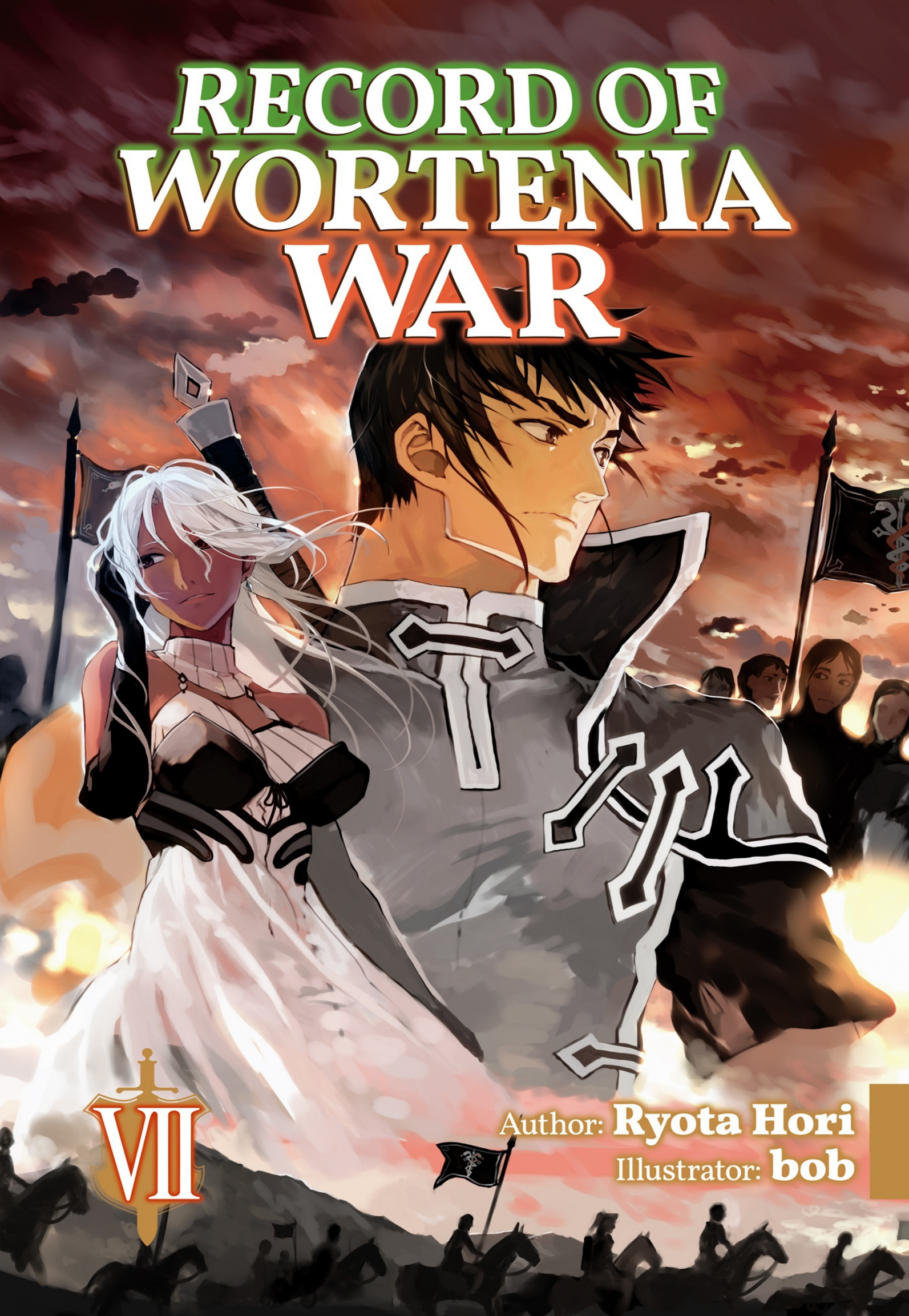
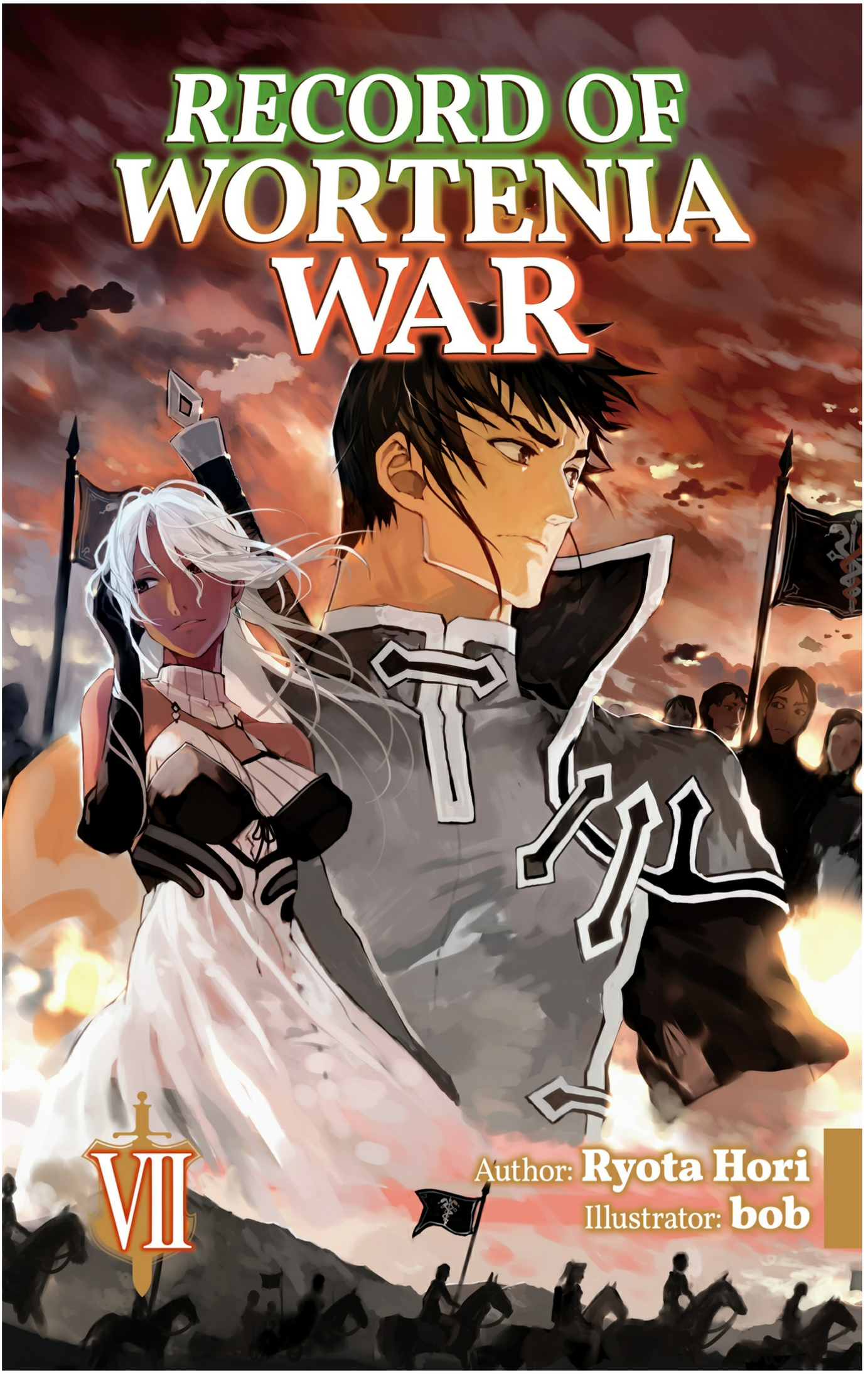
# RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



VII

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

# RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



VII

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


“Come in,”
Nelcius said, prompting Dilphina to open the door.
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR


“Begin!”
“Idiots. Splitting up only solidifies your defeat.”
One of the knights scoffed.


"Master Ryoma..."
Sara turned a concerned gaze to Ryoma, who placed a calming hand on her head.
"We'll be fine."

# CONTENTS


PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1
THE CLOUDS OF WAR BREW

CHAPTER 2
A MESSENGER FROM A NEIGHBORING COUNTRY

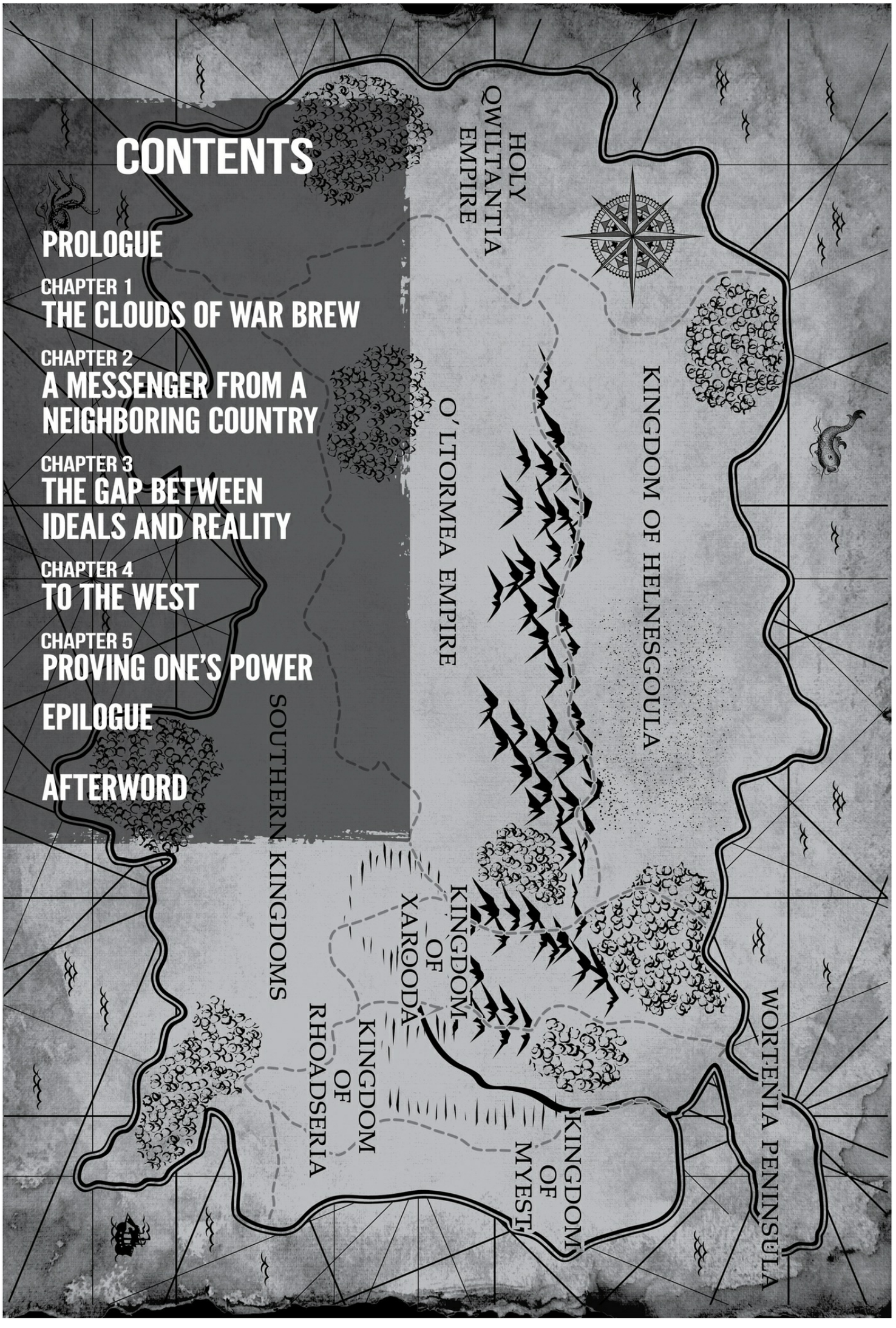
CHAPTER 3
THE GAP BETWEEN IDEALS AND REALITY

CHAPTER 4
TO THE WEST

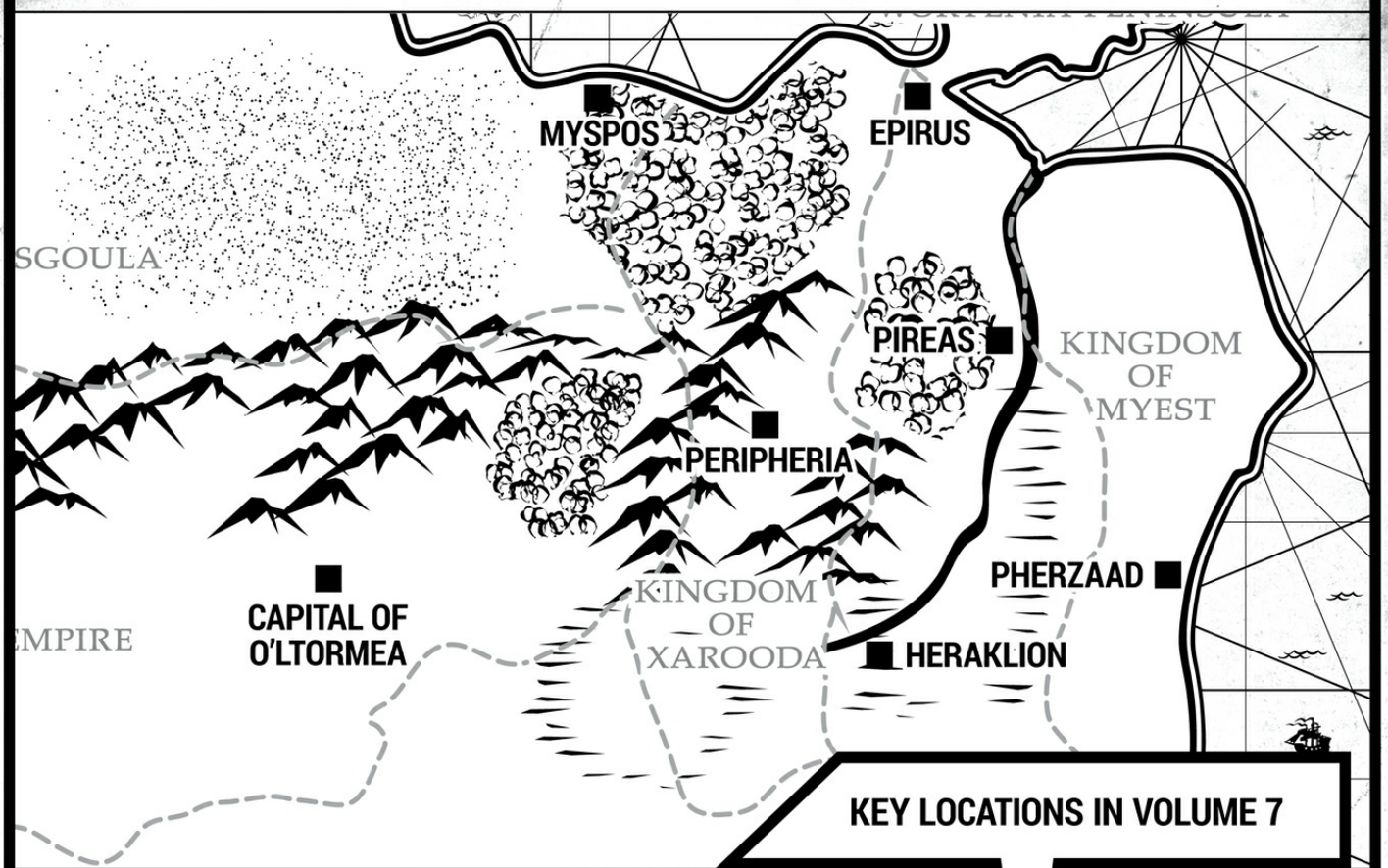
CHAPTER 5
PROVING ONE'S POWER

EPILOGUE

AFTERWORD

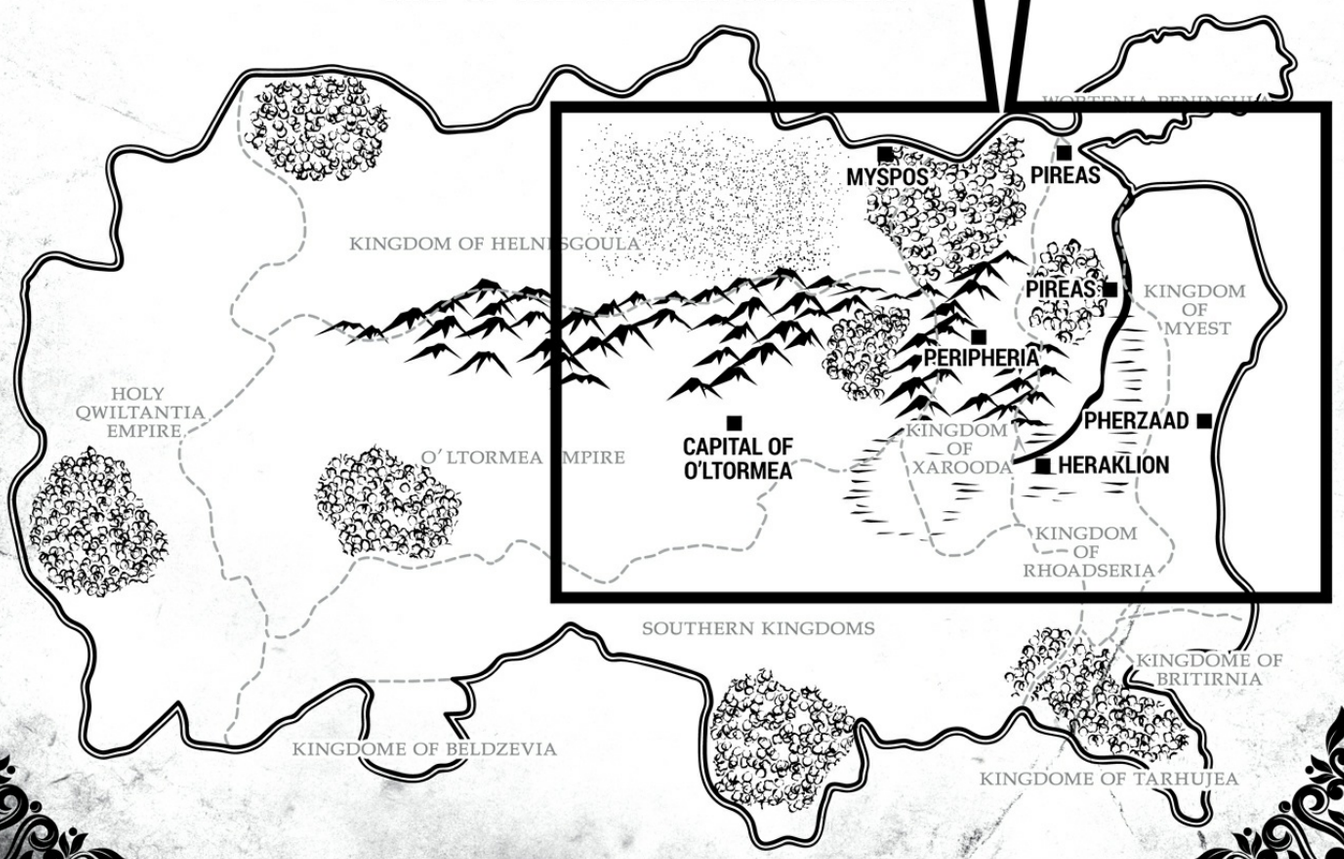



# WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》




## KEY LOCATIONS IN VOLUME 7

## MAP OF THE WESTERN CONTINENT



# Prologue

A grudge lingered between mankind and the demi-humans. The beginning of that rift did not, in fact, begin that long ago. This Earth, rife as it is with continuous conflict, did not have much in the way of archaeological research and so it was difficult to discern. But assuming this world's mankind evolved similarly to how humanity in Ryoma's world did, one can assume human civilization and history existed only a few tens of thousands of years.

Within that time period, the two races only became entwined relatively recently. If nothing else, their relationship didn't fit the rather trite depiction of two rival races whose opposition was decreed by the Creator God when the world was first formed.

Quite the contrary, in fact. The truth was that upon their first meeting, the two races in fact lived in harmony and coexistence. The demi-humans used their unique racial features to bring profit to human society, and benefited from humanity's presence. The same could be said of mankind. Of course, that wasn't to say there was absolutely no sense of animosity or revulsion between one race and the other, but if nothing else, that wasn't prevalent enough to result in any wars.

But one day, the delicate balance that relationship hinged on was broken suddenly. It happened some four hundred and a few dozen years ago. Two men hailing from the parallel world of Rearth appeared in this land, and drove the cogs of fate out of order.

It was not clear how those two men found their way to this world. Perhaps they were lost souls that were summoned across the dimensions by one country or another that existed at the time. But whatever the circumstances may have been, it all began when these men infiltrated the Church of the God of Light — an organization that at the time only barely had influence in the smallest part of the western continent — and distorted the faith.

The men advocated to the people, telling them that mankind was an

unrivaled race created by the God of Light. That humans were the sole race acknowledged by God as the rulers of this world.

Of course, they had no proof that any of that was true. But that ideology spread among the humans of that time like a narcotic. Elitism. The perception that they were the chosen people. The way of thinking that they were chosen by God, or some other force that transcended mankind. In terms of Ryoma's world, it was similar to how Caucasians saw themselves as superior, and looked down upon other people, such as the Asians.

Not a soul in this world could know why those two men proposed such a dangerous idea. But perhaps it wasn't as unnatural as one might assume. The idea that this brand of elitism was dangerous only became widespread among the people during the twentieth century. Even America, which was stereotyped as being overly obsessed with human rights, had legalized discrimination against the African-Americans and other people of color up until the 2000s.

Perhaps they truly harbored those beliefs, or maybe they had some other intentions in mind. But regardless of their motives, the result was all the same. Their honeyed words were advocated time and again, eventually sublimating into absolute faith, and made mankind haughty and proud of their presumed position in the world.

And that led to an unprecedented uprising. A bloody war broke out between mankind and the other demi-human races. At first it was the elves, then the dwarfs and the beastmen. As a result, most of the demi-humans — which were already few in number — disappeared off the face of the western continent. They took refuge in hideouts located in the unexplored, undeveloped regions of the continent, like the Wortenia Peninsula, scraping by as their bloodlines only barely persisted.

A forested strip of land existed in the northeastern reaches of the Wortenia Peninsula. Hidden in the center of that forest was a modest, isolated village. It was a small fortress, guarded by a moat and a powerful barrier field. A small haven, built upon the sacrifice of many of the village's residents.

Sitting in the only council room built in this village, seven men and women had met to discuss the immediate future.

“Nelcius... What are you doing?” said one of the men, who had fair white skin and long, golden hair. “I know you have not forgotten the injustice our ancestors suffered at the hands of humankind... Why are you opposing this? You too have participated in the holy war before.”

His facial features were quite fair. Even ignoring personal taste, there wasn’t a soul alive that would describe him as an ugly man. But right now, his handsome face was contorted in anger. And his growl filled with anger and animosity was met with agreement from those around him.

“That’s right. You were once called the Mad Demon, but now you intend to stand idly by and let that human rule over this land?”

“Pathetic... Even the mightiest grow feeble with age, it seems...”

Words of disdain and criticism rose from every corner of the table. All of the people seated at this round table directed venomous glares at the silver-haired male called Nelcius. But he himself didn’t seem to show any signs of displeasure at those gazes. He was either exceedingly confident or blessed with a brazen, bold character. There wasn’t so much as a shadow of displeasure to his violet eyes.

He was a large man, much more so than any of the other elves seated at this round table. Had it not been for the fair facial features and pointed ears unique for his race, one would be inclined to think he was too large to be an elf. In fact, only when one was told that he had the blood of ogres — who sported brute strength unmatched by both humans and elves — did one believe that for the first time.

“What am *I* doing...?” Nelcius echoed the other elf’s question, resting his chin on his rock-like fist. “Well, if I’m to be quite honest, I have to admit that I don’t quite understand why you’re all so obstinate.”

But this attitude only made everyone’s gazes sharpen. It certainly did not come across well given the situation. This was a critical meeting that dealt with the survival of their race. Acting this way when everyone else present regarded him with animosity came across as mostly mocking everyone else.

Nelcius had his reasons, however. He was, in fact, quite exasperated with everyone else.

*Such a waste of time... I'd have been better off spending this time on a siesta.* Nelcius heaved a sigh, with that thought crossing his mind.

The commotion started when abducted elven girls were rescued and returned to the village by a human. At first they all rejoiced upon seeing the girls' safety, but that soon turned to fear when they heard what the girls had to say.

*Having too many fools about is a problem... Not that I don't understand how they feel, given what happened in the past.*

Including Nelcius, the seven men and women gathered here made up the chiefs of several elf and dark elf clans, and given their position, they couldn't leave this incident ignored. That was all the more true because some of the chiefs here were of the generation that experienced the holy war of four centuries ago. Having fought a gruesome war where they had to face swarms of humans in bloody combat, they would naturally be extremely wary of mankind.

Nelcius, however, cared little for such sentimental arguments. Making the best possible choice for the future of the elven race was the responsibility and role of these chiefs.

*We cannot leave his reign unchecked... That may be true. But what else do they suggest we do...?*

Military force. Going to war to defend Wortenia, their paradise which was free of human domination, was the first idea to come to mind. But the only thing that awaited at the end of that choice would be a slow, sluggish war that would threaten the continued existence of the elven race.

Most of the elves sitting at this table could see nothing but the enemy before their eyes — Ryoma Mikoshiba. The man that defeated the despicable pirates and declared he has possession over the lands of the Wortenia Peninsula. Many of the chiefs were ardently in favor of starting another holy war, but Nelcius turned a cold gaze toward them.

*Assertive, aren't they...? But have they paid any thought to what will happen assuming we do overthrow Ryoma Mikoshiba?*

As far as they knew, Ryoma Mikoshiba's forces weren't vast. Their scouts reported he only had five hundred men, at best. So if nothing else, if the seven

chiefs were to pool their forces, they would exceed them in sheer numbers. Each clan had a few hundred warriors, so put together their forces would reach about two thousand strong.

There was no problem in terms of locational advantage, either. The elves did live in this land for several centuries, after all, and so no one knew the topography of the Wortenia Peninsula better than they did.

Ergo, if they were to go to war with Ryoma Mikoshiba, their chances of victory were by no means slim. But the problem was what would come after that war ends. The humans were exceedingly greedy. If the elves were to slay an officially appointed governor, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria would deploy its army next.

And even if they were to repel that, an international allied army would come knocking on their doorstep, just like the holy war of four centuries ago. And Nelcius and the other chiefs would not be able to oppose such a force. Even if they were to force the women and children to fight, their total numbers wouldn't reach thirty thousand.

*No, even the assumption we'd win a war against that man is an optimistic one...*

Nelcius's side did have the numerical and locational advantage, and with that regard, it seemed their prospects of beating Ryoma were sound. But his intuition as a warrior who lived through the holy war kept trying to alert Nelcius of danger.

*Going to war would be a bad play... In which case...*



Ignoring the gaze of the other chiefs, Nelcius's heart turned colder. After the council ended, Nelcius retired to his room and sank into contemplation. Given that his clan had the largest elven population and he was known as the Mad Demon for his combat prowess, Nelcius's refusal to fight wasn't something the others could very much abide. Without his help, choosing to go to all-out war with the humans became far too risky of a choice.

But on the other hand, depending on how the negotiations with Ryoma Mikoshiba go, Nelcius stood to potentially lose a lot of his influence over the demi-humans. His handling the negotiations also meant he took responsibility over the results of these talks.

*I suppose I'll need to resort to that, then...*

Truth be told, Nelcius himself wasn't excited about taking this choice. But even if he didn't want to make that decision, he did recognize it was an effective one.

*Considering how it all started, I can't order anyone to do this except for her. And if the worst happens and we need to deal with this situation, the only one with the skills to handle it out of all the warrior tribes is her.*

His beloved daughter, Dilphina. She was blessed with a beauty that was praised as the jewel of elvenkind, and stood as one of the greatest warriors of her tribe, second only to her father, Nelcius.

There was, of course, a reason she was caught and rendered helpless by the pirates. It all began when a small group of children wandered out of the village out of curiosity. While they were children, their bodies weren't much different from an adult's. Elves retained their youth for far longer than humans do. Their lifespans lasted a thousand, even two thousand years. Their bodies developed for the first few decades of their lives, and then retained that appearance of being in their mid-twenties for the majority of their lifespan.

This was a racial trait of the elves, and it was thought to stem from the fact that they were born with a larger amount of prana compared to humans. Whether that was true was unknown, however.

Regardless of the cause, this was a trait humans greatly envied, as it stressed

what they saw as a flaw in their own species. They claimed to be perfect lifeforms blessed by God, and this discrepancy stood as proof of that belief being wrong.

There were a few problems the elves had as a race, but there were two major flaws. The first was that their fertility rates were low. Elves could only beget children during a mating period that occurred once a year. Perhaps this flaw stemmed from their longevity. If they had the same productive prowess humanity had, the western continent would likely have been controlled by the elves by present day.

But the second problem here was their other major flaw. While their physical features kept developing until they were fifty years of age, they were much slower in cognitive development. In terms of humans, it was like having youths in their mid-teens with the mental capacity of a kindergartner or an elementary schooler.

