. Everyone present understood this. Gennou did think, however, that Ryoma would normally place more importance on his opinion.

Ryoma’s next words, however, would go on to wipe away everyone’s apprehensions.

“Yeah, it doesn’t matter what their intentions are; we can’t accept them. They’re vicious criminals, after all.”

That was an issue that was even more fundamental than anything else they brought up so far. As light as the cost of human life was in this world, the law did exist. Putting aside how pertinent the rule of law might be in each individual country, one couldn't establish a nation in an entirely lawless environment.

And the Wortenia Peninsula was, legally speaking, territory belonging to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. And it went without saying that piracy was deemed illegal in Rhoadseria. And in every country on this Earth, the sentence for piracy was death. And that extended to not just the pirate committing the crime, but their family as well.

This was an even heavier sentence than ordinary murder, of course, but there was a reasoning for that. Pirates pillaged in the name of their own profit, which hurt many people on a daily basis. In addition, the punishment was to set an example and maintain the civil order. And most importantly of all, it satisfied the masses, who were often directly or indirectly hurt by pirate activity.

Ideas of mercy and ethics could greatly differ depending on the era one lives in, the education they receive and the environment they live in. And while this law may have come across as barbaric in modern Japan, in this world it was simply a natural conclusion. An act of mercy could easily result with the one showing pity to another attacked for their weakness.

The people of this world would likely not care at all if the pirates had reformed or changed their ways. And they would spare no mercy for their families, that lived off of a bloodstained fortune.

Of course, Ryoma could ignore the law thanks to the right to autonomy he'd gained from Queen Lupis. But it would create needless friction between him and the surrounding nobles and their subjects. Had Ryoma been in absolute power this wouldn't have mattered much, but it was risky at this point, when he was still an emerging noble of Rhoadseria.

"The Wortenia Peninsula was given to me as my territory, and that means maintaining the law and order here falls to me. No one's saying anything right now, but if we leave the pirates as they are, people might demand I take responsibility for the pirates, even for things they did in the past."

It was clear how hard it was to settle and govern a land that was left

unattended for years, and so no one bothered Ryoma with the matter right now. But given time, surrounding nobles might begin demanding he handle the pirates, or even take responsibility for their past raids, too. It only made sense that they would. No one could punish the pirates so far since the land was abandoned, but now Ryoma was its governor, and handling the law and order was part of his duty.

“And, well, there’s all these other reasons you brought up, but honestly speaking? I just don’t like them.” Ryoma cracked a smile.

He understood the pirates’ position, and knew they didn’t become pirates because they wanted to. Perhaps they were even victims, in a way, and there was room for sympathy. But they could only demand the justice they were due as victims against the assailants that hurt them. There was no justification to them having turned their blades on unrelated civilians.

Both emotionally and practically, Ryoma couldn’t accept their proposal of fealty.

“And to that end, I’m going to have to wipe them out. Any objections?” He regarded everyone around the round table with a cold, stabbing glare.

At that moment, the pirates’ fate was sealed.

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“Your orders, Sakuya.” One of the men said, snapping Sakuya out of her recollection.

No good... I have to stay focused.

In Chess terms, they already had the king cornered. The pirates had no means of escaping. But that didn’t mean Sakuya could afford to be reckless. Sakuya nodded silently and raised her hand to the air.

“It is time to greet your noble deaths. We haven’t much time. Half of you will regroup with Grandfather and quickly secure the target! The rest of you will follow me and light the fire. Make sure that our Lord’s path of retreat is not severed until the next signal comes!”

At Sakuya’s order, the ninjas set forth like arrows fired from a bow. Given

their careful planning and preparations, Sakuya's explanation was perhaps unnecessary. The ninjas simply nodded and tied a rope around a thick tree's trunk. They then grabbed onto the rope and dived off the cliff.

The nameless city Henry and his cronies made was indeed a natural fortress. It was surrounded in three directions by several-dozen-meter-tall cliffs, with the ocean spreading out on its north end. There were only two staircases across the cliffs, hardly wide enough for two people to pass through together. It was likely designed this way to defend themselves from the monsters, but in times of war the cliffs also served as walls.