The height of their curiosity was only matched by how low their self-restraint was. The period they spent as children in mature bodies lasted roughly a century. This was, of course, the natural development of an elf's physiology, and so it normally wasn't seen as a problem. But every now and then, those children would cause trouble. And this case was one such example.

*I can't fault them for it... At their age, I, too, longed to go outside. My parents often scolded me for it.*

Nelcius's childhood was in the days before the holy war, and so there weren't many restrictions. But he still felt stifled and bored, and often ventured out of the forest with his friends to go on adventures. And, as these things often do, it mostly ended with them being severely told off for their mischief.

But this time, the children's mischief was ill-timed, as they ran into pirates on a slave hunt. Dilphina and her comrades tried to save those children, only to end up being caught instead. And had Ryoma Mikoshiba not exterminated the pirates and escorted Dilphina and the other captive dark elves back to the demi-human village, Nelcius may never have seen his daughter again.

"Excuse me, Father. I've heard you called for me." There were a few knocks on the door, and Dilphina's voice reached him from behind the door.

“Come in,” Nelcius said, prompting Dilphina to open the door.

She likely knew what he was going to say, because Nelcius could see her expression was stiffer than usual.

*Forgive me...*

Seeing that expression flooded Nelcius’s heart with guilt. As a father, he hated nothing more than to send his beloved daughter back to the humans. But as a chief, he couldn’t prioritize his safety or his family’s well being over everyone else. Nelcius realized he placed the weight of their entire race on Dilphina’s shoulders, but Nelcius had no other choice.

Heaving a small sigh, Nelcius gestured for his daughter to approach. All to safeguard the future of the elven race...

# Chapter 1: The Clouds of War Brew

A single galleon-class ship known as the Atalanta sailed across the serene sea, racing to the northeastern regions of the continent. It sailed so fast one could only assume its sails were blessed with godwind. And while the sails were indeed blessed by a wind of sorts, it wasn't one granted by the gods.

"Report! Sirius's port is visible to the northeast!" one of the lookouts shouted.

Land was faintly visible on the horizon.

"Understood. I'll call Captain Brass over," one of the crewmen replied and went below deck.

"Hmm, yes, that's the town of Sirius, indeed..." The tanned captain looked through a telescope, confirming they were almost to the harbor city. "Hey! We're almost at port. Begin preparations to dock."

*Not having to wait for the wind and constantly having a tailwind... That does make for quick voyages, doesn't it?* Brass thought to himself as he collapsed his telescope.

They set sail from the town of Myspos, on the eastern tip of Helnesgoula, at the end of the ninth month. And now, four days later, they arrived at Sirius. And while it was true that unlike last time, they weren't cruising along the shore, but chose to sail straight across the open sea, such a short voyage still defied the logic of this world.

*I wasn't sure what would happen at first, but I was right to accept his proposal... I thought he was just a cheeky amateur, but I guess the joke's on me this time.*

Brass's face twisted into a self-deprecating smile. It happened three nights before he set out on this voyage. He'd lived for years as a man of the sea, and while that boy was somewhat respectful, he also dictated his route and instructed him to cut down on the length of the voyage.

According to established logic, given the time it would take until they caught

the right wind, the trip was expected to take somewhere between ten days to a fortnight. So when Brass was told all too casually to complete the trip in a week, he had to seriously doubt Ryoma Mikoshiba's sanity. It was far too ridiculous to laugh off as an amateur's frivolous request. But looking at the facts now lined up before his eyes, he could understand how he made that request.

Brass turned his gaze to the group seated at the ship's stern. On the trip back to Myspos from Sirius, they were all seasick and practically useless, but this time things were different. They were all, after all, young and barely at the age of fifteen. And none of them were sailors, either. Those youths clad in black leather armor were soldiers under the service of House Mikoshiba. And while they were novices with no experience in sailing aboard a ship, they were now more important and dependable than the most experienced sailors.

"How's the wind, Captain Brass? Should we make it a bit stronger?" One of the girls in the group called out to him, noticing his gaze.

"Nah, if you make it stronger there's a chance you'd tear the sails. 'Sides, we're almost to Sirius. Keep the speed as it is for now. Thank you, Miss Melissa."

Despite the girl certainly being young enough to pass as his daughter, Brass referred to her with due respect. Aboard this ship, this young girl and her companions were in a way even more important than the captain himself.

"Understood. Then we'll keep up the wind's speed like this." Melissa beamed at him and bowed her head.

He simply regarded her with affection in his eyes. It felt like he was watching his own daughter... All the sea vessels in this world were either sail ships or galleys. Each had their advantages, but in terms of carry capacity and sailing range, sail ships were preferred as trade and transport vessels. And among all sail ships, the galleon class of ships boasted the highest loading capacity.

Its hull was oblong and its draft was shallow, and as such it easily picked up speed. Its high loading capacity also made it an exceedingly convenient ship. But the galleon, just like all sail ships, had the critical weakness of being reliant on the whimsies of the wind to move. It used multiple sails to cruise.

Some sailing ships were also equipped with oars, but that required bringing

oarsmen on board. And those oarsmen naturally needed food and water, which meant less room to store trade goods. As such, sails were used as the primary driving force of a sail ship.

This made the state of the weather and the wind's direction important factors. Thankfully, this world was similar to Rearth in that ships were improved so they employed not only square sails and fore-and-aft sails, but also a number of auxiliary sails. These allowed ships some degree of movement even when sailing into headwind.

But even that solution had its limits. If the wind completely peters out and the sea is completely calm, a normal sail ship without any oars would essentially be stranded in place, rocked by the water until the wind starts blowing again. And since controlling the weather was beyond humanity, a sailor stuck in this predicament could only pray to God for help.

At least, until now...

What Melissa and her comrades were doing wasn't a difficult task. Unleashing a gale of compressed wind was the most basic of wind thaumaturgy. The only difference is that rather than releasing it in a compressed fashion, they scattered the wind gradually over a larger area. It had very little attacking power, but the ship only needed mild wind to move. A gust of wind that's too strong would actually be detrimental, because it might rip the sails.

This meant the young soldiers' inexperience was in fact valuable here. And seeing their spells be so significant and effective filled Melissa and her comrades' hearts with joy, exactly because they were aware of their inexperience. This was the perfect way of boosting their experience and proficiency in thaumaturgy.

The fact that they were needed and relied upon filled their expressions with confidence. They were also no doubt elated to return to Sirius after a month's journey. Most people dreaded the place as a cursed no-man's land, but the town of Sirius was, without a doubt, a second hometown to them.

"Now hear this!" Brass shouted at the sailors, switching over from his otherwise serene attitude. "Lady Simone instructed us not to tell a soul about anything we see in this place, got that?!"

The sailors all nodded at their captain's orders, and began working on lowering the anchor. They'd already made the trip from Myspos to Sirius four times already, and were somewhat sick and tired of being told to keep quiet time and again. They did, however, understand why they were told to keep quiet, and what would happen if they were to ignore that warning.

Their first trip to Sirius left that much of a striking impression on them. The townscape was properly divided into sectors. The roads were wide, spacious, and paved with stone. The walls were fairly high, and surrounded the entirety of the town.

That on its own wouldn't surprise them that much normally. Towns of a similar scale could be found in just about any other noble's territory. But the surprise came from the fact that such a town was built on the Wortenia Peninsula, and within just a few months.

"Cap'n... Are me eyes playin' tricks on me?" one of the sailors asked Brass, rubbing his eyes as Sirius's townscape came into view.

Brass didn't ask him what he saw. He had trouble believing the sight before his eyes, too.

"Don't worry. You're seeing just fine," he said.

"Then it's real..." the sailor muttered.

"Aye. The city's getting mighty bigger."

It had been six months since Brass and his crew first came to Sirius. It was just ready enough to allow for the port to operate, and was still roughly the size of a fishing village you could find anywhere. But every time Brass's ship returned from a voyage, the town had changed. Just the port built along the coastline was twice its original size by now. No, it matched Myspos's docking facilities by now.



*We can't tell this to anyone else. And anyone would laugh us off even if we did... This is the worst...*

That thought crossed Brass's mind. After all, if this were anywhere else, one might assume that tens or hundreds of thousands of people were worked to the bone in the name of building such a large dock, but this was the Wortenia Peninsula. That wasn't an option. Several months ago, Brass carried a thousand slaves from Myspos to Sirius aboard the Merallion — Simone's galleon ship.

But even with that number in mind, the sight before his eyes didn't feel plausible. Especially since he knew all those slaves he brought in were young boys and girls with underdeveloped bodies. They'd been submitted to abuse by their slavers and were all extremely weak and emaciated. They didn't look like they were at all capable of labor. They were properly fed aboard the ship, but it was hard to believe their stamina would recover that quickly.

*I can see why the miss insists we keep quiet about this...*

Brass's gaze turned back to the stern, where Melissa's group was. He realized, ever so faintly, the trick behind this unbelievable sight.

"What're you gawkin' at? I said go and prepare to drop anchor." Bottling up his curiosity, Brass scolded a group of sailors who were staring slack-jawed at the horizon.

Brass knew full well that curiosity could very easily kill the cat...

†

The name of the port city of Sirius stemmed from Greek, where it meant "that which scorches" or "that which shines."

"Master Ryoma, the Atalanta has docked after returning from Myspos," Sara informed Ryoma.

"Right, got it. They're finally back... Did Captain Brass say something about why they were late to return?" Ryoma asked.

Sara answered his question with her eyes still on the piece of parchment in her hands. Were this Ryoma's world, he wouldn't mind the delay that much, but in this world things were all too different. There could have been some

absurd reason Ryoma couldn't consider ahead of time.

"According to Captain Brass's report, Melissa's team was seasick during the trip to Myspos. On their way back, though, they'd gotten better and fulfilled their roles perfectly."

"Seasick, huh? And that's why they came back later than planned... Yeah, I guess I didn't account for that."

Perhaps telling them to work aboard a ship with no training or warning may have been reckless, Ryoma realized. Some people were less physically prone to seasickness, but apparently the troops he'd sent with Brass this time lacked that constitution. If anything, he was surprised they'd gotten better on the return trip.

*I guess it was their first time ever on a boat. They would get anxious, and they say motion sickness has a lot to do with psychological factors...*

"There is no problem with the cargo, though. They were thankfully graced with good weather, and the waves rocking the boat didn't damage anything."

If a ship were to have to cross a storm, the cargo would often be damaged. Water could also enter the hull and spoil the goods. Luck was on their side this time, though.

"Alright. For now, keep bringing in weapons and preservable foodstuffs. The monsters' fangs and skins will do for the payment as always, right?"

"Yes, we have enough to make the payment," Sara nodded. "But according to Miss Simone's letter, their clients' stocks of them are running out, and she asked if we could send a larger number of them. She would pay off the remainder with gold, of course."

Ryoma sank into thought.

"Increasing the number we deal in, huh...?"

The monsters breeding in the Wortenia Peninsula were all considered powerful, and as such the ingredients harvested from them fetched a good price on the market. Simone was currently setting up a position in Myspos, and even to her, ingredients brought in from Wortenia were highly viable

commodities.

*I wish I could do something for her, but...*

Normally, he'd like to send all the skin and fangs they got to her, especially since Simone herself was in the middle of a sales war with other sly merchants. They'd sworn to share each other's lots, and so he wanted to give her any assistance he could.

But the sad reality was that he couldn't afford to sell any less of those ingredients to Epirus. Or rather, it wasn't that he couldn't do it, but rather that he dreaded the backlash it would cause. And suddenly dropping the amounts he sold might expose to Count Salzberg the fact that he was selling things to merchants outside of Epirus.

"How's the training going?"

"It hasn't been six months since we began."

Deploying more soldiers would allow them to hunt more monsters, but if they were to send out troops before their training had reached a certain point, they'd only be feeding the monsters instead of hunting them.

"We're going to need Simone to wait a little longer... We've got no choice."

Their supply couldn't keep up with the increase in demand.

*Then again, going crazy with the sales until the prices plummet wouldn't be good, either... Simone's just going to have to be patient.*

Ryoma nodded once to himself. Seeing that Ryoma had come to a decision, Sara brought up the other matter that bothered her.

"There's... something else, actually."

"What is it? It's not like you to be this timid..." Ryoma said with a frown.

Whenever Sara talked like this, good news never followed. Not for any fault of hers, of course, but Ryoma couldn't help but tense up.

"Is it about the demi-humans?" Ryoma asked.

"No, it's something Miss Simone wrote in her letter..." Sara replied, to which Ryoma cocked a bow quizzically.

The biggest issue on Ryoma's mind currently was the issue of the demi-humans. He'd recently escorted the three demi-human girls he'd saved from the pirates back to the chief, which took quite a bit of trouble.

In the novels Ryoma read, a white knight who saved a maiden was welcomed by her peers soon enough. Reality, however, wasn't kind enough to live up to fiction. That wasn't to say the demi-humans were entirely thankless, but they didn't trust Ryoma Mikoshiba as a person, either. In fact, expecting them to trust him was reckless.

Their history with human persecution was deep and long-running, and the weight of that history bound their hearts. They truly and honestly wanted nothing to do with mankind, and it took Ryoma quite some time to convince them. The demi-humans were an issue Ryoma felt he couldn't afford to disregard in any way. At worst, he wanted them to maintain a stance of mutual non-aggression. At best, he'd hoped to absorb them into his forces.

If he couldn't manage that, there would have been no point to setting up base in the backwater lands of Wortenia. So long as they kept control of the seas, Epirus remained the only way to enter the Wortenia Peninsula. Ryoma could focus his forces to the south and keep the enemy out. This was the greatest advantage to having his land be a peninsula on the corner of the continent.

But all of that would mean nothing if a force that opposed him existed within the peninsula, even if their opposition wasn't explicit and direct. The fact they weren't friendly toward him was enough of a problem. It meant he would continually have to keep some sort of force around to protect Sirius.

So when Ryoma returned the abducted elven girls from the pirates, he made a proposition to Nelcius, the chief. His suggestion was that Nelcius, along with the other chiefs, would make monthly visits to Sirius where they would dine with Ryoma. He hoped these periodic dining meetings would help dispel their distrust of humanity.

It was a roundabout solution, to be sure, but Ryoma felt that demanding anything more of them would make the negotiations fail right there and then. Their fear and suspicion of the human race were simply that high.

As such, Ryoma was mostly nervous about the demi-humans. And put

another way, any other problem wasn't on his mind. At least until he actually read Simone's letter...

"There are movements in Helnesgoula. There are signs that soon an army of several tens of thousands will march into Xarooda again... Ugh."

Reading the letter to its conclusion, Ryoma clicked his tongue and crushed it in his hands.

*Dammit, is the beast of the north about to straight up interfere now...?!*

The letter informed Ryoma that the price of armaments like swords and armor was increasing, along with the costs of rations. That, coupled with the fact that several knights orders that were stationed in the western border to serve as a check to the Holy Qwiltantia Empire were moved to the east, signaled that some sort of movement was about to take place within the coming month. The end of the letter was Simone's promise to keep gathering information.

"Looks like her intelligence organization is coming into shape," Sara commented.

Simone's role was to handle trade. She was to raise funds, acquire supplies, and keep and gather intelligence on the diplomatic movements of the different nations. This was, in effect, slightly different from the role Ryoma expected out of Gennou, his granddaughter Sakuya, and the rest of the Igasaki clan.

Gennou's role focused on counterintelligence — eliminating spies that attempted to sneak into the peninsula, as well as handling opposing assassins. Simone's role was to keep an eye on the overall movements and state of affairs of the other powers in the continent, and inform Ryoma.

Famines, plagues, wars, revolts. There are always signs reflected in the market economy that precede such events. The cost of foods skyrockets during famines, and price of medicine increases during plagues. A country's economy was a window into its internal affairs.

So when the prices of rations and armaments increase like they did now, it was safe to assume a military operation was at hand. With this in mind, it was clear Simone was doing her job well.

"Yeah, she's doing a good job." Ryoma nodded quietly.

But his gaze, unlike his words, was severe. Seeing her master's mood, Sara parted her lips to speak.

"This is bad timing, isn't it...?"

Several months ago, the battle of the Notis plains took place. The O'ltormea Empire won the battle, but their invasion didn't surge into Xarooda's territories because the Kingdom of Helnesgoula launched their own invasion of Xarooda.

The only reason the Kingdom of Xarooda hadn't been wiped off the western continent's map was because O'ltormea was dreading the possibility of a concurrent invasion from the beast of the north. But if this letter told the truth, the situation would soon change.

"Well, I suppose complaining about it isn't going to change anything..." Ryoma's expression softened at Sara's words, and he gave a sardonic shrug.

A war was like a giant rock thrown into an otherwise serene pool. The rock shakes the water's surface, and its ripples spread in all directions. Similar to that, a war influences any surrounding countries in a multitude of ways. Those influences could be for the better or for the worse, but one thing was for certain — there would always, certainly, be some kind of influence or change.

The problem was that there was no telling where those influences would appear and how. An increase in the market price of certain items was negligible, but Xarooda could ask Rhoadseria for reinforcements. And how would Queen Lupis react if she would be required to send out troops?

The most probable option would be that Helena Steiner would lead the army, but it was doubtful that things would end with just her taking to the field. At worst, he himself would be forced to go to war, and this was the worst possible development for Ryoma, who wanted to prioritize developing and governing his land. Worse yet, there was no guarantee this wasn't what Lupis and her followers were plotting to do.

*I hope I'm being anxious for no reason here...*

Ryoma heaved another deep sigh. He realized he was overthinking things, but he also knew reality was a series of unexpected developments. He knew he should prepare for the unpredictable if possible.

*After getting that report from Boltz that his task was going along well, I figured I might be able to take a breather. Guess not, though... Seriously, it's one headache after another.*

Ryoma had a fortress constructed at the feet of the Tilt Mountain Range, which was at the base of the peninsula. Boltz was currently in charge of the territory's security, and was heading there with fifty of their best troops.

Ryoma recently met with Count Salzberg, and the fortress was built with his approval. On paper, it was a defensive facility built to halt the progression of the monsters coming from the region south of Epirus. The truth was that the purpose behind its construction was quite the opposite. It was a checkpoint meant to keep out adventurers and spies attempting to enter the peninsula.

The presence of adventures wasn't normally a nuisance. They dispatched monsters, which were usually pests and dangerous threats. But right now, monster hunting was one of Wortenia's leading industries. Ryoma much preferred to have his own soldiers take care of any monsters that needed slaying over letting adventures do it.

Moreover, the peninsula was currently dealing with the issue of the demi-humans. If Ryoma was to nurture the relations between his side and the elves, he needed to get them to trust him as a human, and there was no telling what an adventurer that wandered into Wortenia might do. They might capture a demi-human like the pirates did, and that would deal a crippling blow to his attempts to build a relationship with Nelcius.

For all the demi-humans cared, one human's acts were reflective of the entirety of the race. And for that reason, Ryoma couldn't afford to have an adventurer do something untoward. And true to Ryoma's intentions, Boltz's work did result in a noticeable drop in the number of adventurers gaining entrance to the peninsula. Some did try to get in without going through the highway, but Gennou and his clan were effectively disposing of them.

So far, the turnout of their efforts was looking good. But if a war were to break out in a neighboring country, there was the chance of it spreading out. No, it wasn't a chance — the fires of war *would* spread. That much was certain. And that wasn't something Ryoma needed right now, when he was focused on

developing the Wortenia Peninsula.

To an onlooker, he likely looked like a hero who rose up to nobility despite being a commoner, but in truth, he wasn't that lofty. In fact, Ryoma was quite convinced the goddess of fate hated him. Had she favored him, he never would have been summoned to this world to begin with.

"But the fighting will only take place in the Kingdom of Xarooda. It shouldn't influence us too directly..." Sara said, to which Ryoma smiled bitterly.

She was right. There was no doubt the war would influence them somehow, but even if Xarooda were to request Rhoadseria for reinforcements, the war shouldn't affect them too much so long as Ryoma wasn't asked to be the one to send those forces.

Ryoma couldn't nod at her assessment, though. A bad, ominous feeling brewed in his heart. Ryoma possessed a small number of troops. Their numbers were somewhat larger now since they regrouped with Gennou's clan, but they only had four hundred battle-ready troops. It would take a while longer before the slaves Simone delivered would be of use.

But even if Ryoma were to assume their training would be complete on time, he would still only be able to mobilize less than a thousand troops. At best, he could muster eight hundred or nine hundred. At worst, he'd only manage six hundred. By comparison, the average size of a knight order was two thousand five hundred troops. Ryoma's available forces wouldn't even reach half those numbers.

That said, these numbers did match what a single territory's governor would have as reserve troops. And when considering they were all capable of thaumaturgy, they were by no means negligible. As a force to defend his territory, they were more than just capable enough.

However...

*We need more numbers, even if it means pushing it. I'll need to ask Simone to urgently send us another thousand slaves... And we'll need to speed up work on that thing, too.*

Ryoma's survival instincts were telling him that the current number of troops

he had left him in danger. And Ryoma obeyed those instincts, which had only grown more acute as he cheated death time and again since being summoned to this world. And he knew that his survival and the survival of his companions hinged on how much they could prepare ahead of time.

“Hmm... Gennou has told me as much, but this city is built quite elaborately. Are the trenches built along the road meant to make sure rain water does not go to waste?” Jinnai asked, squinting as he looked out the window.

The moonlight shined down on the streets. A few days ago, Ryoma granted the Igasaki clan a sector of the town to call their own. Five men and women sat around a table, in an estate built at the center of that sector. Those were the elder council, which stood as the will of the Igasaki clan.

“Indeed. It was our lord’s idea. The highway is built similarly,” Gennou said.

“Despite his youth, that one is resourceful.” Gennai nodded.

“’Tis a bit boorish, but quite the functional, efficient city. And it develops at a shocking pace,” Ryuusai said, his voice quite impressed.

The cityscape that spread out beyond their window seemed to be changing by the day. This city grew continually larger, and rapidly so. And its developments were by no means haphazard or random, either. It was done under detailed calculations and cautious urban planning.

“But it is lacking in elegance.” Sae replied to Ryuusai’s words with a teasing tone.

True to her words, the city of Sirius was built while stressing functionality, but completely ignored the idea of aesthetics. It had a sort of artificial, inorganic impression to it. It was different from old Japanese construction, which mostly used wood. Ryoma had most of the buildings made out of stone, probably to lessen the chances of a fire hazard. That only served to make Sirius more drab and unsightly.

“Well, we do live in an age of war. Elegance offers little practical advantages,” Gennai said.

“You may say that, Gennai, but think back to the capital of Kyoto

grandmother once told us about," Ume slightly admonished him. "Do we truly have no need for a touch of elegance? After all, it would not do for our lord to be seen as but the governor of a backwater country."

Elegance. A word that implied tastefulness and refinement. The fragrance of culture, or a refined artistic sense. Of course, rustic brusqueness wasn't inherently a bad thing, but it alone was not enough. Culture was power. It was an aspect of national power — different from military might, but still crucial. An important aspect to consider when building a country.

"That may be true... But it is not as if we have a shred of elegance to our names, either."

By the very nature of their profession, the ninjas weren't completely unskilled in matters of song, dance or music. Pretending to be traveling minstrels or bards gave them a pretty flexible cover story for when they needed to infiltrate other countries. But at the same time, they weren't truly artists — they were ninjas. They didn't have any actual artistic pursuits. Their skills were enough to entertain an amateurish ear, but not good enough to hold an audience's attention. They were, at best, only slightly above average in terms of their artistic skills.

"Gennai, perhaps you should take up poetry? I believe your household published an anthology of poems during the Heian period?" Ryuusai said teasingly as Gennai scratched his head awkwardly.

"Hmm. Perhaps I should." Gennai replied in an overtly serious tone, prompting everyone to chuckle pleasantly.

"But jokes aside, we should discuss that some other time," Ryuusai continued. "I believe that pursuing any notions of elegance right now would only serve to make our lord more anxious."

Culture was an important source of national power, but countries that leaned on cultural wealth too much only drove themselves to ruin. Ryuusai's words had truth to them.

"Our lord shows great interest in the demi-humans' culture," Gennou said. "But of course, that depends on whether he can get them to open their hearts to him. And that will take considerable time."

Everyone lowered their heads at those words.

“Ooh, the demi-humans... From what I hear, they are quite cautious of us?” Jinnai asked.

“Yes, quite right.” Gennou nodded.

Gennou recalled the expressions of fear and hostility they directed at them. When the ninjas he sent to scout out the Wortenia Peninsula encountered them in the forest, the demi-humans attacked them without any chance for dialogue. Many of the ninjas were greatly hurt in the exchange.

Escorting the elven girls they rescued from the pirates back to the village took a great deal of effort, too. But thankfully — and due to persistent, unrelenting negotiations — the relationship between the demi-humans and Ryoma’s side was improving little by little, compared to the open hostility they initially showed. One couldn’t call it a truly cordial relationship yet, though.

The only truly good part was that the people on their side didn’t show much of a dislike toward the demi-humans. Most of Sirius’s residents were in their early teens, and the rest were mercenaries. Neither of those were believers in the God of Light, Meneos. But of course, if the demi-humans were to turn hostile against them, none of Sirius’s residents would hesitate in helping drive them out.

Still, the fact that his people weren’t opposed to the demi-humans for a religious reason was a stroke of luck for Ryoma. If all went as Ryoma planned, it would only take time for the tear between mankind and the demi-humans to be closed.

*All that remains is...*

Gennou had served at Ryoma’s side since the Rhoadserian civil war, and he believed he had a good grasp of that young man’s capabilities.

“I still believe my lord is the kind of person our ancestors sought. What do you say, though?” Gennou asked.

The other five fell silent. The wish of the first leader of the Igasaki clan — the motive for which the Igasaki clan had honed their skills over the long period of five centuries. They wandered the land, masterless, in search of someone who

would lead them. At times they were shunned as outsiders. Other times, they were outright persecuted. But now, they finally found someone.

Ryoma Mikoshiba.

“I feel we can throw our lot in with him,” Ryuusai said.

“I concur with Ryuusai’s opinion. There is also the matter of what happened the other day...” Jinnai agreed.

Sae nodded silently.

“The time may be right to have the heads of the branch families convene... It only remains to be seen if our lord would be able to draw it, I believe...” Ume whispered.

“That, I do not know. But it did cry out recently. Chances are, he would be able to draw it.”

The five of them turned their gazes to a single katana presented on a shelf in that very room. That blade, known as Kikoku — the Wailing Demon — slumbered in the embrace of its white scabbard. It remained silent, awaiting the arrival of its worthy wielder...

†

Roughly at the same time that Ryoma received the letter from Simone, one Owen Spiegel — prime minister of a certain country sitting at the eastern tip of the western continent — entered his master’s office. The purpose of that visit was a secret meeting was to discuss the war against the Empire of O’ltormea.

“Your Majesty... I’ve made preparations as per your previous letter... I’m sure a messenger from Xarooda is on his way now,” Owen said.

At those words, the aging man he spoke to nodded deeply.

“And how goes the war?”

“Ten thousand men led by Ecclesia Marinelle are approaching Rhoadseria’s border.”

“Understood. A job well done, Owen... The road to Xarooda should open soon.”

“I’m not worthy, Your Majesty.” Owen deeply bowed his head, despite the anxiety filling his expression. “But do you think that queen will agree to our appeal that easily?”

Owen was worried over the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s new queen, Lupis Rhoadserians. In his eyes, she was an indecisive woman. This was despite the fact that, when considering the location of the countries on the continent, it was clear to see which country would be attacked next should Xarooda fall. In most cases, it would be Rhoadseria who would be sending appeals for aid to the Kingdom of Myest.

*I understand that her regime isn’t stable yet because of the recent civil war, and yet...*

Even with that in mind, the fact that she hadn’t gathered enough influence over the country in all this time reflected poorly on her rule. And that only made the military prowess she was rumored to have look dubious. Even if she was as skilled as the rumors claimed, it was completely wasted talent if she couldn’t come to a decision.

“Of course, I think it’s quite probable that she will. And you know what to do then, yes?”

“Of course, Your Majesty. I’ve stressed the point to Ecclesia, as well. However... Are you sure that this is the right decision?”

“I understand your doubts, Owen. I have no desire to engage in a meaningless war, either. And yet... Even Xarooda’s knights, as mighty as they are sung to be, will not be able to hold on for much longer. General Belares’s third son is rather capable, but do agree with me that it’s unlikely he surpasses his father.”

Even with the advantageous position Xarooda’s topography granted them, the gap between their forces and the O’ltormea Empire’s numbers was far too great. And on top of that, the loss of General Belares — the hero praised as Xarooda’s guardian deity — was too painful of a blow.

“And there’s no telling when the vixen of the north might act on her ambitions, either.”

The ruler of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, Grindiana Helnecharles, was by no

means as greedy and avaricious as the rumors made her out to be. Owen knew this full well, having met her face to face once before. She wasn't reckless enough to make blind attempts to expand her territory, but at the same time, she wasn't naive enough to let a battle she was confident she could win pass her by.

*Right now, things could go either way... But things will certainly become much more difficult when the Kingdom of Helnesgoula becomes determined to destroy Xarooda...*

And what road will Myest choose then? Owen couldn't help but heave a heavy sigh.

# Chapter 2: A Messenger from a Neighboring Country

The castle standing over the capital city of Pireas was filled with a heavy, anxious air. The high-ranking bureaucrats were rushing to their posts with pale faces, and the military officials were all forcibly gathered in a conference room, regardless of if they were commanders or not. Even the knights were called to the barracks without regard for if they were on duty or not and ordered to make sure their gear was serviced and battle-ready.

Everyone moved about the palace hurriedly. Most of them were simply doing as they were told, and only a select few actually had a grasp on the situation. No... Even they didn't truly understand what was going on. As they all walked past a certain set of doors at the palace, they moved away quickly while sneaking a concerned glance at that room's entrance. Those tightly shut iron doors...

"Yes... I understand what the letter is saying, but... I don't think we can afford to do this..." Queen Lupis said with a deep sigh.

Meltina's explanation only served to darken her mood further. The faces of everyone in this room were thick with grief and concern. This held true for Queen Lupis as well as her aides, Mikhail and Meltina. The representative and one in charge of the army was Helena. Count Bergstone was the leader of several other influential nobles who represented the civil officials.

"But Your Majesty, ignoring this request now would mean..." Meltina interjected.

"I know... But does our country currently have the power to do this?" Lupis asked, her voice thick with resignation.

Queen Lupis had no intention of ignoring this issue. Quite the opposite; her conclusion was that this wasn't a situation they ought to ignore. But while she did have the flaw of letting her emotions get the better of her, she was by no means a fool. As a member of the royal family, she was given the finest education available in this world. So long as she retained her composure, she

was a ruler capable of seeing the reality of things. And she could see that the problem this letter detailed drove the Kingdom of Rhoadseria into a situation it couldn't withdraw from.

"No, it's impossible... Especially now, when we must remain cautious and watch over the nobles' faction movements... However..." Meltina said hesitantly.

"But we cannot stand to ignore this appeal, either," Count Bergstone continued. "If this letter came soon after we quelled the uprising things would have been different, but it's been nearly a year since the civil war. It will still take time for our national power to recover, of course, but we can't use that as justification anymore... And besides, this time..."

Count Bergstone's gaze fell on two letters placed on the table. Having switched to the princess's faction's side during the civil war, Count Salzberg was picked as one of Queen Lupis's aides for his superior political prowess. He was acutely aware of the political power balance in the kingdom, and was wise enough to keep an eye out for the other neighboring countries.

Had he gained more of Queen Lupis's trust, he would have surely been appointed the position of prime minister. And he could tell that the dilemma the other kingdoms forced on them now was an invitation to a labyrinth with no way out.

*It's likely that no matter what we choose to do, this country's outlook is bleak...* he thought.

Two letters sat before Queen Lupis. One was a letter they'd received rather regularly ever since the Empire of O'ltormea launched its invasion of the Kingdom of Xarooda. It was a request for reinforcements by King Julianus I, ruler of Xarooda.

The Kingdom of Xarooda lost to O'ltormea during the battle of the Notis plains, which pushed their defensive line into the interior of their territories. To break through this stalemate, they naturally requested their fellow countries of the east, Myest and Rhoadseria, for reinforcements.

O'ltormea ruled over the central regions of the western continent, possessing a vast territory and population. Xarooda alone wasn't capable of holding back

its military might. But three countries made up the eastern side of the western continent — Rhoadseria, Myest, and Xarooda. If they were to ally, they would have been capable of opposing O'ltormea.

And indeed, in past wars an alliance between the three had kept O'ltormea's ambitions in check. But this alliance was hardly formed out of camaraderie or friendship between the countries. The three countries were simply in a state of mutual dependence.

Without Xarooda to serve as a breakwater, the waves of war would wash over Rhoadseria. And should Rhoadseria fall, the surging war would crash over Myest next... And so, in the name of their own gain and wellbeing, both countries had to send reinforcements to Xarooda.

But over the last year, Queen Lupis had refused Julianus I's appeals for reinforcements, since she needed to stabilize Rhoadseria's national power and political climate. And the painful fact of the matter was that even when not accounting for that, Rhoadseria simply lacked the troops to dispatch.

General Albrecht held command over the military for years, and removing him meant the knights orders would need to be reorganized. This made Rhoadseria's military might decline greatly. With the knights of the established families out of the way, many soldiers who were shunned and kept from promotion now scrambled to claim those open positions. Many knights even held duels over them.

Helena worked hard to mitigate this situation, but the flames of ambition were hard to put out. And with people constantly fanning those flames, it only made sense she would struggle to extinguish them.

With all that in mind, dispatching their troops abroad with the nobles' faction beginning to stir was effectively suicide.

*We really should have rejected Count Gelhart's... Viscount Gelhart's offer of fealty and eliminated him back then... Having his court rank lowered does little to bother him. He agreed to those terms too easily, after all.*

Even with his rank lowered from Count to Viscount, Gelhart held great influence over the nobility. Worse yet, since Princess Radine was formally acknowledged as a member of the royal family, the nobles that were displeased

with Queen Lupis were beginning to unify under a firm banner.

In order to build a power structure with her at its center, Queen Lupis drove many of the nobles from the palace after the civil war ended. It was only natural that they would go on to turn to Gelhart and Princess Radine. From Lupis's perspective, it only made sense to cut out those who toadied up to Gelhart in the past. But those who were driven out weren't going to simply accept being treated that way.

Killing Gelhart would not have dispelled any of the displeasure the nobles felt, but it would have made it much harder for them to unite against Queen Lupis. Gelhart had power, and Princess Radine could serve as a just cause. And now, they stood as an obstacle to Queen Lupis.

*We should have stopped that negotiation, even if it meant leaving Mikhail Vanash to die. Though saying that now doesn't really matter, does it...?*

Count Bergstone's gaze turned to Mikhail, who stood with his arms crossed at Meltina's side. A bitter feeling filled his heart. A perfect victory should have been within their reach in the civil war. If only they didn't accept Gelhart's offer of fealty...

*We might not have had a choice, but Sir Mikoshiba could have found a way...*

Count Bergstone perfectly understood the position they were in at the time. He was part of that meeting, and Helena explained it to him, as well. There wasn't much they could do. But still, he couldn't help but resent the fact Ryoma simply nodded and allowed Queen Lupis to go ahead and accept Gelhart's proposal.

He knew that this was a misguided grudge to hold, but the fact remained that had they turned Gelhart down and executed Radine for impersonation, half of their current problems would not have existed. Any subversive forces in the country would still be forced to obey Queen Lupis, at least on the surface. And in that case, perhaps they would have been able to dispatch soldiers to Xarooda sooner.

*At least he knows his place now. That's the only silver lining here...*

In the past, Mikhail Vanash would simply mindlessly spout nonsense about

chivalry and the way of the knight and only serve to drive any meeting into disorder. But today, he kept his mouth shut. This prompted a small sigh out of Count Bergstone. The idea that Mikhail's growth as a person had to come at the price of Rhoadseria being driven to its current predicament felt like something of a sad joke.

With that thought in mind, Count Bergstone returned the conversation to its main topic.

"Our biggest problem is Myest's actions. They've already gathered their reinforcements along our eastern border, so they may be on their way as soon as we permit them to pass. And we can't deny their request, or they might declare war on us. And besides, now is our last chance to save Xarooda."

Everyone's gaze on the other letter placed on the table.

*Myest won't back down, no matter what...*

Count Bergstone easily noticed the anger and resolve Myest had when they wrote this letter. It was clear that leaving Xarooda to their fate would mean that O'ltormea would flood into the eastern regions like an avalanche, and none of the three countries could oppose it on their own. If anything, it was surprising Myest put up with Rhoadseria's attitude until now.

"This letter doesn't state it directly, but Myest's demand is clear... Do you intend for us to go to war with them, Your Majesty?"

Not letting Myest cross their territory wasn't an option, no matter what. The question was will they let them simply cross through alone or send their own reinforcements to join them.

*No, that's not a choice either...*

What would happen if they were to let Myest's military cross through without aiding Xarooda themselves? Hostilities might not break out at once against O'ltormea, but it would create a rift between the three countries — a deep, irreparable rift.

A rift that might manifest in Rhoadseria being attacked from both the east and the west at once, leading to its destruction. Neither Xarooda nor Myest would tolerate a friendly nation that wouldn't send them aid during such an

emergency.

“There’s no choice but to send over our troops, is there...?” she said, her voice thick with utter bitterness.

But they had no other choice.

*So she understands that much... But the question remains...*

Count Bergstone turned his eyes to Meltina.

“How many can we deploy?”

“Our forces are mostly reorganized, thanks to Lady Helena’s efforts... But given the state of the country, the most we can spare is a single knight order. We could have the nobles lend us their strength, of course, but if we were to rely only on our own strength...”

A despondent air settled over the room.

“The kingdom’s existence hangs in the balance, and we can only send two thousand and five hundred men...” Count Salzberg whispered in shock, representing the thoughts of everyone present.

It was far too small of a number to dispatch as reinforcements to another country. They would need at least five thousand, and the situation effectively called for ten thousand. Of course, they couldn’t send out all of their knights for this, but they also couldn’t expect any assistance from the nobles.

Everyone was aware of the air of unrest that hung over Rhoadseria, and cautiously watched over Gelhart’s movements. In this case, it wasn’t a matter of factions, though. Count Bergstone, Count Zeleph, and the other nobles aligned with Queen Lupis couldn’t send out any troops either.

That was because it was clear to see that if they sent their territory’s soldiers out of the country, those territories would be unable to resist and be reduced to ash if a revolt did break out again. If it were within the kingdom’s territories things were different, but they couldn’t afford to send anyone to assist in another country’s war.

“The nobles won’t move,” Meltina said. “Our only other option is conscripting the commoners, but... Honestly, we probably cannot expect great numbers

there. Of course, if we threaten them things are different, but...”

“But that would only end up pulling us back.” Queen Lupis shook her head and sighed.

Conscripting them would allow them to gather as many as twenty or thirty thousand. Even one hundred thousand wasn’t impossible. But conscripted commoners didn’t amount to much in terms of military might. If anything, they were a liability.

The problem was that this war wasn’t an invasion of another country. An invasion meant they would be allowed to pillage towns and villages, ravage the women, and sell any surviving villagers to slavery.

But this time, they were sending reinforcements. They would not be allowed to pillage and rape as they pleased. After all, who would accept reinforcements that wreak havoc in their own country? And while they would be given food and accommodations, it would be the bare minimum. Things might change if they take the head of a commander in the battlefield, but they couldn’t trust in that kind of stroke of luck.

Most soldiers would simply receive a paltry amount of money as payment for their service from the government, and that would be all. The reward didn’t justify putting one’s life on the line. The soldiers’ morale would be low, and they would likely argue against most orders they’d be given.

The worst possible scenario was that the disgruntled conscripts might actually turn on Xarooda’s cities, pillaging them instead. If it were a short operation in a neighboring country perhaps things would be different, but they couldn’t send them as reinforcements.

“In which case... We’ll need to dispatch a commander both countries would be pleased with.” Everyone nodded at Count Zeleph’s words.

They couldn’t afford to lose this war. A defeat here would mean Rhoadseria would be next in line to be menaced by O’ltormea’s ambitions. On top of that, they needed to pull off accomplishments that would make it so Xarooda and Myest don’t look down on them. If they were to send a handful of soldiers after shirking their requests for reinforcements for as long as they did, the other countries would have the worst possible impression of Rhoadseria.

If they did not contribute to the fighting in a big way, Xarooda and Myest would never forgive them for it. They would demand Rhoadseria make great trade concessions to compensate for it, assuming they didn't outright declare war on the country.

"I shall go," Helena said, parting her lips for the first time during this council.

The whole room fell silent at her declaration.

"Are you sure, Helena?" Queen Lupis finally said after a pause.

Her face was full of doubts and guilt. The only reinforcements they could reliably send out were two thousand five hundred knights, and they weren't to just go out and offer a bit of aid. They would need to perform admirably and reap resounding victories that would convince the other countries. Willingly doing this was, in all honesty and for all intents and purposes, knowingly drawing the short straw.

Helena, however, didn't hesitate.

"Of course, Your Majesty." Helena nodded, her eyes alight with strong will.

She would stop at nothing to save the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, and Helena was also the only person present in this meeting who could command the reinforcements. That wasn't so much an issue of Helena's capabilities, but rather of her fame and past achievements. Meltina and Mikhail were also Queen Lupis's aides, but their names weren't known in other countries.

If their two thousand five hundred men were to be led by an unknown greenhorn, no one would take them seriously and it would simply create more friction. The other countries would, however, be far more welcoming of Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War.

"Then we will have Lady Helena serve as the commander of our reinforcements. We will, however, need a second-in-command," Meltina said after confirming everyone agreed to Helena's offer.

Helena's achievements were unique and storied, but she didn't achieve them entirely on her own. And since they were being dispatched to another country, no one could tell what might happen. They needed a vice commander who could function as a replacement for Helena if need be.

“That does stand to reason... We would need a capable aide... But who should it be?” Count Zeleph asked. “Sir Mikhail, or maybe Lady Meltina? Those are the first two that come to mind among the manpower we can currently shift. But can we safely have them be out of the kingdom for what might potentially be years?”

It was a natural question. There weren’t many known military officers of note in Rhoadseria at the moment, and most of them were given roles that made them hard to replace. Any force sent out to Xarooda would return only six months later at the earliest, and perhaps even years later, depending on how the war goes. Those officers didn’t have the leisure to do that.

Still, they couldn’t send Helena to a lethal battlefield on her own. And everyone fell silent, until a single man finally spoke up.

“Could you not ask Sir Mikoshiba?”

The sound of someone swallowing their breath nervously echoed through the room far more loudly than it should have. That name was a taboo that everyone had considered, but no one dared speak of. A momentary silence fell over the room, which was followed by Count Bergstone’s angry shouting.

“You fool! What are you proposing, Mikhail?! Do you have any idea what you just said?!”

Count Bergstone shouted at him, throwing all notions of politeness and ceremony to the winds. His anger was clear. But no one judged Count Bergstone for calling Mikhail directly by his first name. Mikhail’s words were simply that shameless and unexpected.

*That idiot... I’d thought he’d become a bit more meek after his house arrest was lifted...*

Seeing Mikhail hold his tongue for the entire meeting so far, Count Bergstone assumed he had learned his place and knew when not to interfere. That impression, however, seemed to have been mistaken.

“Sir Mikhail... What are you trying to do, precisely?” Count Zeleph exhaled a deep sigh slowly as he turned a questioning glance at Mikhail.

His words were thick with caution toward Mikhail.

“Me? I’m not trying to do anything,” Mikhail said brazenly, ignoring the glares being directed at him. “I’m merely pointing out that we haven’t any other options. I do believe that Sir Mikoshiba is the natural choice, however, given his accomplishments.”

In terms of just Ryoma’s abilities, Mikhail’s proposal did come across as the natural choice. There was no doubt that it was his strength that allowed Queen Lupis to claim victory despite her initial position being one of overwhelming inferiority. His name would have been the first to come up, but no one did nominate him. No, perhaps it would be wiser to say that everyone else intentionally wiped his name out of the list of possibilities.

“If you truly, honestly say that, then I may have to question your motives,” Count Zeleph growled angrily, making his disgruntlement evident.

Normally, Count Zeleph tended to hide behind Count Bergstone’s stances and didn’t often speak in councils like this one. This only served to make his aggressiveness here all the more striking. But even with that clear anger directed at him, Mikhail remained composed. His eyes shined with cold light as he spoke with a smile.

“Would you, now? Despite him being a commoner, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria made Sir Mikoshiba into a noble. It is only natural that he lends this country his aid in its time of crisis. And besides, this is our last chance. If we let this chance pass us by, this country will fall to ruin. Am I wrong?”

He was not. Ryoma was indeed a former commoner — a mere mercenary of unknown origins. If one were to focus on that fact, Mikhail’s words rang true. And from that perspective, it would only be natural that he would repay the royal house for the privilege of being a noble by protecting this kingdom with his life.

Assuming one ignored that Queen Lupis feared Ryoma and drove him into the monster-infested no-man’s land that was the Wortenia Peninsula, of course...

*You shameless, ungrateful lout... Do you believe yourself to be king of this country?!*

That thought crossed the heart of Count Bergstone and nearly everyone else present in this council. He was very much the cause of most of their problems,

but he shoved the duty of cleaning up the havoc left in the wake of his mistakes onto others. Everyone else glared at him with harsh, criticizing eyes.

But in contrast to Count Bergstone's indignation, Queen Lupis remained silent. Her expression was full of guilt, terror... and the slightest bit of hope. Everyone present could tell what she was thinking. Queen Lupis had thought of the same thing Mikhail did in some corner of her heart.

"Very well. I agree with Sir Mikhail that he is appropriate for this role... But the question remains. Will Sir Mikoshiba agree to that?" Count Bergstone spoke of his doubts while shaking his head.

His voice was extremely sarcastic and bitter, and somehow terribly mocking. Mikhail, however, seemed to completely disregard his tone.

"The fact remains that his strength rivals Lady Helena's. And even the most prized of swords is useless if it is not put into use, no?"

Count Bergstone couldn't deny that. He hoped to rely on Ryoma's strength as well. Considering the capabilities Ryoma displayed during the civil war, he was very much a trump card for Rhoadseria. And given their situation, they couldn't afford to not use it since they stood to be next in line to be attacked. And if that were to happen, they'd be destroyed under O'ltormea's greater forces.

Most of Rhoadseria's territory was flat, open plains. Their population was vast and their land ripe for agriculture thanks to ample water sources. But on the other hand, this also meant their country's topography had little in the way of natural defenses. And when it came to fighting in open plains, the number of each army's troops were the deciding factor.

Once they would be invaded, they likely wouldn't be able to expect any reinforcements from Myest. If O'ltormea were to cross the western mountain range which served as Rhoadseria's border with Xarooda, the kingdom would likely be stomped out quickly by the empire's overwhelming numbers.

So in terms of just Rhoadseria's circumstances, Mikhail's suggestion made sense. His words were based on Rhoadseria's actual current national power and situation. Even the strongest trump card was worth nothing if it wasn't played at the most critical point in the game.

But if they could simply ask Ryoma for help, they wouldn't be in this plight. It was only natural Count Bergstone's words would be as laced with resentment as they were, because Mikhail Vanash was the cause of their problems here. His fixation on earning merit in the war was why they couldn't apprehend Gelhart — which led directly to the difficult position they were in.

"And Sir Mikoshiba's compliance does not matter. We need only give him the order. And, should he refuse, we shall simply handle him as we would any outlaw and kill him. What noble would refuse a royal order when the Kingdom's existence is at risk, after all?"

There wasn't any trace of emotion to Mikhail's voice. It reverberated coldly, almost mechanically through the room.

"That's absurd... Has your sanity completely abandoned you?" Count Bergstone said, forgetting he was in Queen Lupis's presence.

Mikhail, however, simply regarded him with an expression that almost seemed surprised.

"Well, now... Count Bergstone, did I say anything odd? What point is there in keeping a noble who lacks loyalty to the royal house?"

"What are you saying? If you claim that to be the nobility's duty, then you may as well put most of this country's nobles to the sword."

"Indeed. And that is why we must put Sir Mikoshiba to good use."

Both of their voices picked up in volume, and they displayed clear enmity toward one another. Most of Rhoadseria's nobles did not display unconditional loyalty to the royal house. If they had, they would not have been so uncooperative, even with the presence of the banner that was Princess Radine.

The same held true even for the nobles present here. Count Bergstone was deeply loyal to Queen Lupis, of course, but his fealty wasn't unconditional. He only served her as loyally as he did because she placed him in a key position after the civil war ended. It was the difference between receiving one's favor and being given a service.

One year ago, Count Bergstone was part of the neutral faction, and refused to lend the Princess faction his aid despite repeated requests from Meltina. That

was because Meltina expected him to help out of nothing but sheer loyalty to the throne.

The idea of loyalty to the throne had a pleasant ring to it, to be sure, and some would lay down their lives for it. But most people would not. People needed to know that whatever they do will give them a benefit of some sorts.

Mikhail knew this terribly well. Hardly anyone sided with Queen Lupis one year ago... Not until the day Ryoma Mikoshiba appeared.

“What are you in such a panic over?” Helena cut into their argument, after watching over it silently for a while.

“What, you ask? Isn’t it obvious? We haven’t much time left. Isn’t executing Baron Mikoshiba and unifying the nobles’ will our fastest option?”

Mikhail was caught off-guard by the question, and unintentionally let his true intentions slip. Helena’s gaze sharpened.

“I see... So that was what you really meant,” she said.

“N-No...” Mikhail’s face contorted. “I didn’t... I said nothing...”

Her words made Mikhail aware that he had just said something he was better off leaving unsaid. True, making an example of Ryoma may have unified the country. But there was no need to specifically make Ryoma the target. There were plenty of other expendable people they could sacrifice.

Despite calling Ryoma their trump card, Mikhail suggested that they didn’t use it against their enemy, but rather discard it to make a point before their other allies. His words and his intentions were evidently two different things.

*I knew it... He still holds a grudge against Sir Mikoshiba...* Count Bergstone realized at once.

At a sight, Mikhail’s claims seemed to be reasonable, but once he realized his true intentions it was hard not to judge him harshly.

“Do you hate Sir Mikoshiba?” Count Bergstone asked.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Mikhail replied composedly, trying to cloak his confusion.

Apparently he chose to feign ignorance, but it felt like it was far too late for that. His attitude just moments ago made it clear to everyone present just what his intentions were. And yet, he tried to hide his intent.

“Do you hate Sir Mikoshiba that much?” Count Bergstone repeated the question. “That failure was yours and yours alone. Resenting him would be misguided.”

“I haven’t the foggiest clue what you mean.”

Mikhail repeated that farce once again. But upon seeing him say those words a second time, Count Bergstone felt a chill run down his spine.

*Those eyes...!*

They were filled with a deep, bottomless darkness. Mikhail’s gaze was filled with flames of hatred and obsession. As far as Count Bergstone could see, the Mikhail Vanash he knew wasn’t there. True, he always knew him to be a short-sighted person, but he’d never seen Mikhail completely ignore appearances and regard another person with such clear, blatant antagonism.

Count Bergstone could somewhat understand why he’d loath Ryoma from the bottom of his heart. It was perhaps only natural for him to desire for Ryoma to disappear. But it was an unjustified grudge. And he couldn’t allow those personal lusts to plunge Rhoadseria into further chaos.

*I pity you, but...*

Sparks flickered between the two.

“Stop this!” Queen Lupis’s shout echoed through the room. “That’s enough... I will give a royal decree. Firstly, Helena. Contact Baron Mikoshiba and inform him that he is summoned to the capital, post haste. He won’t necessarily refuse, so for now we will explain our situation to him. We can decide what to do in case he refuses later.... Understood?”

“Your Majesty...” Meltina whispered, aghast.

But Queen Lupis gave her orders rapidly, ignoring her aide’s words. They had no time for pointless pontification. Despite the doubts eating away at her, Queen Lupis made her decision.

No... It was more than that. She felt the cold gazes fixed on Mikhail by everyone else in this room, and wanted to shield him from it. Or perhaps it was because she saw his hand reach for the sword sheathed at his waist for one moment.

“Inform Xarooda that we will send them reinforcements. Tell them it will take us some time to prepare, and our forces will set out in a month. And inform Myest’s forces waiting at the border that they’re free to pass. Understood, Count Bergstone? We will need to be prepared within the month.”

“A month, you say... It’ll be difficult. And are you sure we should allow them to enter?”

While they did share a common enemy, the circumstances hadn’t changed. There was the slim chance Myest’s side had already grown impatient and decided to suppress Rhoadseria first. To that end, perhaps it would have been wiser to wait until Rhoadseria’s army was prepared before giving them permission to pass.

That was the reasoning behind Count Bergstone’s question, but Queen Lupis shook her head in denial.

“We don’t have a choice. Both countries’ impression of us is bad as it is since we haven’t moved so far. And letting them pass only once we’re prepared would mean letting them wait for too long... If Xarooda ends up falling because of that, there would be no point to us sending out reinforcements anyway.”

Moving an army took time, especially when it came to dispatching it abroad. Supplies and spare armaments would have to be prepared. Count Bergstone’s fears weren’t unfounded, but they were effectively out of time. And so was Xarooda. The contents of their letter made it clear.

“Is everyone clear on their role?” Queen Lupis asked.

Whatever her reasons were, the monarch made her choice, and her vassals could only nod.

“““By your will, Your Majesty!”””

Everyone rose from their seats and bent at the waist in obedience. All in the name of protecting the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

As the council drew to a close, most of its participants left, leaving only three figures in the room.

“Why did you say that?” Queen Lupis asked.

“As your vassal, I’ve offered what I thought to be the best possible solution,” Mikhail replied calmly, without a hint of hesitation.

His voice was colder than she’d ever heard it before.

“Is that... really the entirety of your intent?” she asked cautiously.

“Whatever do you mean? Do you find my loyalty so difficult to believe in?” Even with Lupis’s questioning gaze on him, Mikhail’s expression didn’t change.

He was unwavering, like a doll that lost its emotions.

“Sir Mikhail! You cannot speak to Her Majesty like this!” Meltina angrily reprimanded his attitude.

Perhaps she was still irritated by his attitude during the council, which may well have justified drawing a sword on him depending on the circumstances.

“It’s fine, Meltina.” Queen Lupis restrained her, however.

“But, Your Majesty!”

Even though Mikhail was a vassal who supported her for many years, his attitude as of late was disrespectful. Ignoring it would only greatly impact Lupis’s authority as queen, and that was something Meltina could not allow. But seeing the emotion filling Queen Lupis’s eyes made Meltina swallow her words.

“Please...”

Just how much resolve was hiding behind those words?

“My apologies, Your Majesty.” Seeing the shiver in Queen Lupis’s shoulders made Meltina bow her head and retreat back against the wall. Nodding at her, Queen Lupis turned back to Mikhail with a sad gaze.

“Well, good work today. You may step down.”

“Understood. I will be leaving, then.”

Milkhail bowed his head and turned around to leave. The sight of his

retreating back told everything there was to tell. A deep, dark, profound obsession roosted within Mikhail Vanash's heart. Two sorrowful sets of eyes watched as he strode unflinchingly out of the room.

"What drove him to this...?" Queen Lupis whispered a question to which Meltina couldn't offer an answer.

The reason was clear, though. Neither could put it into words, though. Doing that would shatter Queen Lupis's heart like glass.

"You've done nothing, Your Majesty." Meltina could say nothing else.

†

In Mikhail's allotted room in the castle, two men conversed, illuminated by a single lamp placed on the table. One was the owner of this room, and the other was a person who should not have been in this room.

"It seems the dispatch has been decided as per schedule," Akitake Sudou said unexpectedly, eliciting a grimace from Mikhail who sat on the sofa opposite of him.

"How do you know that? That hasn't been made public yet."

The decision to dispatch reinforcements to the Kingdom of Xarooda was decided on the noon of that day. Those in a position of public officer were informed of it, but the man sitting before him didn't hold that kind of position.

On the surface, Sudou's position was that of a servant dispatched by Viscount Gelhart to serve Princess Radine. He may have learned of this news eventually, but Mikhail would have to be suspicious if that news had leaked to him on the very day it was decided.

Sudou, however, simply smiled in amusement at Mikhail's suspicion.

"You may all try to hide the news, but the more you scramble to obfuscate something, the faster word of it seems to spread... And it spreads fast, indeed..."

Mikhail scoffed in displeasure at Sudou's condescending attitude.

"Your hearing is as keen as ever, Sudou," he said.

At first glance, it may have seemed like a compliment, but Mikhail was clearly looking down at Sudou. He saw him as a lowly commoner scurrying about the castle like a rat. He didn't put it into words, but the way he eyed Sudou communicated that clearly.

"How very harsh of you... Sadly, I've no other talents to my name." Sudou shrugged, not showing any concern for Mihkail's scorn.

"Hmph. I've no idea why you serve as Princess Radine's aide..." Mikhail snorted with a hint of annoyance at Sudou's slippery attitude.

"That would be because I, much like yourself, Sir Mikhail, am appreciated for my wholehearted loyalty to the royal house," Sudou said with a smile.

"Nonsense... You haven't the slightest bit of loyalty for Rhoadseria," Mikhail spat out in displeasure.

*Such an utterly foolish man...* Sudou thought to himself mockingly. *You can't even hold on to your calmness without all that bravado.*

Mikhail's standing had been in a steep decline ever since last year's civil war. Truth be told, it wasn't just as low as one's standing could get — it went beyond that and straight into negative values, if such a thing is even possible.

*And your stupidity drove you against the wall... All that's left is to finish you off. I look forward to seeing just how terribly you crash and burn...*

Being the number one swordsman in Rhoadseria and Queen Lupis's highly loyal, close aide, Mikhail Vanash's name once had great glory and praise attached to it. His loyalty was seen by the kingdom as a treasure. He wasn't without his flaws, of course, but Mikhail was viewed as a young man worthy of entrusting the kingdom's future to.

And all of that was now a relic of the past. His pursuit of merit led to him shamefully falling prisoner, and upon being released he was sentenced to several months of house arrest. Everyone's opinion of him had greatly worsened as a result.