The only way to lead a frontal charge into the city after coming out of the forest was to cross a narrow staircase cut into the cliff-face. But that was only if one were to attempt a frontal charge like a monster might. Humans could come up with a multitude of other ways into the city. Like rappelling down the cliff using a rope...

This world didn't have anything like a carabiner, which would otherwise be seen as the perfect solution in Ryoma's world. And so, the ninjas had to hang their lives on this literal lifeline, relying on the rope as they slid down the cliff.

"I leave the rest to you, Sir Boltz." Sakuya whispered as she secured her body to the rope and dove into the open air.

†

"Milord... You're finally here."

Gennou appeared after they'd finished off Andre. He was clad in a black bodysuit and a black hood. His ninja attire made his facial features indistinguishable. But the sharp gaze emanating from a small gap in his mask and the low whisper of his voice made it clear it was Gennou.

"Did you find it?" Ryoma asked.

"Of course," Gennou nodded curtly. "I've also secured them, and made sure guards would escort them to the harbor."

Gennou's task was securing the captured demi-humans. Gennou and his men swam into the bay from the western cape. Given it was their primary occupation, the Igasaki ninjas perfectly tackled their tasks. They snuck in under

the cover of shadow and the darkness of night, and were able to infiltrate the nameless city through the sea.

Gennou discovered the prison where the demi-humans were held, and waited for Ryoma's signal before moving in.

"Good job. Then let's head for the harbor and move on to the next phase. Looks like Sakuya's group is already moving in."

Outside the window, flames were rising from each direction, and the streets of the nameless city were falling into a state of frenzied chaos.

"Sir Boltz has the cliff's staircase sealed... So long as we capture the harbor, the people of this city will have nowhere to run."

"Right. So everything's going as planned." Ryoma said, his lips curling up in a cold smile.

Ryoma didn't enjoy murder in any way, but he was more than willing to resort to it if the situation called for it.

Let this sinful city burn...! There's no good or evil here. Everything will be reduced to dust...

It was a city that developed through the weak trampling on the weak. That could only be occupied by people who live that way. Ryoma couldn't imagine a more distorted idea.

To him, this city was a place that never should have existed. No one should live in a place like this. This was all just a stepping stone in Ryoma's journey.

I'll grow stronger... I swear it!

Hatred flared up in Ryoma. Bottomless, righteous wrath at this unreasonable, maddened world.

With the Malfist sisters following him, Ryoma ran through the streets as black smoke and screams swirled all around them. He was doing this to put an end to everything. Angry shouts and howls were echoing from every direction.

"Shigesuke, regroup with Sakuya. Koutarou, come with me. We hunt down the stragglers." Gennou quickly gave orders, and the shadows around them quickly dispersed in different directions.

Ryoma and the Malfist sisters slew Andre, one of the three pirate leaders. The problem was the remaining two.

Now, the question is where they run to...

The Igasaki clan had already seized most of the city in their initial attack, so escaping would be difficult. But the enemy wasn't foolish enough to think they'd walk away with their lives if they surrender.

In which case, they had only two paths they could take to escape. The cliff staircase — which was guarded by Boltz — or the sea, and by extension the harbor.

"Master Gennou... We found the other two. They are headed for the harbor."

One of the people Gennou sent ahead returned, prompting the old ninja to run toward the harbor as well as the city burned around him. And as the blue, sparkling sea came into view, Gennou could hear the sound of clashing weapons.

"That's..." He murmured to himself.

Apparently, their soldiers were engaging the pirates. Gennou sent the ninjas that followed him a hand signal, and the next moment, kunai flew through the air, piercing the pirates' backs.

†

The citadel city of Epirus. A man walked through the filthy back alleys, and entered a love hotel. The large man wordlessly threw a silver coin onto the reception counter. He was wearing a hood, as if to hide his identity. The owner of the establishment, who was currently cleaning through the kitchen, simply regarded the man with his eyes and nudged them upwards, signaling the second floor.

He didn't ask who the man was. The whole affair was arranged ahead of time.

"Room 204."

As the large man headed up the staircase, the hotel's owner whispered at his back. Having said what he needed, the owner then looked away and returned to his business. His attitude made it clear that in his line of business, adopting a

see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil approach was necessary.

Many customers visited the establishment with the intent of not being seen here. And while this was a love hotel, some people didn't necessarily come in with people of the opposite gender. For all the owner was concerned, so long as he was paid the details didn't matter. He knew that the secret to a long life was keeping his nose out of other people's business. The demon of curiosity could take away a person's life with swift fickleness.

And so, the owner simply took the coin the man left on the counter, put it into his wallet and returned his gaze to the kitchen. If one were to ask him what he saw on that day, he would likely reply thus:

"An inn like mine doesn't get any customers."

†

"It's been too long, Lord Mikoshiba. I've heard you disposed of the pirates not too long ago. Congratulations."

When the man entered the room the owner had mentioned, he was greeted by Simone, who rose from a chair and bowed her head respectfully. She was clad in a red dress with a deep cleavage, and her lips were dyed a glossy crimson with lipstick. The skirt of her dress was open along the sides, granting Ryoma's eyes a good view of her white legs.

That day, Simone showed herself with an outfit that was as sensual and degenerate as what the prostitutes walking the streets were wearing. Even those who knew her would hesitate to say she was the same person as the woman who led the Christof Company.



“Yes, it’s been a while, Simone... News reaches you as quickly as ever.”

He’d only just reported of his success at subduing the pirates to Count Salzberg and his wife, and yet Simone already knew of it. Ryoma took off his hood, revealing a bitter, somewhat exasperated smile.

“The rumors have been circulating for a month or so already. The sudden drop in the pirates’ activities was all the proof I needed. And then I heard you returned to Epirus.” Simone finished her explanation and regarded Ryoma with a smile.

After a certain day a month ago, she’d stopped hearing stories of how people were hurt by pirate raids. Naturally enough, the more quick-witted merchants rapidly began gathering information, and Ryoma saw Simone as both a purveyor and a spy. Between all the information she had gathered so far and Ryoma’s return to Epirus, she quickly came to the right conclusion.

“But really, Simone, you certainly picked an interesting place for a meeting.” Ryoma said with a wry smirk as he sank his body into the sofa.

Simone returned his smirk with the whimsical smile of a child who had successfully pulled a prank. The two of them meeting face to face at this point ran the risk of arousing Count Salzberg’s suspicion. With that in mind, Simone brought up this hotel as a place that would allow them to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

While he was in the lowest rank of Baron, Ryoma was still a noble. Simone, as well, was the acting president of a large company which, despite being on the wane right now, once served as the leader of Epirus’s trade union. This place was far too shabby for people of their positions to meet.

“It’s a perfect place for a clandestine rendezvous, though.”

But it was indeed a fine place to avoid unwelcome eyes. It was an area of the city that wasn’t so much dubious as it was outright illicit, but one could get away with anything here so long as they paid a handsome fee.

And so, it was the right place to avoid the spies Count Salzberg placed on the two of them. Even if Ryoma was worried, he could always just shrug any accusations off by saying he had spent his time with a prostitute. Going out to

buy a woman's services was as good a reason to hide one's identity as they came, after all. Incidentally, Simone was supposedly shut off in her estate, recovering from illness.

"Well? How're preparations on your side going?" Ryoma cut to the heart of the matter, while internally being struck dumb by Simone's appearance.

There was a limit to how much he could look at her straight on while she was dressed like that, but there had to have been a reason she asked for them to meet personally like this despite the danger it presented.

"We've already bought two ships, which are currently docked in Myspos." Simone took a map out of a leather bag she carried and spread it out on the table.

Myspos was a port town on the eastern tip of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula. While it couldn't quite match up to Pherzaad, which was the largest port on the western continent, it was still one of the largest ports available.

While Ryoma built a stronghold in Wortenia, Simone began preparing her ships in Myspos.

"Two ships, huh...? How large are they?"