Following his house arrest being lifted, Queen Lupis used the reorganization of her government to instate him as captain of the Royal Guard, which drew much ire from both his subordinates and colleagues. There was even talk of

Queen Lupis dismissing Helena in order to elevate him to the rank of General, which only served to worsen his position.

It made sense for Queen Lupis to station vassals she trusted in positions close to her, but everyone else didn't understand this. For all they were concerned, Mikhail curried favor with the queen while actively acting to undermine her.

And thanks to Sudou spreading rumors outside the palace that were a deft mixture of truth and lies, Mikhail's reputation was plummeting ever further down. His colleagues and subordinates scorned him while the nobles mocked him. To a proud knight like Mikhail, this situation was effectively a living hell.

Were he truly a fool, he wouldn't pay those opinions any mind. And if he were truly that lowly and despicable, he would adjust his standing a bit more cleverly. But sadly, Mikhail Vanash was far too simple and honest of a man. And it was because he could distinguish good and bad and knew how the world worked, and remained proud and honest despite that, that he couldn't tolerate this outcome.

There was a gap between ideals and reality, and most people who fall into that gap lose sight of their hearts. To escape the suffering before their eyes, they torment and curse those around them. Not knowing that doing so only tightens the noose around their necks all the harder...

And being well aware of that, Sudou dripped sweet poison into Mikhail's heart. Poison that would ravage his heart further and deprive him of the capacity for reason. And eventually, all the truth would be drained from his heart, leaving only convenient fiction to be used.

"That much goes without saying. I am no match for you, Sir Mikhail, but Princess Radine is an illegitimate daughter. She may have been formally recognized as a member of the royal family, but she has few vassals that believe in her from the bottom of their hearts. So even a humble, lowly man such as myself is given the honor of her trust."

"I see." Mikhail smirked in satisfaction at Sudou's answer.

The poison in Sudou's words tickled at Mikhail's sense of self-importance. He could see through the transparent flattery that the smiling man before his eyes was trying to feed him. But after having been pelted with scorn and mockery by

his subordinates and colleagues for so long, these words were the only source of healing he had left. He clung to them, even though he knew they were a lie...

“Incidentally...” Mikhail said, taking up a glass full of wine off the table and leveling a questioning gaze at Sudou. “I made that proposal during the council, just like you told me. Are you sure that was wise, though?”

“Of course,” Sudou nodded composedly at the question. “My apologies, Sir Mikhail, but did you perhaps come up with some better idea?”

Mikhail lost all words at the sight of that confident demeanor.

“Well, no... But I cannot imagine he will simply obey without argument.”

“No, he probably wouldn’t. But in that case, it will simply give you pretext to have him executed.”

“Yes, I understand that much. I explained it during the council, too. But honestly, that man has a way of being extremely unpredictable. Who’s to say what he might attempt.”

Mikhail’s claim was a rather level-headed analysis of the situation. As obsessed as he was with his hatred for Ryoma, he still retained that much judgment. Those words only served to exasperate Sudou, however.

*You’re contradicting yourself...*

Indeed, it was a contradiction. He said Ryoma would never swallow these demands willingly, and that there was no telling what kind of plot he might come up with to get back at them for trying to force him into this.

*But even knowing that much, you still proposed it during that council. Just what is this man thinking... I know people have a way of acting in unpredictable ways when backed against the wall, but... Oh well. He does make for a useful marionette.*

Stifling the mocking sneer that threatened to surface on his face, Sudou regarded Mikhail with a soft smile. Sudou may have been the one who directed him to do so, but Mihkail’s thinking was by now lacking in consistency and cohesion. All that remained was his sorrow at the position he was in, and his resentment for Ryoma, whom he perceived as the source of his troubles.

Impatience, hatred, envy, loathing. These emotions raged in Mikhail's heart, denying him the capacity for sound reasoning.

"That in and of itself would be a satisfactory outcome. A disloyal vassal would be removed from Her Majesty's side, and your stock as a loyal retainer will rise."

"But—!"

"You mustn't abhor bloodshed if you are to enforce justice," Sudou stressed, his eyes shining with a dangerous glint.

"But... Will it really go that smoothly?" Mikhail's expression was awash with anxiety.

"Sir Mikhail, you mustn't dread this. Everyone else will eventually come to realize how right you truly are. You will not be able to guide this country if you let petty guilt overcome you." Sudou silenced Mikhail with powerful words. "At times, one must even be irrational if they are to defend their country. And the only one who can do that now is you, Sir Mikhail. Please, protect the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Save Her Majesty, Queen Lupis!"

One minute passed. Then another. The two's gazes were locked across the table.

"Fine... I shall trust you."

"Splendid. Then everything else should go as planned," Sudou said before bowing his head and leaving the room.

Mikhail watched him leave wordlessly.

†

After leaving Mikhail's room, Sudou silently made his way to his own room, making sure to avoid any prying eyes.

*It took quite some time to set this up... But perhaps I should praise him for a job well done after all.*

A dark smile played over Sudou's lips as he thought back to the conversation that had just taken place. People have a tendency to believe only what they want to believe. Ever since the civil war ended, Mikhail had had his capabilities

and character denied by everyone around him. And thanks to that, Sudou's words of affirmation easily crept into his heart.

What filled the bottom of Mihkail's heart, like dark, filthy dregs, was hatred and grudge toward Ryoma Mikoshiba. A misplaced grudge, to be sure. But for the duration of this year, Sudou had managed to warp those emotions, placing that baseless grudge into where Mikhail's sense of justice should have been. His desire to bring justice and defend Rhoadseria.

*But the more he loves his country and the more loyal he is to the royal house, the more he eats away at it... Heh heh, such a tragic man.*

The trust Queen Lupis put into Mikhail was backfiring. The more she tried to cover for him, the more the gazes of those around him drove Mikhail back and made him make mistakes. Queen Lupis then once again covered for him, completing this vicious cycle. Of course, all of this was due to Sudou himself spreading rumors throughout the castle.

*A bond between a lord and their vassal can be hazardous when taken too far...*

It truly was ironic. As fiercely loyal as he was, Mikhail lacked the power to change this country, but Ryoma Mikoshiba — who didn't have any loyalty to the queen — was charged with deciding its fate.

*It only remains to be seen how young Mr. Mikoshiba will act... He truly is unpredictable. But this is the third time he's interfered with me... It's about time he disappears. Now then, how will things turn out...?*

It had been nearly two years since Ryoma Mikoshiba arrived in this world. He slew the O'ltormea Empire's court thaumaturgist Gaius and interfered with Rhoadseria's civil war. And now, he was about to interfere with Sudou's intentions for the third time.

*We would much rather if he doesn't participate in this at all, but the chances of that are low. And so...*

If he were to be asked if he wants to participate in the reinforcements, his answer would likely be no. The current state of affairs couldn't allow for that, though. If he were to refuse, Ryoma Mikoshiba would be placed in a dangerous position, regardless of what might happen to the forces being sent out. If he

were to truly prepare to break off and become independent before the war came to a head, perhaps things would be different, but reasonably speaking, that was impossible.

In which case, the question wasn't whether he would participate, but rather what his conditions for participating would be. Whether he would do so while expecting nothing in return, or negotiate to try and gain something. Given Ryoma's personality and Queen Lupis's actions so far, it seemed likely he would set some kind of condition.

*Would he seek money, or more territory...? Perhaps he would want to have his noble title elevated...*

Since the Wortenia Peninsula's development was still underway, receiving more land now would only make it too much for him to properly manage everything. Perhaps he'd be able to manage land that was directly adjacent to Wortenia, but if he were given detached lands to govern, he wouldn't be able to properly watch over them.

*If I recall correctly, the land closest to the Peninsula is Count Salzberg's territory, Epirus... But it's close to the border with Xarooda, and the Count has consolidated control over the nobles of the north and acts as their leader. Even if the sky were to fall, they wouldn't place a newcomer Baron in his place...*

*Which means he would have to pick either a noble title or gold, and given his personality, I can't imagine he would care for a title. He's probably planning to leave Rhoadseria behind at some point, so he cares little for titles.*

Perhaps it would've been different if Ryoma intended to remain in Rhoadseria until the end of his days, but Sudou thought that was highly unlikely. Sudou himself made this happen, but given how Queen Lupis treated Ryoma after the civil war, it wasn't likely he would wish to stay in this country.

In which case, the options were fairly limited. He would either try to form his own country or come under the protection of another country. And whichever choice he made, a noble title granted by the Rhoadserian royal house would be worth nothing. And in addition to that, developing the Wortenia Peninsula would cost a large amount of money.

*So he would ask for money... I wonder how much he'll demand.*

The question of how much he'd ask for would make it easier to predict his future actions.

*If he asks for dozens of millions, then it would take more than ten years. But if he asks for more... We may need to advance the schedule on our side.*

Sudou was absolutely abuzz with anticipation. When he was first summoned to this world, he lamented the disparity in the quality of life, but it turned out he was actually more suited to this world than he was to Japan.

Manipulating people... Spinning plots... It fulfilled him in a way that his tepid life in Japan never did. Especially at times like these, when his stratagems decided the outcomes of wars. And all the more so when his victory was already assured.

*Now then, what's going to happen next...?*

Sudou smirked — the smile of a man confident in his victory.

# Chapter 3: The Gap Between Ideals and Reality

The town of Sirius was bustling with activity and life. New slave children were carried into the city over the last few days, and they were now swinging their swords desperately, so as to not let go of the fortunate fate they'd stumbled into. Those children that had finished their several months of training and gained their freedom were working hard to build their new hometown.

Everyone was putting all their strength to build up this city little by little. Their dignity was stolen from them when they became slaves, and so the fact they were lucky enough to win their respect back through sheer effort gave them pride.

But they didn't know that the shadow of war was creeping ever closer to them from the southwest.

Much like the other day, an emergency meeting was called. The presence of a guest that should not have been there made everyone sitting around the round table tense up.

"That is all... I wish to hear your opinions."

After Ryoma read the letter Helena sent him from the capital aloud, the atmosphere in the room changed. The letter's date showed it was written three days ago, meaning it got here rather quickly, given the distance between the capital and the Wortenia Peninsula. As it was a secret order of the highest importance, it was dispatched via runner, who had changed horses in every checkpoint to ensure he got to his destination as quickly as possible.

"Ya already told us this would happen, Boy, but the way things always seem to happen exactly the way you say they will isn't funny anymore," Lione said with a terribly sardonic smile on her lips.

Everyone else seemed to feel the same way, their faces thick with astonishment. In truth, they had no choice but to laugh wryly at the situation. The only person in the room with a truly composed smile on his lips was Ryoma.

“The town’s expansion is well on track, and I believed we could finally start setting things into motion... The Queen Lupis Rhoadserians sure has a way of getting in our plans,” Gennou whispered, narrowing his eyes as he looked at the tumultuous activity outside the window.

“I guess. But in the end, we have no choice but to go, and we’re better off with them calling for us. If they’d insisted on not asking us for help and gone on to lose because they sent their reinforcements out without us, we’d get caught up in this war anyway,” Ryoma said with a sneer.

His words were about as awful as they could be. He was almost stating outright that the people in charge of the palace were terribly incompetent. Everyone in the room nodded.

“Even with Lady Helena leading them...?” Gennou asked, to which Ryoma shook his head.

“They wouldn’t lose if Helena was leading the entire army. Even if she did lose, the losses she’d take wouldn’t be too severe. But...” Ryoma turned his eyes to Lione, as if asking if she understood.

“I getcha... Yeah, I can see that happening.”



It’s said that too many cooks can spoil the broth. Put simply, it means that putting too many people in a leadership position makes things swing in unexpected directions. Discussion is important as matters play out, using each other’s opinions to correct problems that crop up. This was basic logic that even children were capable of understanding — an effective and indeed democratic way of thinking.

But on the other hand, that method wasn’t always optimal. Having too many people with the authority for absolute command could be especially problematic. Despite her past accomplishments buying her the position of General of Rhoadseria, Helena Steiner’s position was by no means stable. No, considering Queen Lupis’s plots, Helena was likely walking on very thin ice.

Given that situation, if Helena was sent to command the reinforcements to Xarooda, her authority would be very weak. Things would still be fine if her deputy was cooperative. But if she were given a fool who would argue with her over the right to command, the worst case scenario would happen and their army would split up before they even engaged the enemy.

That was, of course, the worst outcome imaginable. The chances of things becoming that bad were slim, but even if things didn’t devolve into a full blown revolt, the soldiers’ morale would still suffer because of this. And since they were already greatly inferior to O’ltormea’s army, this would be a fatal blow.

“So that means you have to go, right, Lad?” Boltz asked.

“That’s what Helena’s letter said, anyway.” Ryoma shrugged.

“It seems we’ve pulled the proverbial short straw,” Gennou remarked.

“Yeah, sounds about right. And what a short straw it is...” Ryoma sighed.

Even when a request is made with proper explanation, one could still refuse. But it certainly wasn’t as easy, since there would be consequences. The Kingdom of Rhoadseria was essentially a sinking ship. There could be no doubting that. The power structure Lupis was building was going to act against her, namely because of her lack of decisiveness.

It was only natural for the royal house to expect to build an administration where the monarch stood at the center. After all, Hodram and Gelhart had

stolen away their authority for as long as they did. But ideals didn't always align with reality. And the problem was Lupis Rhoadserians's personality.

*She's not a bad person. No, I can even go ahead and call her a good person, and she's not dumb either. She's knowledgeable, and cares for her subjects. Normally, she'd be a fine ruler.*

Ryoma's appraisal of Lupis was by no means negative. Her aides, Meltina and Mikhail, had their flaws but were still capable people. They were loyal to the royal house, and their martial prowess were among the greatest in the country. They were no scholars, but they were literate and capable of basic arithmetic. If nothing else, they weren't incompetent.

*But in the end, her flaw is that she doesn't know herself well enough...*

A certain quote from Sun Tzu's *Art of War* came to mind.

*If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.*

It was a well-known proverb that most people knew, even if they never read *The Art of War*, but it had a continuation.

*If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.*

Put simply, collecting information before the battle was important, but understanding oneself was also important. By knowing both those aspects, one could win. And once one could tell if they could win a battle, the rest was easy. If, however, one judged they couldn't win, they would know to avoid it, or seek another way to resolve things.

But put conversely, what if one didn't have a grasp on either the enemy or their own prowess? It would be the same as having an amateur play a game of chess blindfolded. One would lose before the battle even began.

So what mattered was the question of what sort of person one was. What their strengths were and where their weaknesses lay. And had Lupis understood her weaknesses, she would not have tried to build a political system with her at the center.

A monarch's role was to make decisions and take responsibility for matters. But while her heart was kind and warm, it also meant she was lacking in decisiveness. Ryoma believed a better form of government for her would be to strengthen the authority of the prime minister and the other ministers while also introducing a parliamentary system. That way, she would retain her right to veto while abiding by her ministers' decisions.

There was the chance of despotism like in Gelhart's case, of course, but so long as the royal guard and the knights responsible for the Queen's security would secure military authority, it wouldn't cause that much of a problem. And indeed, had Lupis consulted Ryoma without resorting to any petty plots, he would have told her to do as much.

"We don't want to get caught up in this, but do we really have to go no matter what? I'll be frank, Boy. I'm not in favor of this." Lione spoke as lightly as ever, but her eyes were serious.

Lione and Boltz couldn't act like this wasn't their business. The two of them were single-handedly in charge of teaching and rearing children who were once sold as slaves. Those children would be the ones sent out in case war breaks out — and the ones whose lives would be placed on the line.

Of course, if it was to protect Sirius, Lione would order them to die if need be. But she couldn't be wholly content with doing it for the sake of a country as foolish as Rhoadseria.

*Lione does have a strong sense of obligation, after all...*

This red-maned mercenary woman in fact had quite the big-sisterly disposition. She led a mercenary group composed almost entirely of rough men despite being a woman, and that stood as proof of her caliber. She was fundamentally an amicable and extremely dependable person, but she did have one major fault.

She stressed one's obligations above all else.

That made sense in its own way. When living a life where fighting to the death was an everyday occurrence, no one wanted to entrust their backs to someone who failed their social duties. And that was why Lione deeply despised Lupis Rhoadserians, who forced them into the no-man's land that was the Wortenia

Peninsula after they served her in the war.

That wasn't an emotion she put into words, of course. She had Ryoma's position to consider, as he was still on the surface a noble who looked up to Lupis as his Queen. But Ryoma could understand her feelings from her expression and mannerisms. But he couldn't afford to prioritize her opinion this time.

"I'm sorry, Lione, but I can't bend on this. I said we pulled the short straw, but we're not going to war for Lupis or Rhoadseria here. We're fighting to survive. We can't avoid this if we're to live on and reach for greater power."

"We're doing this to prevent O'ltormea from invading... Correct?" Gennou asked.

Ryoma nodded.

"It goes without saying, but if Xarooda falls, Rhoadseria is the next one to be on the chopping board. Given the size of their territories and national power, the three eastern kingdoms can only hold O'ltormea back if they're united. Myest and Rhoadseria alone will only be able to slow them down, but not stop them."

"I'd imagine," Lione replied with a shaking of the head.

She understood the situation as well, but the idea of saving Lupis in the process didn't sit well with her.

"So that's where we stand... Still, I'm not going to just let that woman use me however she wants. I'll be using this as a chance to squeeze her dry," Ryoma said, his lips curling upwards viciously.

A frightening expression, indeed.

"Squeeze her for what? Money?" Lione asked, eyeing Ryoma suspiciously.

"No, something that's even more valuable than money. The town's already pretty developed, so it's time we set about thoroughly developing Wortenia. We're going to need to migrate farmers and artisans with special skills. And I'm thinking of having them dispatch some civil officers, too."

Lione and Boltz exchanged gazes.

“So you’re going to set conditions in exchange for joining the reinforcements?” Boltz cocked his head.

That was something he never would have expected to hear, since he was a sword for hire for as long as he was.

“Yeah. After all, we can’t rely on just slaves to build up our population. As big as we might seem, it won’t mean anything if our contents are lacking.”

“I suppose... We finished setting up the walls and paving the roads, and we have homes ready. We’re ready to accept more people whenever they might come, but...” Boltz said, his words having a hint of confusion to them.

In truth, Sirius’s population was made up of the Igasaki clan, the slave children they gathered from different places, and the mercenaries. Soldiers, mercenaries, ninjas, and their families. Some of the ninjas could function as blacksmiths, so repairing equipment wasn’t an issue, but without any farmers or merchants this was a rather homogenous town made up of only soldiers. The only exception was a few maids they’d been given from Count Salzberg’s estate.

Boltz himself realized they couldn’t last like this for long. They’d need to develop farmlands and set up industries if they were to collect taxes. And so, Ryoma’s demand was by no means misguided. The question going through Boltz’s mind, however, was why now.

*Would Queen Lupis even accept that, anyway...?*

Ryoma’s outlook seemed to be the opposite, though.

“I think that right now she’ll accept our demands, even if they’re a little exaggerated. Even if she is cautious of us building up our strength.”

A person’s capacity to travel through this world was generally heavily regulated. This world’s technology wasn’t advanced, and so human hands were absolutely necessary for producing goods. In other words, one’s population translated directly to a governor’s power and authority.

And because of that, governors greatly restricted their subjects’ freedom of movement. Put more accurately, they may accept people coming in from other territories, but they tried to reduce the number of people leaving their territory. Very few people could move away from the land they were born into. This was

especially true with nobles who mostly had villages with small populations as their dominion, and all the more so with craftsmen.

Technologies can't be acquired in a day, and some can be outright hidden. Acquiring those techniques takes time and funds, and who one would give up their own just to help someone else?

But now, Queen Lupis was left without any other options, and she might very well accept demands she normally wouldn't. In fact, she was much more likely to yield to those demands compared to money or more land.

"Oh, I see... You're taking this chance to push the peninsula's development further," Lione said, to which Ryoma replied with a cold smile.

"She went to the trouble of inviting me over. Might as well use that chance to squeeze everything I can out of her."

To Ryoma, Lupis was nothing more than prey, a foothold to push himself forward in this world. And with that smile on his lips, he turned his gaze to the one man who remained silent for the duration of this meeting.

"By the way, Nelcius. Do you have any questions?" Ryoma asked.

Nelcius's expression was overtaken with confusion at those words, and he stood from his seat. His skin was a dark, bluish hue and his eyes were golden. His silvery hair shined in the sunlight. His chiseled features were clearly handsome and fair.

He was like a sculpture brought to life — the very image of what people perceived the demi-human race of the elves to be like. The only exception was his massive, muscular frame, which compared favorably with even Ryoma.

"I have but one question... Why did you call me here?" he asked with a low, calm voice.



He only looked to be about thirty years old, but the feel of his voice felt much more aged. Normally, he probably came across as much more dignified and confident. But now he only came across as confused.

“Is it a bother?” Ryoma asked, to which Nelcius shook his head silently.

“No, I believe I’ve had the honor of listening to a very important conversation... But I can’t help but wonder why you called a demi-human such as myself to participate in this meeting.”

Nelcius’s surprise was to be expected. This meeting was attended by the people standing at the heart of Baron Mikoshiba’s noble house, and he was the only stranger present. No... He wasn’t just a stranger. He was a potential, latent enemy.

True, for the last few days he was engaged in talks regarding Wortenia’s future with Ryoma, which explained his sojourn in Sirius. Neither of them wanted the humans and demi-humans to fight over control of Wortenia, and in that regard, they certainly shared a common vision.

But on the other hand, such a difference between two species wasn’t so easily bridged.

*Is he expecting us to offer them some kind of assistance...?*

If nothing else, Nelcius couldn’t help but suspect this. Ryoma simply smiled back at him.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. We’re not trying to ask your people for anything here. For now, I just wanted you to be here.”

“Huh...? What do you mean?” Nelcius cocked his head at Ryoma’s statement.

It wasn’t as if he’d been asked for his opinion, or asked for supplies or aid. He was only invited here so he could listen in on their meeting. Nelcius thought he’d be informed of some kind of demand, but this development struck him as terribly unexpected.

Meeting Nelcius’s suspicious gaze head on, Ryoma simply nodded.

“Just watch us for a little while... All right?”

And with those words, Ryoma concluded the meeting.

*Such a strange man... He shows no sign of fearing us. No, it is not that man who is strange, but rather...*

As Nelcius headed for the room he'd been sleeping in for the last few days, he thought back to the council he'd just attended.

*But why, indeed, did he tell me to be there...?*

None of the people in that room seemed to view Nelcius with hatred or disgust. Despite seeing a demi-human like him, not a single one of them contorted their faces with displeasure or eyed him with contempt.

He'd noticed this ever so slightly since he first arrived in Sirius, but the citizens of this town showed very little signs of discrimination toward demi-humans. That wasn't to say there were no such feelings at all, but at the very least there wasn't enough prejudice to make someone take another's life.

*And during the feast a few days ago, they treated me quite generously...*

They treated him well enough to successfully induce the atmosphere of eating, drinking, and speaking together. But at the bottom of his heart, Nelcius couldn't bring himself to believe quite yet. He couldn't deny the dejected feeling that filled his heart when one of the servants told him he was to attend the council this morning. *He's just another human, after all,* he thought. But Ryoma simply regarded him with a friendly smile today, too.

The elves and dark elves possessed unique knowledge in the field of endowed thaumaturgy. Knowledge passed down since ages past, which remained uninterrupted even now, many years later. Elves are born with an inherent capacity for thaumaturgy that could grant them enough power to match the average knight. Their latent abilities were great, and as such, hoping to use them as soldiers seemed like a natural conclusion.

But the first time Nelcius met Ryoma Mikoshiba, the man showed no sign of craving either that knowledge or that potential strength. He didn't ask for them to lend him their techniques or to dispatch soldiers. When Ryoma rescued Dilphina from the pirates and escorted her back to the village, he only asked Nelcius to visit Sirius once every two weeks. Nothing else.

At first, he only had to come and stay there for a time. If someone spoke to him, he only gave curt, almost mechanical replies. But as he visited them more and more, he gradually began to respond to jokes, hold exchanges, and share meals with the people there.

By now, their agreement for him to visit once every two weeks was in form only. The demi-humans had been given a residence to accommodate them, and there was constantly a group of several of them living there at any given time. Some of the younger members of the warrior clans — young by eleven standards, of course, as they were two hundred years old — had heard of the way humanity discriminated against the elves but never truly experienced it for themselves. And Nelcius saw how their interactions with the humans became more positive and assertive faster than he ever imagined.

*It's hard to believe, but Dilphina's report does support this...*

It had been four hundred and a few dozen years since the demi-humans warred against mankind in the name of their dignity and continued existence. Even for the elves, this was a long time ago. Of course, some among the warrior clans still viewed the humans with hostility and hatred. They were driven out of their beautiful homelands and had their families killed, and those weren't grudges they could easily ignore. Some among the other warrior clans' chiefs even outright disparaged Nelcius, calling him a traitor who chose to nestle closer to the humans.

*I see... He called me there to show me,* Nelcius realized with a groan. *To prove they have nothing to hide. That was his intent...*

This was Ryoma's way of showing the humans intended to walk alongside the demi-humans. And he made that declaration not with words, but with actions. Nelcius intended to turn around and go back the way he came. He couldn't let everything go exactly as this man says.

*Very well... I'll do what you want for now*, Nelcius thought, as his lips naturally curled upwards.

If returning a grudge with a grudge was the way of things, then it only made sense to return trust with trust. Nelcius was, after all, the proud chief of a dark elf warrior clan. He couldn't forget his grudge against mankind.

But he couldn't ignore the future spreading out before him, either. If it truly was possible for mankind and elvenkind to live together, they might be able to go back to the lives they had before the despicable Holy War. That emotion spurred him forward.

†

A week or so after receiving Helena's letter, Ryoma made his way to Rhoadseria's capital of Pireas for the first time in a year. It was his first time being in a large city in a long while. Of course, the population and cityscape were no match for large cities he knew, like Tokyo or Osaka, but it was still quite the metropolis by this world's standards.

*I guess that's Rhoadseria's capital for you...*

Epirus was in charge of safeguarding the kingdom's north. It was a citadel city under the direct control of a noble, and boasted a surprisingly large scale. But the kingdom's capital, however, clearly dwarfed it.

"Can't say the air's too good, though..."

As soon as he crossed the first gate, Ryoma frowned as he looked around town. His statements about the air of the city didn't refer to the city's smell. Of course, if one were to try hard enough, they'd catch the stench of filthy water, but that was true for all cities in this world. Large cities were well-maintained enough that the stench wasn't intense enough to warrant commenting on. The typical Japanese obsession with hygiene could drive him to nitpick, but it honestly wasn't a bad environment.

What did Ryoma mean by 'the air,' then? He meant the oppressive atmosphere hanging over Pireas's streets. Twenty or so soldiers watched over Ryoma as he rode his horse toward the castle.

"Everyone looks rather restless, don't they?" Sara remarked.

"The stalls are rather inactive, too..." Laura nodded.

The twins shared Ryoma's suspicion. They looked around quizzically.

"The question is, what brought this on," Ryoma said, his gaze fixed on the road ahead of him.

From what Ryoma remembered, after the civil war the streets were full of people and the market stalls in the plaza were always buzzing with activity, with the sellers always calling out to draw in customers. But none of those were in earshot now, which meant that despite being open, the stall owners had little desire to sell.

Such a situation wouldn't have happened under a proper regime. But still, on the surface people were walking around in the streets.

*There's definitely more escapees out here, though...* Ryoma's gaze flitted to a mother and children squatting in one of the side streets.

"Perhaps Queen Lupis's reign isn't going too well," Sara suggested.

"Could be..." Ryoma said, clicking his tongue as he glared at the castle ahead.

*She insisted on holding the hegemony all to herself, and this is what it leads to... There's no saving her.*

Idealism was necessary for politics, and Ryoma wasn't going to deny that. But what mattered when all was said and done wasn't one's ideals, but one's results. It didn't matter what your intentions were. So long as you couldn't realize them, they would bring nothing but harm.

"But I suppose that with these conditions, getting new residents shouldn't be too hard."

Escapees were those that discarded their homes and land. They were quite similar to refugees, but unlike the latter, who were driven out of their land by war or religious pressure, escapees had their houses or land stolen from them over financial circumstances.

But subtleties aside, both were people that lost their homes and had nowhere to turn to, leaving them with two choices. They would either be sold off as slaves, or die on the wayside with no one to take care of them.

Sadly, unlike modern society, nations had no concept of welfare, and no non-profit organizations existed to support weakened populations. The weak had no way of getting out of their distress except with their own strength. And so, it was highly probable they would agree to migrate to the Wortenia Peninsula despite it being a savage, undeveloped land.

“Queen Lupis will be able to get rid of nuisances. I doubt she would complain,” Laura noted.

“Yes, it’s in our favor. But why did things become so much worse?” Sara wondered aloud.

Like Laura said, it was likely Queen Lupis would approve sending away the many escapees to Wortenia, since they were a threat to the public order. Lupis would surely prefer to have them sent out to the peninsula instead of them shuffling through her capital’s streets.

However, the question was, why did the number of escapees grow so much over the last year? Having some escapees wasn’t entirely unusual. Some were down on their luck or went bankrupt from gambling debts. Others fell ill and weren’t capable of working, losing their homes as a result. There was a notable number of such unfortunate people in this capital even a year ago.

But even so, the number of escapees walking through the back alleys was even greater than a year ago now. And the fires of war hadn’t reached Rhoadseria yet. The number of the people driven to the streets stood as indisputable evidence that Queen Lupis’s regime had problems.

“Maybe she cracked down on the nobles’ taxes. Or maybe it’s the bureaucrats being corrupt...”

There could have been other reasons, but the most probable cause was Lupis held all the power, which meant that things were actually less organized on a micro level.

*Even in Japan, when the opposition seizes power, the authorities fall into mayhem...*

Ryoma harkened back to the news he’d seen in the days before being summoned to this world. At the time, the masses cheered the opposition on, believing their rise to power would improve things. Reality had a way of easily blowing such idealism away to the winds, though.

Reformists raised the banner of their ideals, clashing with those who wished to safeguard their vested interests. And people in those situations had two methods to pick from. To either trample the other sides with sheer force to

realize their ideals, or to throw aside their ideals and choose reality. This was one adverse effect of democracy, where candidates chant pleasant slogans to earn the support of the masses.

And so, it was perhaps an obvious outcome that after a few years of being exposed to an opposition that only knew how to mouth ideals irresponsibly, the people ended up voting for the previous ruling party.

But leaving talk of Japanese politics aside, it was obvious with a glance that Lupis's regime wasn't going well.

*They're pretty isolated...*

If this was what the kingdom's capital looked like, it wasn't hard to imagine the state of the provincial areas ruled by the nobles. And this brought a certain issue to mind: Princess Radine's movements. In times of such political instability, it was almost inevitable for a rival to rear their head in an attempt to break the status quo.

And that would surely lead to another rebellion, regardless of if it descends into violent conflict or simply ends with a quiet change of government. That was one thing the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, which had the monarchy as its center, couldn't avoid. When the civil war ended, Ryoma predicted Rhoadseria had four years to survive, but as it turned out, its lifespan was even shorter than that.

*I'd say I hope the fire doesn't end up spreading to our land, but... That's just not possible.*

As distant and neglected as Wortenia was, it was still part of Rhoadseria. And since it was part of the collective that was this kingdom, the expectation that the upheaval wouldn't have implications for Wortenia too wasn't a realistic one.

*I guess I'll have to leave that to Boltz and Gennou...*

After receiving Helena's letter, they'd already discussed a few countermeasures. Normally he'd bring all his aides along to participate in the reinforcements, but they couldn't afford to leave Sirius empty. And so, he left the people he believed would be best suited to handle his internal affairs — Lione, who led the Crimson Lion mercenary group for years, and her right hand

man, Boltz.

At the time, Ryoma turned his gaze to Boltz, who stayed at the back of line. He seemed unsatisfied at not being sent out to battle, but Ryoma greatly trusted his ability to handle internal affairs.

Boltz wasn't properly educated, as he was born a commoner. But he knew much about the world from real experience, and had the wisdom to put that experience into use. His many years as a mercenary taught him how to read, write, and handle basic math. And given the situation, where most of their people were warriors and brutes, having someone with the capacity to handle internal affairs was rare and precious.

*Me meeting him might have just been coincidence, but I'm still grateful nonetheless...*

Ryoma crossed the castle's drawbridge on horseback as he appreciated his luck at having become involved with someone like Boltz.

†

They were led to a room where they could rest in, which was where Sara parted her lips to speak.

"Master Ryoma... May I say something?"

She spoke after confirming no one was around, which implied she didn't want others to hear this.

"Sure. What is it?" Ryoma smiled as he turned his eyes to Sara.

"It's nothing too serious... I simply wondered why you refused the aid Nelcius mentioned," she said.

She referred to the council they had a few days ago. Nelcius returned to the council room and made Ryoma a very generous offer. Specifically, he proposed they dispatch young elves to safeguard the peninsula as a way of mending relation between the humans and the elves. Ryoma refused the offer immediately, though.

Ryoma didn't tell anyone else about it, but Sara happened to be in the room at the time, and wanted to know why he refused. She'd tried to think of a

reason herself since, but couldn't come up with an answer.

"Oh, you mean that?" Ryoma asked, nodding as if satisfied.

*So she couldn't come up with an answer on her own.*

Ryoma couldn't help but suppress a smile as he imagined Sara racking her brains in an attempt to figure out why he refused.

*I'm glad she's approaching things like this, though.*

Ryoma had high expectations of Sara, and expected that she, as well as her sister Laura, would become even more capable aides to him. And to do that, their endeavors to think and come up with solutions on their own was indispensable.

"What's bothering you is that I refused Nelcius's offer, and didn't tell the others about it. Right?" Ryoma confirmed her doubts.

"Yes, exactly."

As far as Sara heard from their exchange, Nelcius's proposal seemed quite appealing. Both letting the younger elves help secure the peninsula and having the elves share their techniques would be a boon for Ryoma right now. Having the younger elves migrate to Sirius was especially good, since it aligned with Ryoma's ideals.

Everyone was well aware that Ryoma promoted peace with the demi-humans. If he didn't, Ryoma would have launched an attack on the demi-humans by now, same as how he slaughtered the pirates.

But Nelcius went to the trouble of offering on his own, and Sara couldn't fathom why he'd refuse immediately. Him refusing in and of itself wasn't that unusual. But she'd assumed he'd contemplate things, ask herself, Laura, and Lione for advice, and maybe refuse then.

But he didn't do that. He refused without taking the others' opinions into account, and Sara didn't know why.

"That's simple," Ryoma said as if the answer was obvious. "It's because Nelcius was testing me there."

"Testing you...?" Sara couldn't mask her confusion.

Nothing Sara heard in their exchange gave her the impression Ryoma was being tested.

“Well you see, he was trying to see just how serious I am about making peace with the demi-humans. Why do you think I called Nelcius there?”

Sara hesitated for a moment before speaking her answer.

“To express... your desire to broker peace between us and the demi-humans?”

Ryoma nodded wordlessly. She did understand his thoughts on the matter.

“But if that’s the case, isn’t Nelcius’s offer a godsend for that peace?”

“It is... But if we were to accept it, we’d be the ones in trouble.”

“Trouble...?” Sara’s expression was dyed over with confusion.

Ryoma cracked a strained smile and nodded wordlessly.

*I guess it makes sense she doesn’t get it yet.*

It was a difference in experience, or perhaps talent. Whichever it was, it was a trait that was necessary for a ruler. Lupis didn’t have it, and was prepped to lose everything for it.

“It’s simple. We’re not showing any aversion toward the demi-humans, but that only applies to the people living in Sirius now. There’s no telling what newer commoners that migrate to Wortenia might think. Right?”

“Well...”

“And the problem isn’t just us.”

“Meaning?”

“There are some problematic folks to the south. People that assume God’s name when they speak,” Ryoma spat out, his voice thick with loathing.

Hearing this, Sara immediately realized what bothered Ryoma.

“The Church of Light...” she whispered.

Scattered pieces of information clicked into place like parts of a puzzle in Sara’s mind.

*He's right... Laura and I are from the central continent so we didn't notice it as much, and all the people working under Master Ryoma right now are former slaves and mercenaries. None of us worship the God of Light Meneos that religiously. But that doesn't mean the same will be true for any farmers or peasants that might migrate into Wortenia...*

The religious center for the Church of Light was in the Holy City of Meneus, located near the border of the southern kingdoms and the Holy Qwiltantia Empire. Due to the great distance from it, faith in the religion was more lax along the northern and eastern areas of the continent. But there were individual differences in how devout each person was, and a religious dispute could easily become an armed uprising.

Of course, they were only commoners and farmers, and so suppressing any uprising would be easy, but their disgruntlement toward the demi-humans would only grow as a result.

"Besides, Nelcius's suggestion wasn't realistic anyway. He's definitely a chief of a dark elf warrior tribe, but he's not a dictator. From what Dilphina told me, the elves have something like a parliamentary system. His opinion alone isn't enough to make the demi-humans as a whole act."

Nelcius was certainly influential among the demi-humans, but he couldn't easily mobilize soldiers on his own accord. And the history of the demi-humans' persecution wasn't going to be wiped away that easily.

"Nelcius's personal feelings aside, some of the demi-humans can't let go of their grudge toward humans. It'll take time for us to really reach a compromise. That's true for our side too, of course."

"Then Nelcius's suggestion was..."

"A test to see if I'm viewing this whole affair realistically. He might acknowledge my ideal, but he wanted to see if I had the right and resolve to achieve it. If I'd have taken Nelcius's suggestion right there, he would probably never believe me again."

As Sara saw Ryoma punctuate his words with a small smile, she felt something cold slither down her back.

*Just what is it that this man can see...?* The thought crept up in her mind. *A distant ideal, or the reality ahead of him?*

It was then that there was a knock on the door. A royal guard clad in full armor opened the door from outside and spoke to Ryoma.

“Excuse me, milord. Please proceed to the audience chamber.”

Apparently he came to beckon Ryoma to his audience with Lupis.

“Now then, let’s get going,” Ryoma said and rose from his seat, wiping the smile from his lips.

†

A thick, oppressive atmosphere hung over the audience chamber. The knights standing guard on both sides of the red carpet had their expressions strained with nervousness. Their anxiety was natural — the national hero who ended the civil war was about to come face to face with the ruler who elected to banish him.

Present in the room were also the palace guard and civil officers, as well as influential nobles. Everyone’s gazes were fixed on the man kneeling before the queen and the aide behind him. Ryoma knelt before the throne, his face turned down, when Lupis’s voice rang out over his head with the sound of silk moving.

“Raise your head.”

Her voice was like the chiming of a bell.

*She’s as beautiful as ever... If a bit emaciated...* Ryoma thought as he raised his eyes to gaze upon Queen Lupis.

*And she hasn’t changed much either...* he thought as he looked at Meltina, who stood beside Lupis looking the same as she did when he first met her.

“It’s been too long, Baron Makoshiba,” Queen Lupis said.

“It has, Your Majesty,” Ryoma replied, raising his head with a serene smile as per her words.

His expression didn’t betray a hint of the hatred, anger, or disdain he felt toward Queen Lupis. He acted with the manners of a noble and regarded her

with an amicable smile. Upon seeing this, the tension filling the audience chamber slackened somewhat.

No one put it into words, of course, but most of the top brass understood the antagonism that existed between Queen Lupis and Ryoma. They were concerned this audience might turn into a bitter exchange, but everything was more smooth and peaceful than they thought. Their relief was clear.

But the words Queen Lupis said next made their expressions tense up again.

“I believe Helena explained the situation in her letter, so let me cut to the heart of the matter. I want you to join our reinforcements to Xarooda as Helena’s aide.”

Everyone present held their breaths at her proclamation. They expected her to only go into this matter after concluding some polite pleasantries, if only for the sake of form. Especially given everything that happened so far. But Lupis chose something else entirely.

She went right to the point.

This wasn’t a method the nobility — which stressed such polite processes — would normally willingly take. Ryoma, however, wasn’t one for pointless formalities and saw this favorably. As everyone around him swallowed nervously, Ryoma replied with a calm smile.

“I graciously accept.”

His answer was completely unexpected. Not just the people around them, but even Queen Lupis, who was the one to ask him, couldn’t contain her surprise.

“Really? Of course, like we’ve already said, we’ll do whatever we can to provide supplies and equipment, but...” Queen Lupis recovered from her shock, directing a questioning gaze at Ryoma.

*They don’t trust me that much, huh...*

Aptly picking up on the suspicion in the gazes fixed on him, Ryoma clicked his tongue internally. Still, this time Ryoma was in the wrong. Given his actions in the past, it was obvious how everyone else would think of him. The words he said next, though, echoed through the room.

“Of course, Your Majesty. I will surely answer your expectations.”

“Are you serious...?” Queen Lupis’s eyes filled with anxiety.

Her concern was to be expected. This was a clearly unreasonable demand, which was why she immediately affirmed their side would be assisting with supplies and gear. The better one knew Ryoma Mikoshiba, the harder it was to believe this sight. That was both because of his character, and mostly because the undeveloped lands of Wortenia were his territory.

It was a land abandoned by the kingdom for many years, and had no citizens to take taxes from. Realistically speaking, there was no way he could have soldiers to dispatch after having that land forced onto him. Most everyone present in this room expected Ryoma to refuse Queen Lupis’s order. The only one who didn’t think so was Helena, who knew Ryoma more personally than the others and had a stronger grasp on his personality.

“But I have a few requests to make, Your Majesty,” Ryoma said.

A buzz of whispers once again overcame the audience chamber at those words.

*Yes, that much is to be expected...* Lupis thought as she took a deep breath to calm her heart.

She seemed calm on the surface, but expected Ryoma to outright reject her request. She was instead taken aback by how easily he accepted, but Ryoma wasn’t all that naive, of course. His face, which looked older than it truly was, was fixed in a pleasant smile. His physique was large and solid, but he looked quite ordinary overall.

But Lupis knew all too well that the man before her eyes was a dangerous, carnivorous beast.



It was only a year and a half ago that Viscount Gelhart — then a Duke — presented Radine as the past king's, her father's, daughter, propping her up as his banner. At the time, Queen Lupis was essentially powerless. She had only two royal guards, and no cards or weapons she could play in her hand that would secure her control over the royal house.

Eighty percent of the knights were under General Hodram's control, and the only ones Lupis could rely on for years were Mikhail Vanash and Meltina Lecter, the two in charge of her security. Her situation was utterly hopeless.

But it was then that he appeared before her. At first she was cautious of Ryoma, thinking that he was sent there as part of some ploy by the nobles. She only accepted his offer not because of trust, but simply out of the resignation that if she did nothing, she had no future to begin with. She'd hoped he'd be good for something, and acted entirely out of a defeatist attitude.

But after their first meeting, Ryoma swiftly turned the situation around. He managed to bring the neutral faction's nobles to their side. And after that, he drowned thousands of soldiers as he formed a bridgehead along the river Thebes, a feat that would earn him the moniker of "The Devil of Heraklion." A crafty, vicious, cold-hearted man that would stoop to any means to achieve his goals...

But despite that name, he always treated Lupis with dignity and sincerity. He never once lied to her. If nothing else, he was much more trustworthy and reliable than the flippant nobles.

*And yet, I betrayed him...*

On the surface, she granted him noble status as a reward for his achievements in the war, and gave him dominion over the Wortenia Peninsula. But Lupis knew better than anyone that action was in fact brought on by her fear and suspicion of him.

Granting him an abandoned, undeveloped land with no prospects of tax wasn't an act of hospitality by any stretch of the imagination. And that was, in fact, an open secret among Rhoadseria's ruling class.

"State your terms."

Lupis was prepared. She was the one to make that decision, and so she would have to bear the responsibility for it. Lupis had decided to accept any conditions so long as it would save her country, no matter the pain they might bring.

She had no other means of protecting it anymore.

†

That night, Ryoma visited Helena's room. The two of them sat on opposite sofas, their gazes linked.

"We meet again, sooner than I thought," Helena said, gazing upon Ryoma's face with a motherly smile.

"Yes. I was surprised, too." Ryoma nodded.

The lamp sitting on the table illuminated Helena's face.

*She's gotten thinner...*

As they spoke, Ryoma fixed his gazes on the wrinkles on Helena's face. He'd only seen her from a distance in the audience chamber so he didn't notice it, but apparently she'd been working herself hard.

"Has your warning become pointless by now?" Helena said, referencing the prediction he gave her before they parted last year.

"Yes. I'll be honest, Helena, I didn't think things would deteriorate this much... I don't even know what to say..." Ryoma spoke his mind without glossing over the facts.

It was Ryoma that made Helena retake her post as general in exchange for exacting revenge on General Albrecht for the murder of her family. He had placed her upon the sinking ship that was the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, and he wasn't going to shirk the responsibility of having done so.

"I knew it... We should have had Viscount Gelhart executed..." Helena whispered with a sigh.

"No, looking at the situation right now, even if we had abandoned Mikhail and killed Viscount Gelhart, things wouldn't have changed by much." Ryoma shook his head.

“Is she unqualified as a monarch?” Helena’s gaze sharpened as she fixed her eyes on Ryoma.

This was effectively slander against the country’s ruler. Ryoma didn’t seem at all apologetic, though.

“I won’t say she’s completely unqualified, but I do think she doesn’t entirely have the aptitude,” Ryoma shrugged. “Well, if someone she could trust were to hold power and she would simply be a symbolic figure, things might be different.”

Helena’s eyes lost that sharpness, and her expression turned morose. She was overcome with regret.

“Yes... It would be better both for this country and for her Majesty that way. If only someone like you could support her...”

Those were Helena’s honest feelings, but at the same time it was but a fantasy one could only pointlessly hypothesize over. While he did make great achievements during the civil war, Ryoma wasn’t even a citizen of Rhoadseria. This country was fixated on the ideas of pedigree and bloodlines, and the nobles and knights would greatly object.

And as obsessed as they were with their bloodline and pride, their overbearing prejudice toward the commoners was just as intense. Some of them believed themselves to be privileged individuals chosen by God. And those people would never accept a noble who was elevated from commoner status as one of their own, even reluctantly.

Ryoma, however, was different. He was a mercenary of unknown background. He may have been given the rank of Baron by the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, but that was only done to keep him at bay so he didn’t cause any trouble. That he was given the Wortenia Peninsula, with its unique terrain, kept their complaints silent. Normally, a commoner would never be promoted to such a title.

That country would never let Ryoma take a commanding position. Helena was from a commoner’s background too, of course, but in her case, she built her achievements across many years and made many allies to support her. Her name had even spread to the neighboring countries. Her position was all too different from Ryoma’s.

All the facts made it so what Helena had said was effectively impossible. But she couldn't help but feel frustrated by it all. The idea of 'what if' bound her heart.

"Well, enough of that..." She sighed with a stiff expression and turned to face Ryoma.

In the end, this was just discussing hypotheticals. Regret would do nothing to change the reality of things.

*We need only do what we can right now.*

Because right now, Rhoadseria was being menaced by a great power.

"So? Why did you ask for those terms?"

Lupis accepted all the terms Ryoma stated during the audience. That much was within expectations, since Ryoma prepared those terms so they wouldn't come across as oppressive. That much was clear from the fact she accepted them without having to consult the ministers that attended the meeting. One could say this was because Ryoma lowered his terms, but they had no way of knowing that.

"Did anything come across as suspicious, Helena?" Ryoma smiled as he answered her question with a question.

His expression didn't make it seem like there was some kind of implicit intent. Helena knew better, though.

"Suspicious? Of course not. If anything, your terms were *too inconspicuous*." Helena stressed the last two words.

"You're blaming me for not being suspicious? That's unreasonable," Ryoma said, his smile turning wry.

Ryoma's response was understandable. He could accept being questioned if anything he did came across as alarming, but he didn't. Helena's expression didn't change, though.

"Ryoma... What are you thinking?" Her eyes were serious and unwavering.

She wasn't going to back down until she heard a convincing answer.

*Well, damn... I guess Helena would find it suspicious, though...*

Ryoma couldn't help but crack a self-deprecating smirk. There really wasn't some kind of big ulterior motive behind it. He simply made an offer meant to increase their slim chances of victory. It was he, after all, who was about to set out to the battlefield and put his life on the line. And the army he led wasn't strong enough to turn the tide.

A few hundred soldiers couldn't hope to influence a battlefield where multiple countries clash. The most they could do was take advantage of an opening to score a crippling blow, but the main force would be Helena's knight order or the reinforcements from Myest.

As such, it made sense to decrease the burden on Helena. All he really did was make things slightly more advantageous for them, and as a fee for all the trouble he would have to undertake, it was exceptionally cheap.

*Guess I have to tell her. Having Helena suspect me might come back to bite me...*

Ryoma heaved a small sigh and asked.

"You mean the war funds?"

Ryoma asked Lupis for the right to migrate escapees and commoners with specialized skills — like farmers and blacksmiths — from the capital and its surrounding regions to the Wortenia Peninsula. And he also requested a month to prepare for the dispatch.

Lupis did view his request to move the commoners to be a bit problematic, but not enough to actually object or refuse. But moving away the escapees would help restore public order in the capital, and a month was a short amount of time to prepare for the dispatch.

In which case, Helena was concerned about the fact that Ryoma asked Lupis to convert the support she proposed into a paltry sum of barely ten thousand gold coins.

"Didn't I tell you our side would handle equipment and supplies?" Helena turned a questioning gaze at Ryoma.

In all honesty, the pretense of the money being war funds felt unnatural and forced, and the sum was far too small. Helena knew Ryoma needed funds to develop Wortenia, but if that was the case, she preferred he simply say so. Everyone knew that Ryoma was being asked for the impossible in this situation, and no one would complain if he brought up financial support as a condition for his participation in the reinforcements.

There was no need for him to request that sum in place of the war funds, and having the kingdom provide them supplies and equipment would be much easier, even if he could manage it on his own.

Helena's natural smile, though, was simply met by another smile.

"You're right, having the kingdom handle supplies would have been easier... But after seeing the way the capital is, I'm too anxious to rely on them with this."

"What do you mean?" Helena asked, tilting her head.

"Exactly what I said. Her Majesty doesn't have control over the entire capital right now. Do you think I can really trust her to gather and manage supplies from across the country when she can't even manage the place she should be in direct control of?"

Helena's expression stiffened.

"Well, Her Majesty won't be gathering them herself..."

As Ryoma shrugged with a wry smile, Helena felt something cold slither down her spine.

*This boy... He realized this much just by looking at the state of the capital?*

The reforms in Pireas weren't going well, that much was for certain. No, they weren't just not going well. They were effectively in a standstill. Pireas was traditionally run by the captain of the royal guard, and so it didn't have a lot of interaction with the nobles and bureaucrats.

As a result, Lupis's intent of consolidating the power in the hands of the monarch was met with resistance from the nobility and bureaucracy, who feared what existing power they did have was about to be greatly limited. From

their perspective, a novice who didn't know the first thing about governing was using the monarch's authority to encroach on their domain.

That's the only image they had of her.

Had Viscount Gelhart died, perhaps they would have given up. But he was still alive and propped up Princess Radine as a member of the royal family, and that meant that even with his rank lowered from Duke to Viscount, his power and authority were greater than ever before.

To be exact, he effectively took over the position of a minister. Counts Zeleph, Bergstone, and other nobles of the neutral faction had officially taken those positions after a long period of decline. But the ones following their orders were the same middle-and low-class bureaucrats that worked under Gelhart when he still had power. And if they were to turn their backs on the regime, the country wouldn't be able to function properly.

In fact, ever since the decision was made to dispatch reinforcements to Xarooda, only two thirds of the required gear and provisions were gathered in the capital. Of course, they could get supplies from Xarooda, but they couldn't rely entirely on the country in need of reinforcements. It only made sense to prepare as much as possible on their own.

And indeed, Myest's proud knights led the vanguard, with large wagons full of supplies behind them. They had not just food and gear, but also extra horses and medical supplies to tend to wounded soldiers to help Xarooda's army. It was a show of Myest's financial power, which it owed to having Pherzaad, the largest trade port in the western continent.

"Ryoma, you..." Helena was left speechless.

Even at that young age, the man before her knew the subtleties lying behind a military. An army was essentially a massive living being. It devoured large amounts of supplies and gears, and produced nothing. And if it wasn't fed sufficiently, that creature would go berserk. Few people truly realized this, even within the military. Only those in the higher echelons knew.

But for all her surprise, a certain suspicion crept up in Helena's heart.

*Just where... is he intending to get those supplies, then?*

There was no doubting the supplies were absolutely necessary. And it was evident Rhoadseria's government couldn't provide them, so she could understand why Ryoma elected to convert it to military funds. But any amount of money was meaningless if no one sold him the supplies he needed.

Helena was leading a knight order, while Ryoma was leading several hundred soldiers. Between the two of them, they had less than three thousand men, but no merchant in town could supply for such a large force.

They would need to order from a firm of considerable size, and no company would accept such an order from a first-time customer. Without some real achievements to show, no company would take their order, since supplying such an army carried risks.

Ryoma, however, simply laughed her doubts off.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Ryoma said as if it truly was a trifling matter. "Actually, I already talked it out with them. They just need us to pay them later."

"Huh?" Helena could only manage that response.

"I already have things arranged with a company in Epirus. Though I'll admit that was just a stroke of luck. But anyway, they'll provide us half a year's supplies."

"I see... Hence the month you asked for." Helena said, heaving a deep sigh.

*Worrying about it was pointless...*

In the end, it really was trivial. The smiling young man sitting before her had already prepared everything before arriving in the capital. The only way it was possible was that he assumed he might be called and prepared ahead of time.

Ryoma chose to work for this country, of his own will. And that was something Helena should have been happy about. But given the way he was treated in the past, it simply didn't make sense.

*Just how long... No, that's not it.* What *is he doing this for?*

The doubt bubbled up within Helena, but she didn't ask Ryoma. Something gave her the feeling that if she were to ask... everything would fall apart.

# Chapter 4: To the West

A group of some three hundred soldiers was camped out in the fields outside Epirus. Along with them were a hundred or so men clad in shabby, dirty clothes. The soldiers wore black leather armor, and their faces, while still young, surveyed the area with sharp gazes.

A gust of wind blew through the camp, flapping a black flag emblazoned with the emblem of a two-headed serpent with gold and silver scales coiled around a sword. The serpent glared at the surroundings with crimson, shining eyes. It was as if the flag was meant to daunt anyone who lay eyes on it. But everyone in this camp looked up to it with respect and pride.

The sword stood for power and strength, and the two-headed serpent that seemed to protect it stood for the wisdom and strategy. The design seemed to symbolize their master, as proof of the land they built up with their own two hands.

Ten carriages were sitting at the southern side of the camp, and the soldiers' voices echoed from their direction.

"Forty barrels of salted fish!"

"Fifty barrels of dried dates!"

"Forty barrels of pork jerky!"

The cargo was being loaded off the carriages one by one, and inspecting the barrels' contents was a plain, boring task.

"I know it's irritating work, but we're almost done. Keep going, everyone!" Laura exclaimed, to which the soldiers nodded wordlessly and went back to work.

At Laura's side was a roundish merchant, who inspected a parchment as the soldiers raised their voices.

"That looks to be everything..." The merchant sighed, having finally concluded

checking all the wagons. “My, even with Count Salzberg’s recommendation to encourage me, gathering this much in such a short period of time is impressive, if I do say so myself.”

This merchant alone carried in the ten wagons to the camp, and compared the many supplies loaded onto them one by one to his ledger. The merchant didn’t engage in any physical labor himself — except for flipping through the parchment, of course — but the task itself was mind-numbingly dull. The merchant was understandably exhausted, but with this two-hour task finally at an end, his round face beamed with relief.

Of course, having completed such a large transaction meant he would be leaving with his pockets significantly heavier. The sum promised for it was one this shrewd merchant couldn’t very well ignore. His face, however, turned pale at the next moment.

“Yes, we’re well aware that this was a tall order. That’s why we’ve paid extra, though, and your prices were quite expensive to begin with.” Laura turned a cold gaze at the merchant, who mumbled to himself while looking at the parchments in his hand.

The result of their inspection showed the amount and quality of the goods was as promised, but the invoice he gave Laura listed an extremely high cost. The truth of the matter was that all the merchants present here were of the zealous type one ought to be always wary of. They were stubborn businessmen that were far more used to negotiations than most nobles were. They would take any chance to increase their profits, waiting with predatory vigil for any opportunity to do so.

And this merchant, who was grinning at Laura while fidgeting and leafing through his parchments, was no different. His amicable smile hid the fact that he was no saint, nor was he naive.

“Surely you jest. These are the same prices I offer Count Salzberg.” The merchant mouthed his excuses as if offended.



True, him mentioning Count Salzberg's name would normally shut the mouths of any nobles of lower standing. There was no telling what might happen if a commotion were to break out and news of it reached Count Salzberg's ears, and most nobles couldn't budge in the face of that fear.

*I swear... Everyone thinks they're so high and mighty...*

This farce has been going on for days. At first he found the whole spectacle amusing, but after repeating it time and again, he'd grown tired of it. Laura heaved a small sigh. The supplies this merchant delivered them were mostly preserved foods, like salted fish and dried meat. These were effectively foods one could find in a common household, and while their numbers were indeed large, their price didn't match the sum on the invoice.

Ryoma upped the amount they would pay by ten percent, telling her that this should keep the merchants quiet, but the price listed was five times the market price. This was far, far too greedy. Laura had checked the market ahead of time, and frankly could have bought the same amount from another merchant. Those prices were far more reasonable than this.

Ryoma wasn't so foolish as to blindly trust a merchant and be deceived by their cajolery. And to that end, Laura didn't hesitate one bit to call out this sly merchant.

"Really, now? Then please take your goods and leave. We'll find another company to supply us."

They needed supplies urgently, but everything had its limits. They couldn't afford to withdraw on this.

"What?! That's unacceptable! We worked quite hard at Count Salzberg's request to deliver these, so telling us to just take them back now... This will influence your future dealings both with the Count and with us. You do understand that?"

Apparently he thought Laura was just a young, naive girl, because he tried to menace her using Count Salzberg's backing.

*What a foolish man...*

And normally, his threat would have worked. But he would go on to rue his words shortly after this. Because the moment he raised his voice at Laura, an unexpected person spoke up.

“What is going on here, exactly?”

Upon hearing that voice, both of them turned around, and the merchant exclaimed with surprise.