"Two galleons, the largest I could find on sale. Their crews are all seasoned sailors that are also experienced in naval combat."

"I see. Well, a bit drastic, I'd say."

"I kept the possibility of converting them into war vessels in mind." Simone answered Ryoma's implicit question flatly.

It was a way of saying that despite the fact those ships were purchased using the Christof Company's funds, she didn't mind Ryoma using them as a naval war force if need be. Ryoma eyed her with a slightly exasperated smile.

"That's a crazy gamble you're taking here."

Ryoma knew he'd already thrown his lot in with Simone, which meant they would either sink or swim together. Even still, he didn't expect this much consideration or graciousness out of her. Those trade vessels were by no means cheap, so telling Ryoma he could use them for war if he needed to was a show

of great resolve.

Simone regarded Ryoma's words with a silent smile and directed a questioning glance toward him.

"And what of the port?"

Upon deciding to cooperate, the two of them clearly defined each other's roles in the agreement. Simone was to secure ships and a stream of goods for the peninsula, while Ryoma was to remove the pirates and establish a port in the Wortenia peninsula. Ryoma already dealt with the pirates, but Simone hadn't received any reports regarding the port.

She didn't doubt Ryoma's abilities, but it had only been a few months since he headed into Wortenia. It was only natural she would feel anxious. But Ryoma's smile remained composed.

"Yeah, it's all good. We've got stores and houses, and even a wall. We just need more people," he said.

At that answer, Simone fell silent and eyed him fixedly with unflinching eyes.

It looks like he really is ready...

She could tell he wasn't lying, and heaved a deep sigh. In the few months since she met him, this man created an infrastructure in that cursed land.

This man...

If she were to put a name to the feelings filling her heart, it would be fear... No, awe. Fear was linked with rejection, while awe was linked with obedience. His facial features weren't quite those of a handsome man, and while his physique was impressive, he otherwise looked like an average young man.

But Simone knew. He had exterminated the pirates. She only had fragmentary information so she didn't know the details, but she assumed that none of the pirates or their families were among the living. She used one of the merchants in Myspos to send people into Wortenia and check. That town, which was hidden in an inlet, was burned to the ground, and the charred buildings and corpses were left as they were.

That man described the image of the birds pecking into the burned corpses as

a hellish sight. Simone thought the pirates' fate was a ghastly one, but she did think it was their just deserts. Her take was that while she didn't believe in adhering too closely to the law, she didn't think it was to be ignored either.

True, there were some unreasonable and illogical laws, but as a whole, laws were necessary for government. And had Ryoma and his comrades shown mercy to the pirates, Simone may have elected to stop cooperating with them. The pirates were useful as a fighting force, yes, but some of her subordinates had their family members abducted by pirates and would never forgive them.

Had Ryoma chosen to ally with the pirates, it was clear to see it would have resulted in a major problem sooner or later. And yet, Ryoma chose to wipe them out. She thought him to be a bit soft since he'd liberated the slaves he bought, but apparently he was fully capable of ruthlessness when the situation called for it. His heart was capable of coldly discerning risk and merit.

My judgment of him... was correct. The thought crossed Simone's heart.

She took his hand as if grabbing onto straws in her attempts to keep the Mystel Company afloat. But as it turned out, his hand wasn't a straw, but a firm rope. A person who was only kind or only ruthless could never govern over people for long. Only a man that was graced with both those qualities could stand at the summit.

A hegemon...

The word surfaced in her mind, and a jolt ran down her spine.

"What's wrong?" Ryoma asked with a hint of concern.

Apparently she'd kept her gaze fixed on him, which flustered him somewhat.

"Nothing, my apologies."

"You all right?"

"Yes." Simone bowed her head.

Ryoma looked at her, not quite convinced, but continued speaking.

"Well, our city's pretty much built, so we just need residents."

They'd already had buildings ready to accommodate people, so all that

remained was to bring people into this town he'd built.

"Understood. We'll bring in the slaves from Myspos as fast as we can."

"Yeah, did you pick them according to what I asked you?"

"Yes, a thousand healthy boys and girls, aged ten to fifteen. We have them secured on site already."

Purchasing slaves from Xarooda and Helnesgoula as opposed to in Epirus meant they were less likely to be noticed by Count Salzberg. It was for this same reason that Simone purchased her ships from Myspos.

"All right. The monsters' fangs and skins should do well enough for the fee, right?"

Simone nodded wordlessly. Fangs and skins collected from the monsters living in the Wortenia Peninsula sold for a fairly high cost. They had to be hunted periodically, and so their skins and fangs made for important local export products.

"By the way... Rumor has it you've encountered some demi-humans. Is that true?" Simone asked.

It was a casual question asked out of curiosity, but Ryoma's expression changed upon hearing it.

"Who told you that?" He glared at her sharply, which elicited a sharp intake of breath from Simone.

He wasn't looking at her as he might at an enemy, but the cold, sharp light emanating from his eyes was real. A silence hung between them for some time, after which Ryoma's gaze softened.

"Ah, sorry... It's just that that's a bit of a complicated issue." Ryoma apologized with a smile, realizing he was pressuring Simone.

He didn't intend to intimidate her, but the mention of that subject made him glare at her despite himself.

"Just what happened? Did you really meet the demi-humans?" Simone asked, taking a deep breath in an attempt to steady her breath.

For all Simone was concerned, the demi-humans were an extinct species. In fact, that was what all people on this continent thought, with the exception of a select few. There were occasional rumors that they still existed in the unexplored regions of the continent, but it was all in the realm of gossip.

Simone didn't truly believe Ryoma met any demi-humans. She thought it was just a groundless rumor, borne from crossing an existing theory that the demi-humans had a hidden community on Wortenia with the fact Ryoma was made governor of the peninsula.

She only brought it up as a conversation subject and didn't mean anything deeper by it, but given Ryoma's reaction, she realized it was probably more than just a rumor. Exposed to Simone's questioning gaze, Ryoma explained, though not without heaving a sigh.

What he'd told her was a story that was by no means vague or ambiguous. And the more Ryoma told Simone, the darker her gaze became.

Because it was the story of the demi-humans, and the dark hatred they harbored toward mankind...

Epilogue

The moment she opened the door, Lady Yulia distorted her face unpleasantly at the air that filled the room. It was the stench of a woman, and the sweet, sickening aroma of aphrodisiac that clung to the skin. It was the aroma of a musk imported from the central continent and broiled together with a stimulant.

It was clearly evident what was going on in this room. Count Salzberg was enjoying himself in a rather blatant and gaudy fashion. As he sat on the sofa and enjoyed a glass of wine, his disheveled hair made it clear just how intense the tryst he'd just engaged in was. Lady Yulia walked into the room and approached the maid who was squatting in the corner of the room. The girl had her face in her hands, and after helping her fix her clothes, Lady Yulia sent her out of the room.

The talk she was about to have wasn't something the servants had any business hearing.

"I see you've been quite indulging yourself... Beloved." Lady Yulia said with a sigh as she sat down on the sofa.

She looked at her husband, trying to gauge his mood from his facial expression. Even when confronted by his wife's cold gaze, Count Salzberg showed no signs of regret or remorse. And at this point, Lady Yulia herself felt no anger. She was mostly just exasperated.

"Hmph, as if this could even count as indulgence... Mmm, delicious. Would you like a glass, too?" Count Salzberg sank his body composedly against the sofa and took another sip of wine.

The wine remaining at the bottom of his glass was red in color. It was made from the finest grapes gathered from Helnesgoula, which were kept for many months under the correct temperature and refined into the finest wine. Count Salzberg kept this bottle for a special occasion, and the fact he opened it meant he was likely in quite the good mood.

"My word, beloved... Honestly, I cannot bring myself to be as optimistic as

you are.” Lady Yulia wordlessly refused his offer and whispered bitterly.

Count Salzberg laughed out loud. He could easily discern what concerned her.

“Really now? I, for one, think the future holds interesting prospects in store,” he said, his face brimming with the confidence of the strong and powerful.