“What?!”

Count Salzberg had appeared behind him, accompanied by a group of knights. Apparently he’d been there for some time. Count Salzberg’s lips twitched slightly. Apparently he was suppressing the urge to laugh out loud.

“My, if it isn’t Count Salzberg. We’re delighted to have you here.” Laura gave a respectful bow with flawless aristocratic decorum.

“Mm. I’ve come here to give my regards to Baron Mikoshiba, as he is about to depart on his campaign...” Count Salzberg asked Laura with a gracious tone and a pleasant smile. “I believe I sent a runner ahead of time to inform you of this. He has time set aside for me, I hope?”

“The Baron is indeed quite occupied with preparations for the march, but I doubt he will refuse once he hears you have gone to the bother of coming here, lord Count.”

“I see... Very well, show me to him, if you will.” Count Salzberg then cut off his words and turned his gaze to the now very pale merchant. “And you’re from the Raphael company, I believe?”

Count Salzberg’s tone wasn’t particularly harsh, but the merchant stiffened in place as if the noble had just declared his death sentence. Epirus’s economy was under the control of the union, and the Mystel Company stood at its head. And the one speaking to him was both the governor of Epirus and husband to the Mystel Company’s sole daughter.

To this frightened merchant, Count Salzberg’s words were tantamount to the underworld judge’s verdict.

“Baron Mikoshiba is placing his life on the line for Rhoadseria. I know I’ve

asked for quite a lot out of you, but can I ask you to be considerate of the circumstances?”

It wasn’t an order, but a request to be considerate of Ryoma. But the merchant wasn’t so foolish so as to not understand the meaning behind Count Salzberg’s words.

“M-My apologies, it seems there was a miscalculation here... “ The merchant stammered as he blatantly lowered the price.

Count Salzberg didn’t need to say anything else. He knew his intentions were made perfectly clear.

“Good,” he nodded. “I realize I had the Union’s people work quite hard over this whole affair, but it’s all for Rhoadseria’s future. Do keep it up.”

“Of course. My apologies for the trouble, I’ll have the goods reconfirmed right away.” The merchant mouthed this excuse and bolted off.

He would likely take advantage of this check to fabricate some excuse regarding the number or quality of the goods, and use it as a pretense to lower the cost.

*Your luck ran out, didn’t it...?* Laura smiled in her heart as she watched the merchant check the goods again in a cold sweat.

His attempt to make a profit off of them would likely result in him selling it off at a lower price than usual. Of course, he never imagined Count Salzberg would call his bluff there, and so the merchant was more likely to curse his luck rather than reflect on the depth of his greed.

“Let us be off, then.”

Count Salzberg ordered Laura to guide him as if nothing had happened. This was, after all, an inconsequential sequence of events to him. All he really did was admonish a greedy merchant.

“My word, you are too soft-hearted. Even if they came begging for it, I can’t believe you would join the reinforcements to Xarooda. Is life not dangerous enough as it is?”

Upon entering the tent Laura escorted him to, Count Salzberg’s lips curled the

moment he saw Ryoma. He was still smiling, though, and his tone didn't come across as sarcastic. If anything, it was closer to how one might jab at a friend.

Laura hurriedly slipped to Ryoma's side and whispered in his ear, after which he spoke without surprise in his eyes after and whispered something in her ears.

"It's been a while, Count Salzberg. I thank you for all your help with this affair, too." Ryoma said, bowing his head.

Count Salzberg stopped him with a raised hand and sat on a nearby chair. He was clearly in a good mood.

"Oh, do away with the pleasantries. I've made quite the profit out of your involvement in all this, after all."

"Oh, I couldn't. Everything's going so smoothly thanks to your assistance, Count." Ryoma bowed his head anyway.

"Hmm. I hope we can continue this mutually beneficial give-and-take relationship in the future," Count Salzberg said with a satisfied smile.

This much was to be expected. All Count Salzberg really did was contact his father-in-law, the president of the Mystel company, and asked him to have all the companies in the union help secure the goods they needed.

The Count himself didn't do any real work, and that alone earned him a good amount of money. Ryoma sent him quite the sum as a fee for acting as their intermediate, and he got a very attractive fee from the union, as well. Ryoma didn't know just how much Count Salzberg earned in total from the supplies transaction, but it probably wasn't less than a thousand golds.

The fact that Ryoma wasn't trying to make a favor out of this affair, even when considering how much Count Salzberg earned from it, made the noble quite satisfied, too.

*Well, that's what I expected.* Upon seeing Count Salzberg's pleased smile, Ryoma realized his assumption was correct.

People like Count Salzberg tended to act in one of several set patterns. The most striking pattern was that they hated seeing people patronize them and

expect gratitude in return. On the other hand, though, they had a strong sense of duty and would reward their benefactors so long as they remain modest. In a way, dealing with him was very easy. At least so long as one made note of not agitating his sense of pride.

“Incidentally, I hear that Helena Steiner is already on her way to Xarooda?” Count Salzberg breached on the subject of the war upon seeing the atmosphere was calm enough.

He was, after all, originally more of the warrior type and had a great interest in the reinforcements being sent out to Xarooda.

“Yes, going any later wouldn’t leave a good impression on Xarooda and Myest,” Ryoma replied.

Saying it ‘wouldn’t leave a good impression’ was an understatement. Drawing things out any further could possibly result in Myest declaring war on Rhoadseria.

“Understandably enough, I’d say. From Myest’s perspective, Xarooda is their greatest and foremost shield. It’s a surprise they’d been this tolerant for a year.”

“They probably knew the state Rhoadseria is in. Besides, Myest wanted to avoid crossing through Rhoadseria territory when Her Majesty still hadn’t consolidated control over the nobles.”

“Sending an expedition is difficult enough, but for a country with such an unstable regime as ours, it’s all the harder...”

Count Salzberg was right. Deploying an army out on an expedition would be a difficult task even at the best of times. Just keeping up the morale of the soldiers, who were forced to move away from their homes, was a challenge.

And that was on top of all the other concerns involved with it, from procuring supplies to organizing the forces that would guard the country in the absence of the army sent out to countless other considerations. It was, indeed, a pile of headache-inducing problems.

And if the country they were to pass through was plagued by unrest and political instability, Myest’s army would hesitate to pass through it even if it was

to save Xarooda from its plight.

"So what do you intend to do?"

"The purchase of the supplies should be complete in several days. We'll then go west of Epirus and cross the border to Xarooda. After that, we'll take the highway south and head for Xarooda's capital city, Peripheria, and regroup with Helena's forces."

"Yes, I suppose that would be the natural choice... I pray for your good luck." Count Salzberg turned a somewhat teasing glance at Ryoma, who simply replied with a wordless nod.

The fortunate survive, while the unlucky die. This was true both in this world and in Ryoma's.

†

After concluding his conversation, Count Salzberg made to leave the camp with his escorts when his eyes fell on the black flag flapping in the wind.

*Hmph. A sword and a serpent... The design does suit him. The serpent, if nothing else, fits him perfectly. I've decided to bet on his ploys, and I look forward to seeing where he takes this.*

Count Salzberg did not trust Ryoma, truthfully. He simply used his connections to repay for the profit Ryoma brought him. The amicable approach he showed Ryoma in this meeting was but a shallow, thin veneer. Count Salzberg did understand this much, though.

*If he saves Xarooda, that's good in one way. If he doesn't, I need only gather the nobles of the north and negotiate with O'ltormea.*

So long as they insist on Rhoadseria's continued existence, the nobles had their ways of ensuring their own survival. Of course, he didn't want to have to face an O'ltormean invasion. There was no money to be had in war, after all, even if no weapons are truly crossed. Any money lost in the war would certainly serve to pressure his personal entertainment funds.

*Let us see if this man has the wisdom of the serpent in this banner... and the might of that sword. Whether that banner is but an empty threat... is something*

*I long to find out.*

A cold smile played over Count Salzberg's lips. As if he was looking down on a weakling struggling with all his might...

†

Ten days had passed since Ryoma's meeting with Count Salzberg. The soldiers stood clad in black-dyed armor, forming a long line as they headed south down the high road to Xarooda's capital city of Peripheria. Behind that line were groups of carriages overflowing with supplies.

They advanced with the red sun dipping below the mountain range as their backdrop, making them seem like a horde of bloodied devils.

"Hey! Those soldiers, what noble's army do they belong to?!"

One man plowing the fields along the highway asked his wife, who stood ahead of him, as he let go of the plow. Keeping the horse-pulled plow fixed was taxing work, and so he used this as an excuse for a break. Rubbing his numbing hands together, the man turned his gaze to the road again. His eyes were burning with hatred.

*Day in, day out... War, war, and more war... I swear, I dunno what those damn nobles are doing or what they are, but it's got nothin' do with us...*

Those emotions surfaced in the heart of this man, who lived each day by the sweat of his brow. For common farmers, it didn't matter who they paid their taxes to. In the end, all that mattered was that their lives and livelihood were assured. And right now, Xarooda was hinging on defeat at the hands of the Empire of O'ltormea.

Thankfully, the northern section of Xarooda had escaped the ravages of the war so far, but eventually the flames of conflict would reach this region, as well. And even though it had escaped the direct influences of the war, the north was still influenced by it.

Over the last year, the cost of living in this country had been gradually rising, and the governors were enforcing special tax increases using the war as pretense. Life was becoming harder.

*I suppose we're still better off...*

This man owned the land his house was built on, and so he only had to pay taxes to the governor. By comparison, people who had their land lent to them had to pay to their landowners in addition to their taxes. The man's mind drifted to the image of the man who had to sell his weeping daughter to slavery to afford his taxes.

*She was only eight years old... Dammit.*

She had hazelnut-colored hair and pretty blue eyes, and for her parents, she was the apple of their eye. If it were any ordinary year, a girl like her would never be sold off. But what brought upon this tragic result was that their produce wasn't growing well out of season, and the war with O'ltormea broke out, forcing the governor to raise taxes to cover for war expenditures.

*I just hope this damn war ends quickly. It's got nothing to do with us, anyway...*

If this country were to be ruined, it could at least be quick about it. The continued resistance meant the war expenditures were only going up, and those losses were foisted onto them.

But of course, this man's reasoning had quite the large hole to it. If this country were to fall, and they become vassals, there was no guarantee they would be treated fairly. And it was very possible that they would be forced to pay even heavier taxes.

This world had no United Nations or concept of human rights, and so there was no reason for a country to treat its conquered vassals fairly. Even if Xarooda's nobles would act the way this man wanted them to and gave up the resistance against O'ltormea, the future that awaited them could very well be one where they would be exploited to death.

Of course, this man lacked the knowledge to think that far ahead. He didn't know how to write his own name, and couldn't even count the change he got from the peddlers without help from the village headsman. He was a simple man feeling his simple life being pressured by outside forces, and all he could do was loathe whatever increased the taxes he had to pay that month.

“Huh? What are you slacking off for? Come on, we need to finish this.”

Noticing that the plow slowed to a crawl because her husband let go of it, the woman stopped whipping the two horses and raised her voice. She was something of a rough woman, the type to wear the proverbial pants in the house.

“Forget that for a second, look over there!”

“Look at what? We have to finish this before sundown, you oaf!”

But as she said this, she turned her eyes in the direction of her husband’s gaze, to the highway.

“Where is that army from? I’ve got a bad feeling about those soldiers...”

Black, black, black. From a distance, the soldiers looked cloaked in black from top to bottom.

“Yeah, you got any idea where they’re from?” the husband asked.

“Never seen the likes of ’em,” the wife replied with a shiver.

“Me neither... Don’t look like they belong to any noble in the area,” he nodded and whispered, looking back to the highway.

An army that left such a striking impression was unusual. Their numbers weren’t terribly impressive, but few nobles would spend money to ensure all their soldiers were clad in armor dyed in the same color. The only ones who would be afforded that much would be the kingdom’s knights, or perhaps the royal guard who had proven their ability and loyalty to be above all. Or otherwise, only the most major of nobles.

“And that banner...”

“Is that a snake? Those red eyes are unnerving...”

A black flag flapped in the wind, and sewn onto it was the mark of a double-headed serpent with gold and silver scales coiled around a sword. A rather striking design — the kind one would never forget after seeing it once.

“Say... Shouldn’t you tell the headsman about this and have him contact the governor?” the wife asked, the anxiety clear in her eyes.

“The headsman...” he muttered.

Her suggestion was reasonable. The northern regions were spared from direct fighting so far, but Xarooda was still in the middle of a war with O’ltormea. An unidentified army marching through their territory was too dangerous for them to simply overlook.

“And what if they end up pillaging our town...?” the wife asked, to which the man could only swallow nervously.

That was something the man actively tried not to think about so far. What if the fire were to burst out here this time? He could imagine the village cloaked by a blanket of black smoke. The townsfolk lying lifeless on the ground, basking in pools of their own blood. The children having collars clasped around their necks as they were taken to slavery.

*Dammit! Weren’t the frontlines to the west, near the border?! They couldn’t be here... But, wait... But what if they are...?*

There were some escapees who escaped the war and took refuge with some of the families in the village. From what they told, the battlefield was to the west, near the border with O’ltormea. Rumors did say Xarooda’s army was being pushed back severely, but even so, the enemy shouldn’t be marching through a northern highway like this.

Still, there was no denying the reality of the sight before his eyes.

“Hey, let’s go inform the village about this,” the man said, grabbing hold of his wife’s shaking fingers as he made to toss aside their agricultural equipment and head south.

They cut through the field, crouching down so as to avoid being seen by the soldiers marching down the highway. They were stomping down the ground he had just plowed that very morning, but at this point that didn’t matter anymore.

Their highest chance of surviving a war was by taking cover all on their own, but the two of them lived in a small village a short distance from the highway. All of the village’s people were like family to them. Pulling his wife by the arm, the man desperately hurried to the village. They couldn’t abandon their family,

after all...

†

“Master Ryoma... The farmers.”

Laura drew her horse closer to Ryoma and pointed to one of the farmlands along the side of the road. Ryoma turned his gaze there, and indeed saw crouched, black silhouettes retreating and stomping over the fields as they fled.

*Aaaah, they’re ruining the fields... Seriously, we’re supposed to be on your side...*

Ryoma sighed heavily. He’d seen this happen time and again ever since he left Epirus.

“Don’t bother with them needlessly... They might mistake us for enemies and lunge at us.”

Farmers in this world were certainly weak compared to knights who were capable of martial thaumaturgy. But a spade or a hoe was a potentially dangerous weapon even in the hands of a commoner. If they were to charge their soldiers, Ryoma’s men would get injured, even if they might not outright die.

And even if they were the ones being attacked, hurting the populace of the land they came to help would render their coming here pointless. The prolonged horseback ride left the soldiers with sore backsides, and the occasional pangs of pain were grinding on everyone’s nerves. Ryoma didn’t expect their villages to greet them with open, grateful arms, but couldn’t deny wishing they were capable of a bit of consideration.

He wished he could at least send their vanguard forward to tell them ahead of time, but any attempt by the soldiers to approach the farmers simply resulted in the latter running away. And splitting up their unit too much made it easier for their forces to be taken out one by one. Xarooda’s north was relatively safe, but there was no saying where the fighting might break out.

Just a few days ago, hostilities nearly broke out between them and a mixed army organized by one of the nobles. They’d mistaken Ryoma’s forces for a raiding party sent out by the enemy. The understanding was thankfully cleared

up before things came to blows, but truth be told the whole affair was rather discouraging.

“How many days do we have left?” Ryoma asked how much longer before they reached Peripheria.

“About seven, based on the distance... But there’s a bit of a problem,” Laura replied.

The map they’d borrowed from Helena was made for military purposes, so it was decently accurate. Of course, this world had no man-made satellites, so this was speaking relatively. Still, it was far more accurate and useful than the maps used by the civilians. Thanks to this map, their march had gone relatively smoothly.

Laura’s face clouded over as she checked her map, jolted by her horse.

“The path from here to the capital is terribly mixed in with a minor noble’s domain.”

“I guess that goes to show the messengers screwed up at places, huh...?” Ryoma grimaced bitterly.

Due to their run-in with the local forces the other day, they asked the noble to send runners to inform the nearby areas that they were reinforcements from Rhoadseria. But owing to this being a time of war and there not being enough people to send out, many nobles didn’t get the news. And the more minor nobles — that only had small agricultural communities off the highway, like this one, as their territories — were the most likely to not hear of it.

It had been five days since they left the citadel city of Epirus. It was a rather demanding march, and they crossed over forty kilometers each day. They marched at four kilometers per hour. They’d crossed a total of over two hundred kilometers on a highway that was unpaved — though it was maintained.

To top it off, the ranks Ryoma was leading also included the logistics unit that carried their supplies and rations. For the standards of this world, they were marching rather quickly. Given how excessive their efforts to help Xarooda’s army were, losing any men to a misunderstanding borne of a communication

mistake would reduce their endeavors to nothing.

“No choice, I guess... All right, we’ll chase them down with our horses. Don’t lay a hand on them though, got it?”

It wouldn’t do to get into pointless quarrels here, too. At Ryoma’s order, a few of the knights surrounding Ryoma broke from the group and went after the fleeing silhouettes.

*We should have gone to Peripheria with Helena, even if it meant losing some time...*

Helena’s forces went ahead of them, setting out from Pireas to the Kingdom of Xarooda. Their advance force passed through the villages and towns they would pass through, preventing those kinds of misunderstandings.

Normally, moving his army along with hers would have been the best choice. But since they had to carry their supplies with them, marching all the way to Pireas would have made their already slow march last even longer.

*We should have bought at least one Xaroodian banner before we set out...*

Flying his banner meant that Ryoma’s name might spread across the other countries, changing the way they regard him in the long run. But a group of armed soldiers marching unannounced with a banner unknown to anyone except for a few people in Rhoadseria made the nobles mistake this army for the enemy.

But the only thing Ryoma had to prove his identity was a single letter he’d received from Lupis. His options were limited.

*God dammit, this is going to be a hell of a task, isn’t it...?*

Ryoma heaved another deep sigh.

†

“Lord Baron, Peripheria is coming into sight.”

Ryoma turned his eyes in the direction the village girl was pointing towards, and indeed could see what looked like a gray point beyond the plains. As his forces advanced down the highway, that point was slowly becoming clearer.

An unshakeable citadel city, surrounded by tall ramparts. But unlike Epirus, it was built to be far larger and far more solid.

“Ah, father!”

Upon seeing her father come out to greet the approaching soldiers with a group of other people, the village girl beamed and waved. It may have been for work, but she was still torn from her family for several days. Ryoma cracked a forced smile. The girl may have looked like an adult, but seeing her like this made her look much younger.

*He must have fussed over her a great deal. Not that I can blame him...*

Ryoma felt the same way about the Malfist sisters behind them. The girl’s actions were likely a show of anxiety and fear. In exchange for food and some gold as payment, she was to show them the way to Peripheria and serve as their mediator.

Over the last few days, she’d been exposed to a series of stressful events. The strict taxation of wartime made their life hard. She’d been forced to do this, and being hired by a foreign army was a clear gamble. Their excuse was that they were an army sent from Rhoadseria, but their only form was some slip of paper handed to the village head. They could very well have been O’ltormean soldiers pretending to be allied soldiers.

And if they were, the villagers would all be executed as traitors that collaborated with the enemy. They could insist that they were lied to and fooled, but no one would listen. Being executed as an example would make it easier to govern the country.

The villagers were all aware of this. They might not have been educated or wise, but they understood that on an instinctual level.

Still, she took Ryoma up on his offer because her village was in dire condition.

As the distance between them shrank and the other group came into her father’s view, Ryoma’s brows furrowed as he realized something was off.

*What is it? It’s not like we’re being chased by the enemy...*

One of the men leading the group had his face contorted with fear. The girl

likely noticed her father's expression, because her gaze turned morose. If they were pursued by soldiers, they wouldn't be approaching Ryoma's group so slowly. And they were being followed by armed knights.

*Those are probably Xaroodian knights... So what are they scared of?*

"Master Ryoma..." Sara turned a concerned gaze at Ryoma, who placed a calming hand on her head.

"We'll be fine," he said, regarding her with a smile. "I've got you two with me... I probably don't need to say this, but don't let down your guards, all right?"

The Malfist sisters nodded.

"Do be careful..." Laura uttered.

Ryoma nodded back and ordered his forces to halt. After all, if they don't know the situation, it was hard to judge what the right course of action might be...

A group of soldiers on horseback stopped before Ryoma.

*Now isn't this pretentious...* Ryoma thought as he watched them.

There were a hundred or so of them, and as that thought crossed Ryoma's mind, their ranks parted to the left and right. A single knight on horseback strode through the path they cleared, accompanied by robust bodyguards.

The armor he wore made it clear he was a high-ranking knight, and his bodyguards were also carrying high-quality equipment.

*Looks like a knight order's captain, or some sort of general...* Ryoma narrowed his eyes suspiciously. *Why is someone of such high ranking here? Is Xarooda really in that bad of a position?*

Normally, one might assume they came here to greet Ryoma as reinforcements that came from afar, but the gazes the knights were fixing on his group were too harsh.

"Are you the reinforcements sent by Rhoadseria?" the man asked, directing a sharp glare at Ryoma as he brought his horse to face him.

It was extremely discourteous as greetings went, especially when directed toward someone he met for the first time, let alone the leader of a force that had traveled far to assist one's country. Ryoma simply bowed his head, however, showing no regard for the rudeness of this greeting.

"I am a baron of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, Ryoma Mikoshiba. My men and I are reinforcements, dispatched by Queen Lupis Rhoadserians to assist you and your country in your time of distress. We seek an audience with your sovereign, Julianus I of Xarooda. May we?"

Ryoma's response could be called perfectly courteous. Unless one knew otherwise, they likely wouldn't imagine Ryoma had only recently and suddenly became an aristocrat. But the man before Ryoma mercilessly stomped over Ryoma's politeness. He simply took off his helmet and handed it to one of his attendants.

He was a man in the prime of his life, with shortly cut blonde hair. He looked to be in his early-to mid-forties, and while it was hard to tell while he straddled a horse, he seemingly had quite the largely-built physique. He was, for all intents and purposes, a thick wall of flesh and muscle. Less human and more of an anthropoid ape, like a gorilla.

"Hmph... There's only five hundred of you, at a glance..." the man scoffed, turning a sharp glare at the soldiers behind Ryoma. "You call yourselves reinforcements, but what do you hope to achieve with these numbers?"

The man spoke with a sneer, words of sharp mocking leaving his lips. The fact he could estimate the number of soldiers Ryoma brought with but a glance was impressive, but the man's overbearing attitude ruined any positive impression his skills might have produced. He was not, by any means, a person Ryoma much wanted to associate with.

But Ryoma only held his silence and smiled, to which the man decided to twist the knife further.

"Are we to take it that your queen, Lupis Rhoadserians, seeks to abandon Xarooda? She has ignored our repeated appeals for reinforcements, and when she finally did oblige, she sends a senile woman recalled from retirement and a whelp of unknown origins... It doesn't seem to me like she realizes the depth of

our predicament.”

The man’s words had completely discarded all notions of dignity. Had Mikhail or Meltina been there to hear those words, a war would surely break out between Rhoadseria and Xarooda. The man’s words were, indeed, simply that insulting toward Lupis.

But Ryoma had no patriotic emotions toward Rhoadseria or respect for Queen Lupis, and so the man’s provocation fell on apathetic ears.

“I see. I suppose the way you present it isn’t too far from the truth. And you even saw that a hundred and fifty of my men are devoted solely to carrying supplies... That’s quite the very impressive, discerning eye you’ve got there. I’m assuming you’re a distinguished man of some sort. Would you do me the honor of sharing your name?”

Ryoma’s tone remained as polite and composed as before. Depending on what he said, that tone could actually come across as provocative, but in this case Ryoma didn’t harbor any such intentions.

The man simply furrowed his brows at Ryoma’s attitude.

“Do you have no conception of pride?” he asked, exasperated by the fact Ryoma’s intention didn’t so much as change.

No warrior would normally hold his tongue at such an insult, and anyone that did would be seen as spineless. Were it Meltina or Mikhail in Ryoma’s place, they would surely draw their swords in rage, completely disregarding the consequences. Truth be told, however, exposing one’s mental state to others was a foolish act.

*Only a fool exposes his emotions in public!*

In his mind, Ryoma mocked the man’s open provocation. The important part was not to show the other person your true feelings. It was exactly when one felt anger or bloodlust that they ought to display the utmost respect and dignity. That was a truth Ryoma Mikoshiba learned as a child; a lesson he gleaned from a certain incident. And that truth showed its value in this world of warfare.

And besides, this reinforcement of Xarooda was in Ryoma’s eyes nothing

more than a means to ensure his and his comrades' survival. He only came here because he didn't have much of a choice, and, when taken to the extreme, Ryoma didn't really care if Xarooda fell to O'ltormea so long as the aftereffects didn't reach him.

But of course, Ryoma wasn't foolish enough to put it into words for this man to hear.

"I can apologize in the name of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria for ignoring your requests for over a year. But do understand that the state of affairs in our country has not quite stabilized yet, and I admit the knight order led by Lady Helena only numbers three thousand men. Your country's apprehensions are clear... All we can do is prove otherwise on the battlefield."

"Oho. If these are your honest feelings, that's quite admirable..." It was hard to tell if he believed Ryoma's words, but the man eyed Ryoma appraisingly.

True enough, without proof his words only came across as mere platitudes.

"Very well... Lady Helena is already in a war council in Peripheria." Though it was hard to tell if the man believed Ryoma, his expression did soften. "You are to participate in the war council as well once your audience with His Majesty is done."

*Everything's already prepared, huh? In which case... This guy's whole spiel was just an act... I guess it makes sense they'd be anxious about us...*

They likely wanted to surmise Ryoma's attitude toward them by suddenly insulting him. That much was clear from how the audience with the king was already arranged for.

*And I guess the soldiers needed to let off some steam, too... Crafty.*

Those at the heart of the government likely realized Rhoadseria's difficulties, but a knight on the field would be hard pressed to comprehend political issues. In that regard, Ryoma's attitude softened their hardened hearts somewhat.

"Incidentally, I've yet to introduce myself. I am Grahalt Henschel, captain of the Xaroodian royal guard. A pleasure."

Grahalt then turned his horse around and motioned with his hand for Ryoma

to follow as he set off toward Peripheria.

*Now then, what'll happen next...?*

As Ryoma watched Grahalt move ahead, Ryoma reached into his pocket and took out the gold coins he'd prepared. He still had to pay the man standing at the roadside, his eyes darting to and fro anxiously...

†

A man and a woman stood opposite each other in one of the rooms in Peripheria's castle. One of them was an aging woman with a gentle smile on her lips. Despite boasting unrivaled accomplishments and skills on the battlefield, the atmosphere she gave off was warm and serene.

*She never changes... She's the same as she was back then...* Grahalt whispered to himself as he watched Helena bring a teacup to her lips.

He first met Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War soon after becoming a knight. Many of Xarooda's knights were enamored by her candid nature and attitude, and even approaching her golden years did little to diminish her charm. Her beauty had deteriorated as she grew older, of course, but her personal charm had only refined with age.

"Then what do you think of him, now that you've seen him with your own eyes?" Despite being a generation older than Grahalt, Helena spoke to him with polite dignity.

Given the gap in achievements and experience between them, Grahalt was awkward and ill at peace with this treatment, but Helena wouldn't change her attitude toward them. Regarding her with a strained smile, Grahalt honestly described his expression.

"I met him face to face, as per your suggestion... But truth be told, I found it hard to judge." He managed to squeeze out a response.

In truth, he didn't understand Ryoma well enough to harbor either a positive or negative impression of him.

"One thing I will immediately acknowledge is that his self-restraint is admirable. He didn't so much as flinch at my provocations, and was able to

express himself eloquently enough. In that regard, he does seem capable... But the numbers he leads are still too small. I simply cannot see him shifting this war, one way or another... And, besides...”

Grahalt cut off his words for a moment and directed a questioning look at Helena.

“The soldiers he leads are far too young, and many of them are women... Right?” Helena spoke the words Grahalt hesitated to say, as if reading them straight off his mind.

Grahalt was struck silent.

“Don’t mind me and speak your mind,” Helena chided him, smiling innocently like a child who had successfully pranked someone.



“You knew already?” Grahalt scratched his hair awkwardly.

“No, I only saw it from a distance just now. After all, that boy leads an army he built from nothing after being granted the Wortenia Peninsula.”

“Only just now?”

She likely watched from somewhere as Grahalt showed Ryoma and his men around camp. That was the first thing that came to mind, but Grahalt denied it.

*No... Isn’t that impossible?*

As far as he knew, Helena hadn’t set foot outside this palace since she arrived here. Helena didn’t answer his doubt, though, and instead changed the subject.

“I’d hoped to speak to him before his audience, however...” Helena sighed, turning a blaming gaze at him.

Helena did, in fact, acknowledge Ryoma as her right hand man. Depending on the situation, she would even transfer command over the Rhoadserian forces to him. They’d gathered information ahead of time, but there was too much they couldn’t learn before they actually came to Xarooda itself. Helena knew from experience that it was this kind of detailed, precise information would become a major factor in forming strategies.

*And I wanted to consult him about what we should do next, too...*

This wasn’t something Grahalt could do anything about, though. Helena had her own matters to attend to, while Xarooda had its own concerns to deal with.