The pride of one gazing down on the weak from high above. His meeting with Ryoma Mikoshiba that afternoon must have pleased him greatly.

“He’s a useful man... Apparently he got rid of the pirates. That already makes him much more useful than that stupid queen, Lupis, who’s content with sitting back and doing nothing in the capital.”

“Yes, I understand that much... But you should know that a sword that’s too sharp must be handled with caution.”

Her words held the implicit meaning that said sword could eventually turn its sharp edge against them.

“I won’t deny that, but we can always have him dealt with. In which case, it would be wise to squeeze as much use out of him as possible... Wouldn’t it?”

His eyes were thick with greed, but his mind was clear and coldly calculating. The fact Ryoma was able to remove the pirates was proof he had the power to maintain public order and peace. Even if it’s in a cursed land crawling with monsters, a leader that proved himself capable of maintaining the peace would draw people to him.

In other words — developing the Wortenia Peninsula was perfectly possible.

And while that land didn’t belong to Count Salzberg, it did neighbor his own. In which case, one could expect to see Epirus receiving that land’s blessings, too. At this point, Count Salzberg wasn’t bent on eliminating Ryoma. He realized using him would net him more profit than removing him would.

Firstly, Ryoma maintaining peace in the peninsula already meant Count Salzberg had to spend less on fighting off the monsters that wandered in from Wortenia. Getting rid of the monsters altogether wasn’t possible, but it alleviated his burdens somewhat. And when coupled with the possibilities that came with developing Wortenia, the profits stood to be large.

With that in mind, getting rid of Ryoma at this point seemed unprofitable. And Lady Yulia nodded wordlessly at Count Salzberg's explanation. She didn't have a concrete reason to overturn his decision...

†

It had been two months since Ryoma established his stronghold in the Wortenia Peninsula and got rid of the pirates. The season was approaching summer, and the sun shined in the heavens, radiating a smoldering heat over the land.

A group of one hundred was heading south, cutting a way through the trees as they did. They were divided into three groups. One group cut through the trees and made sure the ground was stable. The second paved the cleared way with stone. The third kept watch and made sure the former two teams were safe.

Their work was swift and efficient. Each member understood their role and they worked while splitting the labor equally.

"Alright, start chantin'!" Lione exclaimed.

"Our mother earth, extend thy strong arms and protect us, your beloved children, from harm! Stone Wall!" Several dozen people started chanting at once, and then slammed their palms against the ground.

This was a low level earth element verbal thaumaturgy spell, often used to block enemy arrows and thaumaturgy. But this time, they didn't cast this spell to defend themselves.

"Dig it up!"

At that order, the soldiers reinforced by martial thaumaturgy tied the two meters long, three meters wide slabs of rock that rose up from the ground with rope and began pulling it down into the ground. They then dug up the foundation that was buried into the ground, revealing a large stone wall that was nearly 5 meters in length.

Finally, they neatly and carefully placed the ten centimeter thick stone slabs onto the sand-covered foundation. With five rows of the stone slabs placed neatly together, they formed a paved stone road.

“Alright, we take an hour’s rest here! Guard squad, rest in shifts!” Lione ordered them, which made everyone sigh with relief.

“Phew... We’re about half done now, right?”

It had been ten days or so since they started working on this task. A long road of flagstones that lasted some thirty kilometers extended from the direction they came in. They didn’t need to prepare the flagstone’s shape, and so their width and height was uniform. All they had to do was set them together.

On top of that, they used a low level thaumaturgy that was easy to learn and depleted relatively little prana. Considering the expenses that would usually be spent on procuring and ferrying the materials for the road, this was an extremely efficient method.

“Do ya think the fortress’ construction is going well?”

Lione turned around at that question, finding herself face to face with Mike, who was rubbing his mustache with a smile.

“Boltz is in charge of it. There won’t be any problems.”

“I’d bet. And thankfully, we’re blessed with good weather... Maybe too good, even.” Mike added and glared up at the sun.

Bad weather would mean their construction work would take longer, but the intense sunlight made the physical labor harsher on all of them.

“Just ten more days or so, yeah?” Mike asked.

“Right. We’re about halfway done, so that’s how long it should take.” Lione nodded, turning her eyes to the road paved by stone walls. They had to cut through nearly fifty kilometers of forest, and pave the road with those walls. This work would take them twenty days or so.

“Still, it’ll take less than a month... I swear, I’ll never understand how the lad’s brain works.”

If they were to go about this labor in the usual way, it would require thousands of workers. They’d need to obtain the needed stone, and then work on cutting it into the right shape and carrying it over. The expenses and time required would be absurd.

Indeed, in this world, the roadworks Lione and her group were working on right now usually took years and a startling amount of funds to complete. No one would believe they could complete it within less than a month. Ryoma's ideas turned this Earth's logic on its head.

"Well, the town's mostly coming into shape, so all that's left is the elves." Lione concluded.

"You think that'll go well?" Mike directed a doubtful glance at her.

"Well, I dunno. They hate us humans like the plague... But hey, the boy'll figure it out somehow, right?"

Lione turned her glance north and whispered.

"After all, that boy is..."

The small whisper that left her lips didn't reach Mike's ears.

And around that time, Ryoma Mikoshiba shifted his focus primarily toward developing the Wortenia Peninsula. In preparation for the day when the cinders of war would blow onto his land from the east...

Afterword I doubt there are many such readers left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. And to those of you who have kept up with the series since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

I am writing this afterword during the later stages of February. The passage of time is frighteningly fast. How did you all spend this time? It's allergy season for me, and my hand is constantly stuffed in the tissue box as of late.

But let's do away with trifling topics like the author's health. To those of you who begin reading from the afterwords, I'll give an outline of this volume's plot, as always. Firstly, volume 6's biggest draw is that our protagonist finally entered the titular Wortenia Peninsula.

This is a complaint that's been floating around since the web novel days, but we can finally say that the title of the series is not misleading. All the conditions for this war record story to begin in earnest are in place, which is a huge relief for me as the author. I'm sure our good Mr. Mikoshiba is as relieved as I am.

Well, he can only be relieved for so long, as he will soon have to contend with many internal and diplomatic challenges. Such is the fate of a protagonist that's graced with both a strong body and a firm intellect, so expect to see him being tested to these limits in the future.

In addition, this time, the focal points are the efforts of Ryoma as well as other established characters like the Malfist sisters and Gennou. But another major part of the story is the slave children, such as Melissa and Kevin. The despairing environment of slavery, and by contrast the single strand of hope found in that situation. I hope that you will read the story while imagining their suffering and feelings.

And lastly, finally we have the fantasy setting staple of elves. And of the dark variety, at that. They're only briefly featured in volume 6, but look forward to more developments regarding them going forward.

Also, I'd like to use this chance to deliver an update regarding the *Record of Wortenia War* manga adaptation, with volume 1 set to release next month. After the first chapter's publication during October of last year, you will likely be reading this afterword in March, by which time we will have reached chapter 5.

During the first few months, I dreaded the possibility the manga might be canceled. But thankfully, that didn't happen and volume 1 will be out for sale soon. As the author of this work, I am endlessly thankful for that.

I hope to see the number of this series' volumes — both in manga and novel format — grow in number going forward.

In addition, this volume was focused on Ryoma and his group, so I'd like to apologize to those of you who are curious as to Asuka's and Kouichirou's fates. I've already started working on what happens to Asuka next, but following Kouichirou's exploits will be difficult, given the flow of the story. Look forward to seeing more of that side of the story in the next volume.

Lastly, I would like to extend my thanks to everyone who helped bring volume 6 to life. Starting with the editors, and to everyone else who were involved with the work on this volume. And of course, to you readers — I can only continue working on this series thanks to your support.

I will work hard on getting volume 7 to you as fast as possible. I hope you will continue to support *Record of Wortenia War* in the future.