“There is nothing to be done. His Majesty expects much out of Rhoadseria’s reinforcements...”

Xarooda’s position in the war was by no means a positive one. Over the last year, they single-handedly resisted O’ltormea’s invasion, and war fatigue was settling over both their territories and their soldiers.

The fields in areas close to the frontlines were burned down, adult men were forced to conscript and the remaining women and children had no choice but to seek shelter in nearby cities. And of course, the governors couldn’t offer proper protection for everyone, forcing some to sell themselves off as slaves.

Xarooda's national power was diminishing by the day, and so, Xarooda had to turn to its final recourse. Right now, with Rhoadseria and Myest supplying them with reinforcements, they could strike at the force marching through their country in one decisive battle.

Of course, this was a gamble where the continued existence of their country was on the balance, but a worthwhile gamble. At least, that was what the king and those under him — including Grahalt — ardently believed.

But there was one major problem here. The question of whether Myest and Rhoadseria would be willing to shed blood for Xarooda. Normally, Xarooda's fall would equal the fall of the other counties of the east, but they couldn't help but doubt Rhoadseria's people after their country had ignored their request for reinforcements for as long as they have.

It was for this reason that Grahalt acted upon Helena's recommendation and performed that little spectacle upon greeting Ryoma. All to affirm Rhoadseria's true intentions.

"And besides, if we'd have let Lord Mikoshiba meet with you first, there's no telling what accusations the reconciliation faction might try to bring up," Grahalt spat out with hatred.

To him, the reconciliation faction were traitors to the fatherland.

"Grahalt... I understand how you feel, but you mustn't blindly reject the reconciliation faction's claims."

Helena deftly noticed the slight emotion Grahalt showed upon mouthing their names, and spoke to him like a mother chiding their child.

"But—!"

"Listen here. The reconciliation faction are not traitors. In their eyes, they're making the best choice for this country and His Majesty, Julianus I. Even if their methods differ from the knights, they still seek the same thing... Right?"

Even as she spoke those words, Helena couldn't help but laugh at herself sardonically in her heart.

*Though the fact their thoughts are without any malice is probably the biggest*

*problem here...*

Good intentions don't always lead to the best possible result. Sad as it is, that's the reality of politics. But she had to placate Grahalt here, lest he try to achieve his own idea of justice with brute force.

A unification through military force. Indeed, if they were to crush the reconciliation faction through military might, the country would reach a consensus. But that would have to be their last resort, once they'd exhausted all other courses of action.

"Of course... Xarooda's survival stands above all else..." Grahalt managed to stammer that response, unaware of Helena's thoughts.

"Becoming a vassal of O'ltormea would allow Xarooda's royal house to survive, and that is indeed one choice..." Helena said. "The price would be great, of course, but it's better than losing everything. It's only natural some people would think so."

"And you think that is a good idea, Lady Helena?" Grahalt asked, his face contorted with bitter agony.

He hated nothing more than having to hear these words leave the lips of the woman he secretly looked up to and admired. But that question was an insult to the woman known as Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War.

"Why do you think I personally came here, leading this army?"

The moment those words left Helena's lips, the atmosphere in the room froze over. The glint in her eyes, the expressions in her face — it all switched over. The only thing that didn't change was the serene smile on her lips. Grahalt's body shivered with terror.

"M-My apologies... Forgive me for saying something so foolish."

Rhoadseria couldn't overlook Xarooda becoming O'ltormea's vassal. If they could, they wouldn't send Helena Steiner out for this task. Without changing her expression any, Helena continued speaking.

"Though I am a senile old woman called out of retirement, after all. Your anxiety is understandable."

The moment he heard those words, Grahalt felt something cold slither down his spine.

“Y-You heard that...”

He’d only said it when he first met Ryoma to gauge his reaction, but he never imagined Helena was listening. It was as awkward as finding out one’s boss was listening in one of the stalls while they were gossiping about him with their co-workers.

“Yes, as senile and old as I am, my ears and eyes still function as well as ever.”

Said eyes and ears certainly didn’t refer to her physical faculties, but rather to her information sources within Xarooda.

*Such a frightening woman...*

Many called Helena Rhoadseria’s Ivory Goddess of War, but her true strength didn’t lie in her stratagems and tactics on the battlefield. No one knew how she achieved it, but she had the power to draw on countless information sources throughout the continent. And through those miscellaneous streams of information, she could weed out whatever subject she needed and construct a hypothesis.

On the battlefield, she could certainly exhibit the majesty of a skilled, wise general but that was just one side of her. Grahalt looked away from Helena, turning his gaze down.

“Please, do not jest...” he managed to stammer out.

He then covered his face, hoping to escape her gaze. A long silence settled over the room.

“Yes, just a jest... Of course,” Helena said.

Grahalt’s mouth fell open, to which Helena covered her mouth, giggling in amusement.

“That was ill-natured of you...” Grahalt said, sighing heavily and dropping his shoulders.

Seeing this, Helena couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“If that’s enough to shock you, I can’t see how you’ll be able to restrain that boy.”

At those words, Grahalt narrowed his eyes and asked. He wasn’t so blunt as to not understand which boy she was referring to.

“Is he really... that much?”

“Why, yes. Among the many people I’ve seen, he’s the most unruly untamed horse of all.”

“An untamed horse, you say...”

“Though he has the mind of a serpent, or a scorpion.”

Her descriptions of him struck Grahalt as conflicting. Calling him an unruly, untamed horse wasn’t that hard to understand. Ryoma’s physique was indeed astonishing. His facial features were calm and amicable, but perhaps his nature changed on the battlefield, just like Helena’s.

But the intellect of a scorpion or a serpent? He didn’t sense anything of the sort from him.

“You mustn’t underestimate him, Grahalt. Unless you want to be eaten alive.”

“That doesn’t feel like a way one would describe an ally of theirs.”

Helena described him with a tone that fit another country’s general, or a political rival. Helena simply shook her head silently.

“Don’t misunderstand. I trust him, and he believes in me, too. But, Grahalt... Your side is neither friend nor foe to him yet. In which case you should show him due gratitude and seek his help... Because if he marks you as his enemies, he will take away everything you have.”

Those words were Helena’s frank warning to a friend.

“If that man... truly has the power you speak of.... At that moment... We will.”

Silence once again settled over the room.

“Good. Because you will soon understand all too well... Everyone in this country will... You’ll see.”

Helena smiled silently, imagining the moment the young serpent bares his

fangs...

# Chapter 5: Proving One's Power

A strained air filled the audience chamber. Soldiers stood on both flanks of the red carpet extending from the entrance to the throne, standing still. Behind them stood civil officials and military officers on both sides. Many of them were also nobles with titles.

The officials were clad in lavish silk garments, coated in silver and golden threads that had gemstones inlaid in them, as if to stand as symbols of their authority. Perhaps the only reason this outfit didn't come across as too gaudy was because of the noble blood running through their veins... Despite the fate of their country hanging on a thread, they still put in effort to maintain their dignity, as empty of a gesture as it may be.

This was just as true for the officers as it was for the knights. They were of course clad in armor, and wore their sheathed swords. But their armor had elaborate designs made at the hands of master craftsmen. The swords they carried didn't look like weapons to be used on the battlefield, and more like works of art to be admired.

*I guess looking too seedy would just lower the troops' morale... I guess that's the kind of people I'll have to contend with...*

While acknowledging their choice of decor to some extent, Ryoma internally heaved a sigh. Based on his experience since being summoned to this world, nobles that wrapped themselves in expensive clothing to prove their station were the most dangerous and worthless people of all — regardless of how skilled or incompetent they were.

"Please, do come forward." A chamberlain standing beside him whispered into his ear, prompting Ryoma to step up to the throne.

*Well, would you look at that...*

The audience room was lined with knights and nobles, and they all wore assorted expressions. Excitement, expectation, disappointment, exasperation,

mocking. Those were the main five emotions that seemed to fill this large audience chamber. Roughly 30% of those emotions were excitement and expectation, with disappointment, exasperation and mocking making up the other 70% percent.

*I guess they were expecting reinforcements but got a nameless brat like me instead. Makes sense they'd be pessimistic.* A masochistic thought crossed Ryoma's mind.

But even so, he calmly observed his surroundings, taking in all manner of information.

*There's... more of them than I expected. I guess that's just the gap in experience between Lupis, who only just took to the throne, and a ruler who has held on to the throne for thirty years.*

It was a palace where many plots and intentions intersected and acted against one another, but the fact that people were here meant that Julianus I still held influence. If he was an inexperienced monarch like Lupis, the nobles, with their penchant for self-preservation, would have long since fled the palace. Just like none of the aristocrats gathered under Lupis when the civil war broke out.

Unlike knights, that typically didn't have territories and simply worked for wages under employers, nobles had land of their own. Some were more or less affluent than others, but they all had independent influence, making them a powerful group.

As such, even if during peace times they allow for a centralized authoritarian rule under the king, should the king's ability to rule be cast into doubt, the nobles immediately turned to self-preservation. And in that regard, since this didn't happen here, it stood as proof that Xarooda still had hope as a kingdom.

Of course, there could be traitors in hiding, and most people were adopting a wait-and-see approach. But the fact that people were willing to wait showed that they still believed Xarooda had a chance to emerge victorious. Even if that chance was merely a few percent, the possibility bound the nobles' hearts, forbidding them from leaving the palace.

Had they sensed defeat was imminent, the nobles would plunge to keep themselves paid while paying little to no mind to what others might think of

them. And that would be when that kingdom truly comes to an end.

*This really must be their last chance... Whoever realized this read the situation well. Was it Lupis or Meltina? No... Maybe it was Count Bergstone... Whichever it was, though, it's pretty ironic.*

The pressure from Myest surely contributed, but in the end it was Rhoadseria's leadership that decided to send reinforcements to Xarooda despite the risks. And while they were blind to the trouble plaguing their own country, they aptly picked up on their neighbor's circumstances.

Ryoma stifled the smile attempting to creep to his lips. And it was then that he sensed it. Cold gazes bearing down on him as he approached the throne.

*This isn't scorn or evaluation... This is closer to anger and bloodlust.*

Ryoma turned his eyes to the source of those gazes.

*Must be them... Looks like they don't like me too much.*

He fixed his gaze on the ones who glared at him, standing near the throne. They were all people he'd never met before, and yet, the dark gazes they cast at him couldn't be summed up as mocking or scornful. They were full of clear enmity. Their outfits were more lavish than those around them, implying they were of fairly high station. And given their position in the room, they likely possessed quite a bit of power and authority...

The truth of the matter was that one's social standing didn't always equal their effective power and influence. Some dukes held titles that were merely nominal and offered no real influence, while there were barons that were closely trusted by the king and appointed to important positions.

But the group eyeing Ryoma with enmity had both positions and power.

*Tch... This is gonna be annoying. Why can't anything go smoothly for once...?!*

It happened during the Rhoadserian civil war and it looked set to happen now as well, but somehow it seemed Ryoma was fated to always have the most influential and powerful of nobles stand in opposition to him.

*That gorilla guy isn't here, though... Grahalt, I think he was called...?*

Restraining the urge to sigh at his lack of luck, Ryoma looked around for

Grahalt. His position was what interested him the most at the moment, and that would be made clear by seeing his position in this audience chamber. But Ryoma couldn't spot his face among the knights. He then turned his gaze to the empty throne, finding Grahalt standing to the left of the throne. Despite standing near the king, he was still clad in armor and carrying a sword, like the rest of the knights.

*Well, wow... I guess the king must really trust him.*

Grahalt stood, as if showing off his large physique, like a shield guarding the throne.

*Since he's so close to the king... His attitude earlier must have been someone's suggestion. Though I guess I can't disregard the possibility of him coming up with the idea on his own, but the most prime suspect would be Helena, I suppose...*

Those standing closest to the throne were those that had more influence and a higher standing, but standing next to the throne was different. Standing and influence weren't enough to allow for that — one needed to be trusted by the king. The royal guard — the protectors of the king — were both the sword and shield of the monarch. The fact that the king let someone stand at his side stood as proof of the great trust he harbored toward that person.

By comparison, it was like how Lupis trusted Meltina and Mikhail. And such a person was sent to the capital's outskirts to greet Ryoma. There was little to no chance Julianus I would know of someone like Ryoma on any practical level. If he possessed an information network to know closely of Ryoma, Xarooda would never have been placed in such a position of inferiority.

Someone must have advised the king — for some purpose, of course.

*But even if it was Helena's idea, it would have come to naught unless he had the tolerance to accept it... Julianus I... I shouldn't underestimate him.*

Ryoma kneeled before the empty throne and waited nervously for the arrival of the so-called mediocre king...

"You've done well to come here from afar." A serene voice eventually spoke from above Ryoma's head, from the direction of the throne.

“Yes, your Majesty!”

“Come, no need to stand on ceremony. Show me the face of Rhoadseria’s young hero. You are not of Xarooda’s nobility, so you may be at ease.”

Ryoma raised his head, fixing his gaze on an old man with a white, bushy beard. He wore a red silk mantle, and resting on his head was a crown lined with glittering diamonds. Deep wrinkles were etched into his serene face, and he looked upon Ryoma with blue eyes.

He was by no means a largely built man. It was hard to tell since he was seated on the throne, but he looked to be of about medium build. But the atmosphere he gave was, without a doubt, that of a monarch.

“I greet you after your long journey. I am the King of the Kingdom of Xarooda, Johann Julianus I.”

He had the bloodline of a long, uninterrupted royal line, and the definite achievement of having retained his rule for decades. The two mingled together, creating an odd sort of pressure that bore down on Ryoma.

*Well, damn... If they call Julianus I a mediocre king, I guess you can’t trust rumors after all...*

True, his reign didn’t have many accomplishments of note, and the man himself didn’t seem to excel or be exceedingly bad at anything. But the fact remained that he’d been able to retain the land he’d inherited in a world of constant warfare, and that was perhaps all the proof Ryoma needed to know that he was no mediocre or average man.

“Hmm, Lady Helena did tell me of you ahead of time but... Yes, I see,” Julianus I said, a slight smile on his lips.

*So it was Helena’s idea, after all...*

The king’s words confirmed Ryoma’s suspicion. There was a deep connection between Helena and Xarooda’s king.

“Right now, my country is besieged by the Empire of O’ltormea, and has been driven to the point of no recourse,” Julianus I said.

Ryoma nodded wordlessly.

“However, now that we have reinforcements from Rhoadseria and Myest, we may have a chance at retaking our land. What say you? Have we a chance?” the king asked probingly.

“If I may, Your Majesty, I ask that you give me time before I answer that question.” Ryoma shook his head.

Ryoma’s response caused everyone present to stir and begin whispering to one another. Now that Rhoadseria and Myest had dispatched their reinforcements, now would have been the time to risk it all and go on the offensive. That was what most of the people present in this audience chamber were looking forward to.

But Ryoma advised against recklessly throwing themselves into battle. He arrived in this country to win the war against O’ltormea, and easing the people’s anxiety or flaring up their morale was secondary to him.

“Oho... You think now is not the time?”

“I won’t say that it isn’t, but I won’t say that it is, either. I believe the correct course of action is that I first carefully examine the information we have, get a grasp on the situation, and give you a more informed answer then.”

The nobles’ whispering grew more intense, and the enmity directed at Ryoma grew in intensity. Was it out of sheer animosity, or perhaps because of some kind of reason...?

“I see... That is quite cautious of you.”

“There is a fine line between bravery and recklessness, Your Majesty.”

All of the people in the room were overtaken by the fact Ryoma spoke to the king as squarely as he did. His eyes looked back into the strong gaze directed at him from the throne. It was a sharp gaze, as if the man had been trying to see through his heart.

The commotion suddenly died out, and silence settled over the audience chamber.

*His eyes are unwavering...* Julianus I felt strong will burning in Ryoma’s eyes.

All he saw there was the might of steel incarnated into the shape of a man.

*What kind of life must one lead to bear these eyes at such a young age...?*

Julianus I knew two other people with the same kind of eyes as this young man gazing intently back at him. One of them was the deceased General Belares, Xarooda's Guardian Deity. The other was Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War, Helena Steiner. They harbored a certain light within them. They were confident of that light, and it showed in their eyes.

"Very well... I wish for you to lend me your strength, alongside Lady Helena," Julianus I said, the intensity in his questioning gaze making way for the serenity he showed earlier.

"I will do everything in my humble abilities to ensure Xarooda's victory." Ryoma bowed his head quietly as he promised triumph to the king.



“Hmm. We expect much of you...”

Julianus I’s words made the air in the audience chamber relax. The reinforcements sent by Rhoadseria were accepted. But some people weren’t so happy to greet them. When Julianus I approved of Ryoma’s response with a smile, one man broke past the royal guard’s restraint and stepped before the throne.

“Wait, Your Majesty!”

Julianus I glanced in the man’s direction and ordered the knights trying to pull him back to let go.

“What is it, Count Schwartzheim?” The king regarded the man kneeling before his throne with a somewhat amused expression, resting his chin on his hands as he gave him permission to speak.

The man — Count Schwartzheim — was clad in silk clothes decorated with golden strings and inlaid with gemstones. Apparently, he was fairly influential within the palace. The fact that he was even given permission to speak after bursting through the royal guard was proof of his position.

He was a man in his forties, with blond hair that was combed back and had a bulging, round gut. But his shoulders were wider than his 170 centimeters of height suggested, and his forearms were as thick as logs. It was clear he wasn’t just an influential noble.

“If I may, I would like to say something, even though it may earn me your ire, Your Majesty,” he said with his head bowed down.

As he spoke, the gazes directed at Ryoma by the nobles beside him grew sharper. Hatred, anger, envy, loathing. Emotions that were far too vivid for one to normally direct at a man they had met the first time.

*What’s these guys’ problem...?*

Anyone would be taken aback by having a stranger regard them with blatant hatred, but Ryoma tried to suppress his confusion. He couldn’t afford to show any weakness in this audience chamber, where those on his side were intermingled with his foes.

Of course, he could make himself intentionally look weak to make other people underestimate him, but right now Ryoma needed Xarooda's nobles to absolutely be in awe of him. And as such, he took care to maintain his expression as hard as he could.

"If you have any opinion on my decisions, speak your mind."

"I believe that this man, Mikoshiba, lacks the strength you expect of him, Your Majesty. I believe it would be best if he takes his soldiers and returns to his country."

It was such a provocative, shameless statement, everyone present in this audience chamber couldn't help but begin to murmur.

"Ohoh. You tell me to send Lord Mikoshiba and his reinforcements away after the long journey they made to come here?" Julianus I asked.

"I do, indeed." Count Schwartzheim nodded, not showing any sign of shame or remorse.

"Count Schwartzheim..." Julianus I began, his voice pleasant and almost amused. "You realize the meaning of what you say here, yes? Do you intend to drive a wedge between our country and Rhoadseria?"

Indeed, sending Ryoma away now would be a terrible diplomatic move, but that went without saying.

"That is a concern I am aware of, yes. But Your Majesty, you can only say that because you have not seen the so-called reinforcements this man brought with him." Count Schwartzheim said, silencing the tumult filling the room.

"Lady Helena tells me they are all selected elites."

"If General Helena Steiner truly told you that, Your Majesty, then I am sad to say that she has greatly misled you. I have seen his forces, and they number a mere three hundred. Not only that, but they are mostly made up of commoner girls who are barely of age, if at all. I cannot see what good they will bring us on the battlefield. At worst, they will be snatched away by the enemy, lowering our army's morale. And besides, after a year of holding the line, our forces have no abundance of supplies to spare. Since they are useless in battle, I posit that they ought to turn around and return to Rhoadseria."

Count Schwartzheim's voice echoed through the audience chamber. Rhoadseria's reinforcements were made up by the 2,500 knights led by Helena and the three hundred brought by Ryoma, for a total of 2,800 soldiers. Even with Helena, for all her acclaim, serving as their commander, the simple fact of the matter was that their forces were far smaller than the ten thousand elites dispatched by Myest.

While Count Schwartzheim's attitude was exceedingly rude considering he was speaking to a man who had come to their aid from afar, his stance wasn't mistaken altogether. A weak ally can be a much larger liability than a powerful enemy, and war depends on how one breaks the hearts of man.

Indeed, sometimes one need only claim the life of the general leading the battlefield, and other times one must defeat every single soldier the enemy has. But when properly examining things, the reason a general's defeat can conclude a war stems from the fact that a leader's death forces the soldiers' hearts to break under the weight of reality. A war is decided when one side's soldiers and their general begin fearing for their life and become aware of their defeat.

*Oh... So he knows how war works. This man isn't stupid.*

He had a well-reasoned, logical reason to say what he did. Ryoma was honestly impressed with the man kneeling beside him. He looked like a haughty fool, but first impressions were deceiving. And with those prejudices gone, Ryoma began seeing this man's true intentions.

*There are two options here. He's either serious, or he's trying to deceive... If he's serious, this man is trustworthy and reliable. But if he's deceiving the king here, this man is one hell of a villain.*

Ryoma silently gazed into Count Schwartzheim's face as he shouted. As if trying to peer into his heart...

The problems he pointed out were understandable. If one were to just look at the surface, Ryoma's three hundred soldiers weren't worth anything, especially since most of his soldiers were commoner girls.

Had his army consisted of robust men, perhaps the Count wouldn't have raised his voice so much. One wouldn't normally send an army of such conscripts out on such a mission, but given Rhoadseria's troubles, one might

feel inclined to swallow their anger.

It was understandable that since they were recovering from a civil war, they wouldn't have many soldiers to send abroad... To that end, Count Schwartzheim was appreciative of the fact that Rhoadseria went to the trouble of sending 2,500 knights under Helena's skilled, experienced command.

But that wasn't the case with Ryoma and his soldiers. An army of soldiers that didn't look to be of any use on the battlefield, led by a young noble with little to no merit to his name.

*Bringing this rabble and calling them reinforcements... This is an insult to Xarooda!*

That anger flared up in his heart. From Count Schwartzheim's perspective, Ryoma dressed up commoners as soldiers and tried to pass them off as an army.

"I appreciate their coming here and offering their help, but we haven't much leisure. I know not what your intentions were in bringing this army here, but I will be frank — it is nothing more than a nuisance to us! They may only be three hundred, but we have no provisions to offer to your soldiers!"

His shouts echoed through the audience chamber. Indeed, one wouldn't waste precious supplies on useless soldiers.

"Count Schwartzheim, are you not taking this too far?" Grahalt tried to rebuke him for his outburst.

Grahalt had leveled the same accusation against Ryoma before, but that was in an informal setting. Saying everything that he did during an audience, while everyone is listening in, was excessive. But right now, that basic level of consideration was beyond the Count.

"What are you saying, Captain Henschel? To begin with, what were you thinking? I heard you were sent to greet this man at the capital's outskirts. If you knew ahead of time, why did you not tell His Majesty of it? You should have driven this man back before he ever came to this audience!"

His argument was sound and beyond refuting. Xarooda needed reinforcements — not needless baggage. With that in mind, Grahalt should

have forced this army to go back. While this might not have held true for all the other nobles, Count Schwartzheim was willing to risk everything for the continued existence of Xarooda and its royal family. Julianus I may have been mocked as a mediocre king by the other countries, but in count Schwartzheim's eyes, he was a worthy ruler to serve.

*His Majesty is by no means mediocre. He has overcome countless crises in this violent world, and retained the country respectfully!*

That emotion spurred the Count forward. And yet, Julianus I had no intention of accepting his counsel.

"Hmm, I understand your misgivings, Count Schwartzheim..." Julianus I said with a smile, stroking his beard as he spoke. "However, I have no intention of asking Lord Mikoshiba to leave."

His unwavering words echoed through the audience chamber, making everyone present murmur once again.

"Why?! Why not?!" Count Schwartzheim drew near the throne, his face red with anger.

"Desist, Count Schwartzheim! You are bordering on irreverence!" Grahalt's massive frame pushed the Count back.

"Dammit! Let go of me!" Count Schwartzheim struggled to get out of Grahalt's grasp, his face flushed with emotion. "Your Majesty, why?!"

"Henschel, it is fine. Let go of him," Julianus I said calmly.

The tone of the king's voice made Count Schwartzheim realize the meaning of what he just did. Lunging at the throne in anger could easily be taken for treason.

"M-My apologies, Your Majesty... I..." Count Schwartzheim fell to his knees as if shrinking in place, but Julianus I gestured for him to rise.

"It is fine. As I've said, your misgivings are clear to me..." he said, and then shifted his quiet, amused eyes to Ryoma, who stood at the side. "What say you? I believe everyone present shares Count Schwartzheim's doubts. As bothersome as it might seem to you, would you demonstrate your strength,

and the strength of your soldiers?”

Having kept his mouth shut as he watched everything unfold so far, Ryoma parted his lips to speak.

“Are you asking me to fight someone?” he asked.

Julianus I’s lips curled in a slightly vicious, provocative smile.

*Oh, I see... It’s a bit annoying to have been led by the nose, but whatever. I’d have needed to do this sooner or later. I should probably just be happy things are proceeding faster...*

He didn’t come all this way just to reinforce Xarooda’s defense. Now that he had secured control over the Wortenia Peninsula, he needed fame to make his next strides. And gaining that fame was, for all intents and purposes, his primary objective here.

Obtaining that reputation would require a sacrifice. The more blood flows, the louder Ryoma Mikoshiba’s name will echo throughout the western continent.

“Indeed. Or are Count Schwartzheim’s doubts based in fact?”

“Not at all. My army’s soldiers will prove their strength before you all.”

“Then it is decided. We can hold the challenge as early as tonight.”

At the sound of those words, Ryoma’s expression contorted. It was the smile of a carnivore, licking his lips at the sight of prey. But with his face bowed down before the throne, no one in the audience chamber could see the vicious grin that overtook Ryoma’s features...

The maneuvering grounds were lit up by bonfires as a large number of nobles and royals gathered in this area, which was usually populated only by soldiers.

“They all have time on their hands, don’t they?” Ryoma scoffed, glancing at the curious onlookers gathered around to watch.”

“You can’t blame them,” Helena chided him, standing at his side. “You won’t find a spectacle like this in the middle of a war. And it’s not just them. I’m curious to see how this turns out, too.”

They hadn’t met much since the Rhoadserian civil war ended, but there wasn’t so much as a hint of alienation or awkwardness between them. To anyone looking at them from the side, they were like the very image of a kind grandmother and her grandson.

“I swear, Lady Helena, you make it look like this has nothing to do with you...” Ryoma shrugged with a sardonic smile.

Helena simply smiled peacefully.

“Why, of course,” she said. “This is a chance to see your strength, and the might of your soldiers. In that regard, this is not my problem.”

“That’s fine, but Xarooda looks pretty serious about this...” Ryoma said, turning his gaze to the group on the opposite side of the maneuvering grounds.

A contest in the presence of the king was about to take place, between the Xaroodian Monarch’s Guard and Baron Mikoshiba’s soldiers. Normally, both sides would have the weapons they’re allowed to use limited, so as to prevent any ill-will from getting in the way of the match.

This time, however, their opponent insisted that their match should be closer to true battle, and as such no limitations were placed on weapons. They were clad in plate armor and armed with drawn spears. The dull glint of their blades made it clear that the battle ahead of them was no training match.

“Knowing you, I do believe you have a chance of winning, but don’t be careless. Xarooda is known to have a spear and a shield to ward off their foes, and they are without a doubt that spear... And they’re perfectly intent on killing you and your soldiers, yes?”

At some point, the smile had vanished from Helena’s lips. In its place was a will of steel. The expression she wore gave the impression that it was she who was about to set out on the battlefield.

“You don’t have to worry so much. Do you think I’d take a fight I didn’t know I could win?” Ryoma said, directing a teasing glance at her.

Helena sighed and shook her head.

“This isn’t a joke. I know you, of course, and I know you single-handedly

bested Kael Iruna, one of the leading swordsmen in Rhoadseria. You might be fine, but I don't know about those children. It's not too late, Ryoma. I know you have trained mercenaries among your soldiers. Have them take their place... And if you can't withdraw, let me handle it. I'll come up with something."

Ryoma simply smiled and kept silent at her suggestion. Helena was only the general of the reinforcements, and even she couldn't quell this situation now that it's gone this far. Even with her connection with Julianus I, she didn't exert that much influence on the nobles and knights of Xarooda. At worst, it could even drive Rhoadseria's already hard position further down.

But even while knowing that, Helena couldn't simply stand by and say nothing without confirming this with Ryoma. Her eyes turned to the group standing behind them. And all she could see was young soldiers. They couldn't even be called inexperienced, they were just *young*. And there weren't just boys there, but girls too.

Of course, the way they held and serviced their weapons matched that of an experienced mercenary, but when things came to a real clashing of blades things could prove to be all too different.

Across many battlefields, Helena had seen the bodies of young children. Conscripted commoner soldiers, young sons of distinguished knight families. The reaper descended to greet everyone equally on the battlefield — regardless of their social status or their age. That was inescapable reality.

And so, Helena did not wish to have to see the bodies of children strewn anywhere but the battlefield.

*In the end, this is just in the name of my own self-satisfaction...* The guilty thought crossed Helena's mind.

And that thought could not have been unrelated to the fact that she had lost her own daughter in a power struggle.