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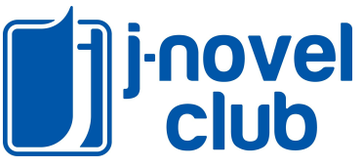
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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 6

by Ryota Hori

Translated by ZackZeal

Edited by Nathan Redmond

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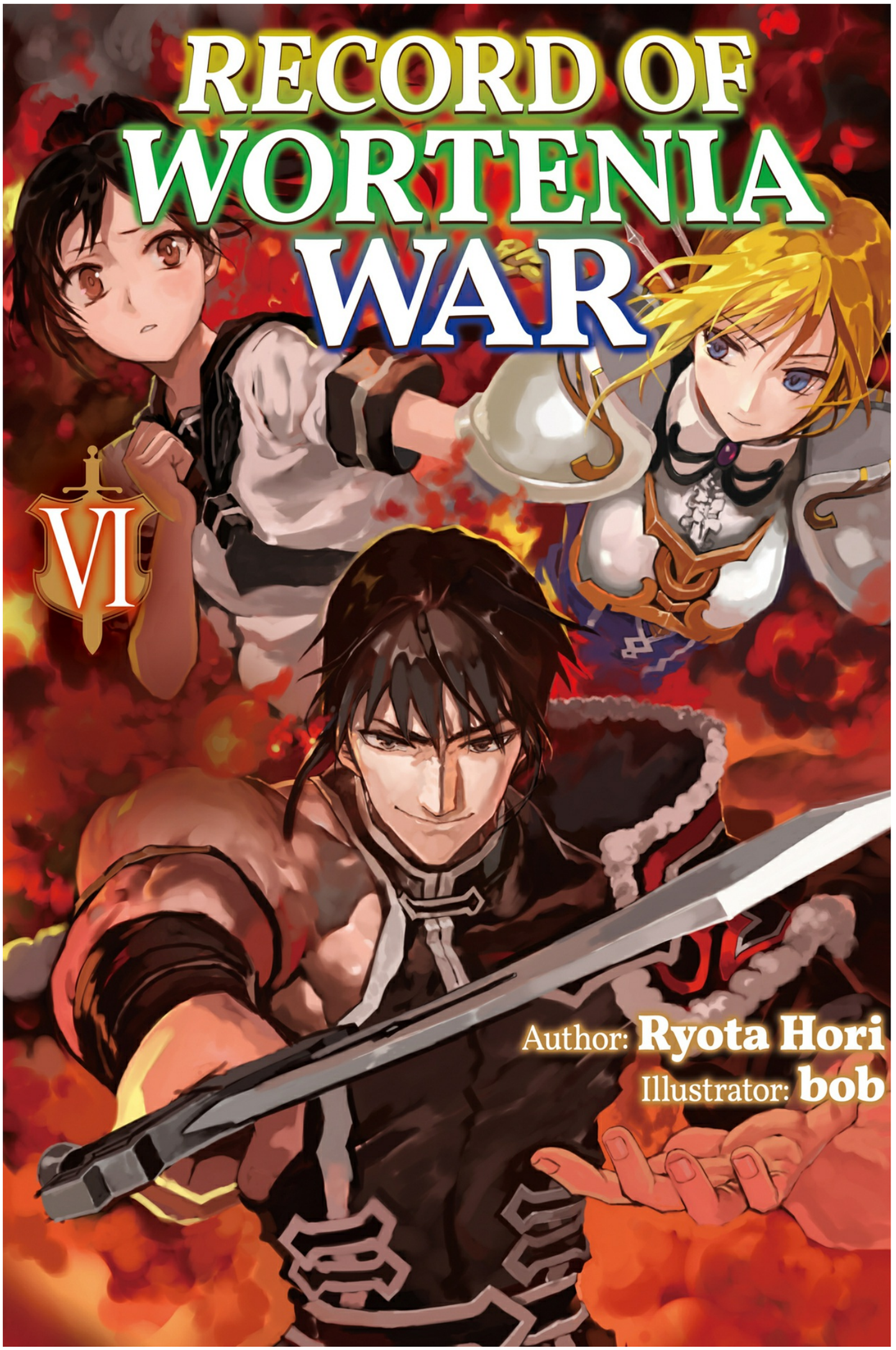
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RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

VI



Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**