"We will now begin the match," the old noble that served as referee exclaimed, his voice silencing all the whispering. "Baron Ryoma Mikoshiba of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, and Captain of the Xaroodian Monarch's Guard, Sir Orson Greed. Both of you, approach the center of the grounds."

“Oh, they’re calling for me... I’ll be back soon,” Ryoma said with a smirk.

The match was a group battle of five against five. Count Schwartzheim wanted to see their ability in group battle over their personal martial prowess. It seemed the Count didn’t much like Ryoma. And since Grahalt didn’t report the truth of Ryoma’s troops to Julianus I, he insisted that Ryoma match up against the Monarch’s Guard and not the royal guard. From his perspective, Grahalt and his royal guard might throw the match intentionally.

“I’ll be fine. Oh, why not place a bet over who’ll win? You could make a fortune. Actually, I’ve already placed my bets... Oh, but keep it a secret,” Ryoma whispered to Helena, and then wordlessly motioned with his hand for the soldiers to step forward.

*Gambling...? My word, this boy...*

Apparently, Ryoma was gambling behind the scenes with Xarooda’s nobles. It felt quite audacious given the survival of the kingdom was hanging in the balance, but foolish people were never in short supply, no matter where one went. That said, even Helena had to admit that this was perhaps unavoidable; people couldn’t last for long without an outlet for constant stress.

*He’s not one to change his mind just by my words... But still, where does that confidence come from?*

Helena couldn’t help but ask herself that question upon seeing Ryoma’s confident smile. Why was he so sure he would win this match? An onlooker gambling might appear disrespectful, but Helena couldn’t quite fault them for doing that. But Ryoma gambling on himself only came across as exceedingly brazen.

*Does he have some reason to believe he’d win...?*

Ryoma boasted an intellect and ingenuity with an edge like a blade of ice. It was a sharpness Helena knew all too well, because it was thanks to it that she achieved the vengeance she sought for so many years...

Two conflicting emotions clashed within Helena’s heart. Her warrior’s heart longed to see the skill the soldiers Ryoma raised possessed. But her mother’s side ached at the prospect of seeing children die. Both of the things she told

Ryoma earlier were her honest feelings.

*I believe in you, Ryoma...* Helena thought as she gazed at Ryoma's back with both expectation and grief.

†

"Now then, are both sides ready?" the aging, white-haired man chosen as referee asked Ryoma and Greed.

This old man often boasted of his days of youth and the heroics he once performed, and so nominated himself to serve as referee. In truth, though, he was less of a referee and more of the facilitator and host of the duel, as well as witness. Once the battle began, an old man like him would be powerless to stop a fully armed knight.

Having a referee in form only was perhaps the nobles' attempt at keeping up the appearance of a fair match. In truth, they could only see what was to come as a one-sided slaughter, and this was their attempt at making it feel less gruesome.

"Of course," Greed replied curtly with a nod, directing a gaze of cold scorn at Ryoma.

It was evident he was displeased with this battle. His gaze seemed to wonder why the Monarch's Guard, the spear of the kingdom, had to fight a group of children. Most of the people in these maneuvering grounds cared little for who wins or loses. This was a battle between burly, fully-armed knights and a band of children. The latter were armed with sturdy leather armor and real weapons, but the difference in their physiques was stark.

Modern martial arts divided matches into weight classes, since the grim reality was that superior weight and size made one stronger. Judo often stressed that flexibility is stronger than muscle, but the truth was that in most cases, the bigger and stronger trumped the smaller and weaker.

Greed, of course, knew nothing of modern martial arts, but even across different worlds people thought of the same things. This was, for all intents and purposes, a match he was set to win. And since his victory was a foregone conclusion, going to the trouble of fighting felt like a waste of his time.

Still, he knew better than to simply let that thought show. This was a match done before the eyes of the Xaroodian king, Julianus I. As displeased as he was, he couldn't afford to appear unmotivated before the king.

"Yes, we're ready whenever," Ryoma replied with a smile so calm it made Greed's well-shaped eyebrows twitch.

"Very well. Both sides step forward, then... May you bear no ill will toward one another, regardless of the results of this battle! Understood?" The referee spurred Ryoma and Greed to step forward.

Apparently, he wanted them to shake hands before the battle.

"To a fair fight," Ryoma said, reaching out his right hand to Greed.

The man, however, simply scoffed at Ryoma mockingly, turned around and walked away.

"H-Hey now, Captain Greed, where are you off to?" The old noble raised his voice in surprise at Greed's attitude.

Whatever his reasons were, his actions were in defiance of decorum and politeness.

"My apologies, but I have no intent of making friends with an opponent before a match... I will take any rebuking later," Greed spat out with his back turned and approached his subordinates.

"What a bother. Looks like he hates me," Ryoma muttered, moving his extended right hand to scratch his cheek awkwardly.

His expression, however, didn't seem bothered in the slightest.

"That Greed... It seems he's excited before the match. Do not think ill of him, Sir Mikoshiba."

"Yes, that makes sense given his position," Ryoma told the old noble comfortingly. "Besides, I can see how he'd be unhappy about being ordered to be our opponent all of a sudden. You needn't worry about it, old man."

He then turned around with a composed smile and walked back. In truth, Ryoma couldn't care less about Greed's attitude. After all, he was nothing more than prey brought before him.

“Now, the feast begins... I hope you at least put up a good show.” A soft whisper escaped Ryoma’s lips.

†

Silence fell over the maneuvering grounds. Kevin could barely make out the sound of faint breathing from around him. They were in a place that was nearly a hundred meters in size. Standing around it were countless nobles and high-ranking knights. There were no seats like the coliseum in Rome — only exposed ground and pebbles.

*This place is big... We’d be at a disadvantage in a normal fight...* Kevin thought, his eyes turned toward the knights standing fifty meters away, waiting for the signal to begin.

A battle started by appraising the difference in strength between one’s side and the opponent. The quote from Sun Tzu’s Art of War, ‘If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles,’ was by no means an exaggeration. It was a natural course of action for those preparing to set out into battle.

And so, as he always did, Kevin observed the five knights lined up on the opposite side of them. He was still in his mid-teens — the height of adolescence — and compared to him they stood 170 centimeters tall, with their bodies bulky and wide. In terms of pure physique, the match seemed decided.

The same held true for their equipment. The knights wore heavy steel armor, and their heads were covered by helmets. The spears in their hands were three meters long. By comparison, Kevin and his friends were only protected by the leather armor granted to them by Ryoma and an iron shield.

Of course, this armor — made from the skin of monsters stacked over each other — was by no means greatly inferior to steel armor. But this leather armor stressed mobility, and as a result the metal armor, which had its joints protected as well, certainly offered greater defense. Picking light armor that favors mobility wasn’t a mistake in Xarooda’s mountainous terrain, but in a direct clash of brute strength, it did place them at a disadvantage.

Kevin was well aware of how his lips were dry from suspense. His pulse was beating like a drum in his ears, and his hips felt like they were tingling. It felt like

an insect was skittering across them — an insect called terror. The most familiar emotion of all that always seemed to creep in before a fight.

Kevin licked his dry lips as he gripped his personal iron sword tight, glancing at his comrades. Their expressions were as tight as his.

*They all feel the same way... But who can blame us? This is just our second time, after all...*

They were overcome with terror before a match to the death. The fear of having their lives taken from them was gripping their hearts — as did the fear of taking their enemies' lives. Even when they fought the pirates — a battle that had a meaning of vengeance to these children — they were still shaken by terror.

But Kevin didn't deny the fear. He converted it into strength. Fear was by no means weakness, and he knew that it could in fact be made into power. It had been months, and Kevin had survived countless battles against the monsters infesting the Wortenia Peninsula. He was part of the force sent out on the voyages through the rough seas to Myspos. Fear was his closest ally, his weapon to survive.

*Don't think. Our side is weaker... If we hesitate, they'll kill us without a second thought.*

This was only a match on paper, but what lay ahead of them was a true battle with their lives on the line. The victor would be decided when one side dies or when the referee decides they have no will to fight. There were no rounds or points, only the question of which side was defeated.

If one were to quantify the knights' strength as one hundred, Kevin and his comrades were only a sixty, or seventy at best. If one were to ask which is stronger and which is weak, Kevin's group would be deemed weak.

But strength and weakness weren't always what decided the outcome.

*It's the same as always. We just need to fight the way the instructors taught us... So we can survive this.*

Life in the Wortenia Peninsula had already made Kevin's body into that of an animal in human form. All he needed to do was have that body act in

accordance to his will, and let that terror suppress all sense of reasoning and ethics within him.

“Let’s do this. The same as always...” A small whisper escaped Kevin’s lips, and his comrades nodded wordlessly.

Kevin’s fear had sublimated into bloodlust that coursed through his body. The prana they’d gained from killing Wortenia’s monsters surged like a violent stream from the chakras in their perinea, flowing into his muladhara chakra and granting their bodies superhuman strength. Their fighting spirit had drawn to its limits like a bow’s string...

“Begin!” The old referee’s voice tore through the silence.

“Leon and Rina, go right. Annette, go to my left. Melissa! Match my timing!”

After officially being admitted as soldiers, they were organized into platoons of five. Kevin’s platoon had since overcome countless trials, ingraining those tactics into their bodies. At Kevin’s signal, he and three others sprang into action like arrows from a bow.

Of course, their speed was within human limits. The four went around from both sides, drawing arcs as they did. The only one to stay behind and face the knights was Melissa.

“What? In the end, they’re scurrying around like the brats they are...” one of the knights scoffed mockingly. “Idiots. Splitting up only solidifies your defeat.”

They were surprised to see them sprint forward as soon as the signal was given, but even lumped together, a group of children incapable of thaumaturgy weren’t a threat. They were only clad in light armor, so it was clear who would win in a direct clash. That was the knights’ common perception, at least.

The children’s only chance at victory hinged on the five of them acting as one to form a firm defense and wait for a chance to strike.

“Hey... The captain said not to hold back on them, but... I can’t say I like this. Let’s just finish them off quickly,” the platoon leader said.

The others nodded and gripped their spears tightly. They wouldn’t shirk murder if those were their orders, but they didn’t enjoy killing.

*At the very least, we can make sure they go without any pain...*

It likely only came across as petty hypocrisy, but those were their true feelings. The knights held up their lances as they watched the children charge toward them. They had no intent of using martial thaumaturgy. But they would pay a steep price for that decision...

“Melissa, do it!” Kevin’s shout echoed through the maneuvering grounds.

The moment he did, the children’s movement speed accelerated, and they covered the twenty meters between them and the soldiers in a moment.

“Raging wind, breath of the spirits, abide by my prayer and cloak the earth!” Melissa, who stayed behind, began chanting.

“Wh-What?! Verbal thaumaturgy?!”

“No good, defend yourselves!”

Upon seeing Melissa begin her chant, the knights hurriedly flowed prana into their chakras and they held up their spear handles to shield themselves. Normally, the defensive spells applied to their shields would protect them, but since they underestimated their foe, they neglected to activate them. Even so, their martial thaumaturgy would have normally been enough to bolster their defenses.

At least normally...

Melissa concluded her chant and strained her body like a bow.

“Wave Wind!”

She then swung her hand down like an underhand throw, skimming it just barely above the ground before raising it up into the sky. The spell she had just used was considered a low level verbal thaumaturgy spell. It wasn’t usually lethal, and all it did was release a wave of wind across a large area. It only unleashed wind without compressing it, and so it was easy to acquire.

But the trade off for that ease, of course, was that it lacked the force to be useful in combat. In terms of how it felt, it was like a mildly strong gust of wind that would at most make one shield their face with a hand.

The knights knew what spell she used, and so they simply snickered in disdain.

But they didn’t know that her aim was elsewhere. The gale grazed the ground as it pushed toward the knights, kicking up dust into the air — forming a curtain of sand and sediment.

“Shit! My eyes!”

The smoke and sediment in the wind blocked the knights’ line of sight. Their faces were covered by full-face helmets that already limited their field of vision, leaving them powerless to resist. And as they stood there blinded, Kevin and the three other children’s swords swung down on them.



Kevin and the others cast aside all notions of stealth, exposing the increased physical strength afforded to them by their martial thaumaturgy.

“What?! This is impossible! How can brats like them use martial thaumaturgy?!”

“Who the hell are they?!”

The soldiers exclaimed as they swung their spears in resistance.

But as the knights were stricken with surprise, they swung their weapons clumsily, without any sign of the refined, trained thrusts they usually showed. And to Kevin and the others, who had survived time after time against savage monsters, an opponent that launched clumsy attacks that lacked any trace of bloodlust was the same as a sitting duck.

Kevin dodged the spear thrust by moving away and swung down his sword at the knight’s fingers gripping the handle. As well-armored as the knight may have been, due to the human anatomy, jointed areas like the fingers had to be lightly armored. If one were to completely cover their fingers with metal boards, they wouldn’t be able to grip anything.

“Gaaaaah! The little shit just— Aaah, my fingeeers!”

Kevin’s blade cut along the spear’s handle, chopping off the knight’s fingers. Normally, the knight wouldn’t raise his voice in such a pathetic scream, but he was completely unprepared for this.

“What the hell is going on, aren’t these just brats?!” one of the knights whispered in shock as he watched his comrade squat down in pain.

They looked all too defenseless considering they were in the middle of combat. And the enemies bearing down on them weren’t foolish enough to ignore such a clear opening. Kevin slashed with all his might at the dumbstruck knight, aiming at his knee’s joint. The sensation of a dry twig snapping reverberated through Kevin’s hand.

Things wouldn’t end with just that, though. As the soldier squatted in place in an attempt to suppress the pain, Annette bolted behind him and swung her sword at his defenseless head. The blade swept diagonally over his helmet. Had

Ryoma not instructed them ahead of time to not kill their opponents needlessly, Annette would have surely severed his head. Still, her strength was still heightened by martial thaumaturgy, and so the blow had enough strength to knock the robust soldier unconscious. And indeed, the soldier took the blow and crumbled to the ground limply.

†

“I see. So that’s why. That’s why he was so confident...” Helena, who was watching the match with Julianus I and Grahalt, muttered in surprise.

The exchange playing out before their eyes made the level and quality of soldiers Ryoma had raised clear to see.

“Impossible... How are children capable of thaumaturgy? That’s impossible, they’re commoners,” Grahalt muttered, his expression dumbfounded.

“Grahalt, the facts are aligned before our eyes,” Helena glared at him coldly. “Admit it. You wouldn’t want me to doubt your worthiness as captain of the royal guard.”

Grahalt went red in shame. A man who couldn’t admit the reality before his eyes wasn’t worthy of commanding others.

“M-My apologies, my conduct was shameful... Please, forgive me.” Grahalt bowed his head hurriedly.

“Hmm, so all the soldiers he brought are on the level of the ones fighting out there. In which case... They’re a force to be reckoned with,” Julianus I whispered softly, stroking his white beard.

“Your Majesty, you don’t mean every one of those three hundred soldiers...?!” Grahalt shook his head in disbelief.

His assumption wasn’t wrong — by the standards of this world, Ryoma’s territory should have been limited in the amount of soldiers it could support. Grahalt himself thought that Schwartzheim’s estimate was correct. Rumors of the Wortenia Peninsula reached Xarooda as well, and they knew that this undeveloped land would not return any profit. And without taxes, one couldn’t maintain an army.

“And yet, we have no basis to assume that those soldiers are the select few that possess such skill,” Julianus I said, his lips curled up in interest. “Putting aside how they acquired thaumaturgy as commoners, if those five could learn it, there is no reason why the rest of them would not be able to. Does it not make sense to assume that all three hundred of Sir Mikoshiba’s soldiers have gained that power? Of course, this could be a bluff, meant to fool us into thinking they’re all that skilled.”

The king watched the match unfold not with the eyes of a kind old man, but the keen eyes of an eagle that had detected its prey.

“That’s absurd... This can’t be happening...” Orson Greed couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

He was a brave soldier who had fought on the battlefield since his youth, but now that whisper escaped his lips. He’d noticed that at some point, his clenched fist was dripping with sweat. Xarooda was praised as a military power that had kept the Empire of O’ltormea in check for many years, and the Monarch’s Guard was made up of the most elite of its soldiers. The soldiers elected for the match were also the most certified members of the Monarch’s Guard.

Of course, Orson didn’t send out his most skilled men because he thought the reinforcement forces were inferior, but they were all highly-talented and extremely experienced soldiers. He was confident that they would be more than a match against any army capable of holding its ground in the western continent.

But those mighty soldiers he took so much pride in were being brought to their knees by the assault of these young, teenaged beasts.

“This can’t be... How did commoner children acquire thaumaturgy at such an age...?” one of the people watching the fight uttered, to which those around him hummed in agreement.

That surprise was to be expected. Anyone could acquire thaumaturgy given enough training, but commoners rarely had the chance to learn it. There were two methods of gaining thaumaturgy. The first was to steal the lives of many other living creatures until the prana in one’s body naturally reached their chakras, or to be taught by a teacher who had gained thaumaturgy already.

Such a teacher wasn't easy to find, though. The biggest reason for that was the costs involved with learning thaumaturgy. As a whole, thaumaturgy was a powerful weapon, shield, and a healing art that was, for all intents and purposes, a status symbol. Not every single person to have learned thaumaturgy was a noble, of course, but all nobles had to have learned how to use it.

At the core of that thought was the influence of the elitist belief that those who had gained thaumaturgy were chosen by the gods, and so such a precious technique could not be taught easily. And putting aside the question of the gods' involvement in the matter, realistically those who gained thaumaturgy needed not live in want of employment. Commoners could work for the royal house as knights, and should their service in war be distinguished enough, they could even rise to the nobility.

Even if they didn't elect to become knights in service of the crown, they could become adventurers or mercenaries, earning enough to lead a wealthy life. Thaumaturgy was a technique that could allow one to earn money easily, and could change a man's life altogether. And something that valuable could not be allowed to be acquired that easily.

If a commoner were to seek out a thaumaturgy teacher, they would be hard pressed to find one unless they happened to be related to one. And even if they did find one, any teacher would require a large sum of money for their services. In some cases teachers did take interest in a student due to their potential, but those were fortunate exceptions that rarely happened.

And so, most commoners that acquired thaumaturgy inevitably only did so through the first method; they became adventurers or mercenaries, and acquired enough prana through fighting to naturally force their chakras into operation.

But unlike everyone else in the audience, who were shocked at the very idea of the children using thaumaturgy, Greed aptly noticed something Kevin and the other children had in common that the others couldn't pick up on.

*How can this be... They're using thaumaturgy perfectly at such an age... But the way they're organized, though... That takes a great deal of training and*

*experience in live combat...*

Thaumaturgy was a powerful technique, and so wielding it could be difficult. And knights had a tendency to overestimate the strength afforded to them by martial thaumaturgy and challenge their enemies alone. The sight of a lone knight being beaten down by multiple soldiers wasn't in fact all that unusual.

The amount of prana the human body could contain differed from person to person, but no one could possess infinite amounts of it. Same as how a car consumes gasoline to move, thaumaturgy consumed prana to grant superhuman powers to its users, and if one were to run out of prana, they'd be incapable of using those powers.

And without thaumaturgy, a knight was only slightly stronger than a commoner. And so, even the knights — which were lauded as one-man armies — couldn't hope to win and return alive by charging into the enemy's lines alone.

And yet, there were always those among the knights who would still recklessly charge forward, and the reason for that was that thaumaturgy was simply that powerful of a technique. It had a way of enticing those who used it.

But Kevin and the other children not only gained the power of thaumaturgy and wielded it handily, they kept fighting as a single unit, covering for each other. While the Xaroodian Monarch's Guard's knights' stamina was being slowly and surely whittled away, the children watched keenly for the chance to deliver the finishing blow.

*This is bad... At this rate, the children will win by pushing them down with sheer numbers. I have to stop this battle here...*

Greed's hands were shaking uncontrollably as he watched the battle clearly tilt in favor of the children. In terms of individual skill and ability, the Xaroodian knights were superior. But their carelessness made them vulnerable to a surprise attack. One of them had his fingers severed, rendering him incapable of holding weapons. Another was beaten over the head and knocked unconscious.

The match was already decided.

Kevin's group acted in perfect coordination, and the number difference of five

to three would allow them to overcome that difference in skill and strength.

*But... Giving in now would mean surrendering to these children...*

The fact that Annette's blow only knocked the knight out without killing him meant the children weren't intent on killing their opponents. But still, they didn't hesitate to maim them — as could be seen by the first knight's severed fingers.

*So he told them to stop short of killing them... Blast them to hell... The nerve of them.*

Now that the match was all but decided, he knew that his first priority was to make sure his soldier's bodies remained intact. But Greed knew what losing this match meant, and so he couldn't forfeit the match to keep his men safe.

"Your Majesty..." Greed's gaze turned to the one man who could break this deadlock.

†

"Melissa! We don't need the big move. Listen, just keep the enemy pinned down and exhaust them, same as always! Annette, cover for me. We can finish them off once they're completely out of steam!"

Kevin shouted instructions in fast succession while keeping his sword fixed in the direction of the knight before him. Their initial surprise attack left two of Xarooda's knights out of commission, and the two forces backed off and glared at one another. The knights assumed a defensive formation around their comrade which had been knocked out by Annette.

At this point, they no longer underestimated the children as mere commoners. They tried to rely on their plate armor's defenses as they probed for an avenue of attack. Meanwhile, Kevin's group of five was gradually cornering their opponents using a tactic of cautious and repeated hit-and-away attacks.

"Captain, at this rate we'll lose!" one of the knights shouted as he desperately pushed back another savage attack by Kevin's group. "We don't have a choice, we have to charge them and hope to take out as many of them as we can before we fall!"

The captain remained silent. The same thought had crossed his mind.

*He's right. If we're going to win this at all, it'll have to be now...*

Each of the children's blows was light, but their attacks were many and swift. The knights were being tossed about and their stamina was diminishing, and while they could stay on the defensive, there was a limit how long that would last.

That left them with two options. They could either gallantly admit their defeat, or die an honorable death embracing their knight's honor...

They knew well enough that since this wasn't a true battlefield, admitting defeat could guarantee their survival. But even if this wasn't of their will, this was a match where they were expected to kill their opponents. Not one of them thought to rely on the format of the match to survive just because they'd ended up being on the losing side.

Doing so would be all too pathetic of them. And even if no one else knew of it, their own hearts would know. And making that choice would also run Xarooda's reputation as a military power into the ground, making them the laughingstock of their neighbors.

"Let's do it!" the captain shouted.

One of the knights, who had blocked a slash from Leon's sword, nodded in understanding. The captain couldn't tell his expression behind the helmet, but he somehow knew that the pure smile of a man resolved to die was on his lips.

*Forgive me, all of you... We pulled the short straw... But while we may not be able to win, we shall not walk away from this as losers.*

Even if the accolades of victory will not come to them, this was a match to the death. The captain was overcome with guilt for involving his men in such a meaningless battle. And yet, they couldn't tarnish Xarooda's name. They would retain their knightly honor even if it would cost them their lives, or they will have truly lost all their means of stopping O'ltormea's invasion.

But just as the knights had prepared to throw themselves headfirst into a suicidal charge, Grahalt burst into the arena between them with his sword drawn and held up. And as he did, Julianus I's voice echoed through the

maneuvering grounds.

“Enough! That’s enough.”

The cheers and jeering coming from the audience died down at once, and silence settled over the area. Grahalt stood imposingly between Kevin’s group and the knights as Julianus I rose from his throne and looked down at them. The audience’s stares wandered restlessly between the two sides of the battle.

“Y-Your Majesty, what are you saying?!” The old referee’s shout tore through the silence, his face flushed red. “The match is not yet decided!”

“Nay, letting this go on any further is pointless,” Julianus I said. “Any more fighting would simply result in casualties, and that would only create a rift between our two sides. Sir Mikoshiba’s soldiers fought toe-to-toe with our knights. Is that not all we need to know?”

Considering why this match was even suggested to begin with, Julianus I’s judgment was correct. Normally, soldiers that came to aid their neighbor should not need to prove themselves by putting their lives on the line in a match to the death.

But the reactions of the nobles and knights watching over this fight were mixed. Some nodded in agreement, while others bemoaned that losing to such children is shameful. But the most dissatisfied of all was the old noble that served as referee.

“Your Majesty, this will injure the pride of Xarooda’s knights! Is it not so, Captain Greed?!” The old noble shouted, turning to Greed for support.

Ryoma furrowed his brows. This behavior was a far cry from the neutral stance a referee was expected to have.

“No,” Greed shook his head. “My apologies, but I too think that letting this battle go on any longer would be pointless.”

“What?!” the old noble exclaimed in outrage. “And you call yourself the captain of the glorious Monarch’s Guard?! Be ashamed of yourself!”

Greed’s shoulders shook at the sound of that shout. He wasn’t satisfied with this, either. But while he wouldn’t hesitate to order his subordinates to die if

this was a battle for the fate of the country, he couldn't do it in a duel like this one.

"Enough, stop it," Julianus I said sharply. "This is my order as king. This match ends in a draw. No one wins, and no one loses. All of you are to regard the outcome as such... Sir Mikoshiba, is this agreeable?"

At those words, all eyes in the room turned to Ryoma, who pushed his way through the audience.

"Of course," Ryoma said, bending to one knee. "That you have allowed my men to spar with Xarooda's skilled knights is a great honor to us. We only hope that our strength can be of temporary aid to you, Your Majesty."

"Hmm. I believe that after seeing this match, no one would look down on your soldiers as an unnecessary burden anymore. I ask that you stay, and lend this country your services... There are no objections, yes?" Julianus I declared and looked around sharply.

No one could argue against such a clear declaration from the king. Everyone fell silent, bottling up any discontent and grumbling.

*Looks like everything ended pretty much as I planned it... I feel bad for Helena since she gambled on our victory, but she'll have to forgive me for that one.*

Ryoma gambled on his own victory to stress that this match was done in earnest, and Helena was caught up in it, but Ryoma assumed the match would end in a draw. Or, if nothing else, Ryoma didn't intend for this match to end in a victory by slaying the knights.

*This old man's pretty impressive, though... If this is the kind of person the other countries call a mediocre king, it just goes to show rumors aren't worth anything.*

Ryoma's initial plan had him suggest the match to Julianus I, but the king had made his decision before that happened. That meant that Julianus I knew what the Xaroodian knights losing to Ryoma's soldiers would mean. And without even revealing that, he had the battle end in a draw.

It was an impressive display of slyness. The other countries were either terrible judges of character, or he'd kept his fangs hidden from view for many,

many years...

*Yeah, Lupis is no match for him... And the old man noticed it, too.*

He'd noticed the presence of the venomous stinger that had been injected into his country.

With his head still hung down, Ryoma snuck glances around. The first person his gaze fell on was the old noble that served as referee. Ryoma didn't know if he spoke like he did because the responsibility he was given as referee spurred him to do so, but one needed a great deal of nerve to argue back directly against the king. But the words he said carried one of two meanings.

*Now then... What reason did he have to argue against his king?*

Those were either innocent words spoken out of true love for the country, or words borne of malice...

Ryoma's lips curled up in a cruel smile.

# Epilogue

With the match concluded, the audience began filing out of the maneuvering grounds. They were all thinking back on the match held that evening, basking in the afterglow of what they saw. And so, none of them noticed the hooded figure retreating away, after watching over the maneuvering grounds from behind a tree a short distance away.

*So those are that man's soldiers...*

Dilphina thought back to the match she had just watched. The courage to face an opponent that is overwhelmingly stronger than yourself unflinchingly. A way of using thaumaturgy that allows one to overcome the gap in skill. And a trust and cooperation between five people.

This match displayed all of these capabilities. As a warrior herself, Dilphina couldn't help but admire it. But while she wanted to praise the match as a warrior, her status as a chief's daughter didn't allow her the leisure to do so freely.

*I serve that man on my father's request, but...*

Her father, Nelcius, asked her to serve at Ryoma's side in order to ascertain his intentions and, should the need call for it, kill him. And Dilphina would never forget Nelcius's expression when he told her to do so, even if she had to sacrifice her own life for it.

A parent ordering their child to commit murder even at the cost of their own life. One could imagine the sorrow and sadness it must have brought Nelcius. But it was because she knew this that Dilphina refused to betray her father's expectations.

*If things come down to an assassination, I would have to break through a defensive network made up of those kinds of soldiers...*

Thankfully, no reason that would force Nelcius to order Ryoma's assassination had come up, but there was always the chance it might happen. They had

stayed in Sirius and gained a great deal of information, but this was the first time Dilphina had seen the soldiers Ryoma raised perform in live combat. She'd heard rumors, but seeing it for herself told a different story from what she'd heard.

Of course, Dilphina herself was the daughter of the infamous Mad Demon Nelcius, and the strongest warrior of her tribe. For two hundred and fifty years, she had fought the monsters infesting the Wortenia Peninsula. And in that regard, Ryoma's soldiers, with their several months of training, would be no match for her.



But they did have unwavering will and faith. They would no doubt fight to defend Ryoma Mikoshiba even at the cost of their own lives. And it is said that the strongest soldiers in the world are those resolved to lay down their lives. A heart that doesn't break is the greatest strength of all, and even Dilphina would struggle to break through a frontal assault against such soldiers.

*In that case...*

If a frontal assault was out of the question, one choice remained.

*Thankfully, that man doesn't seem to be too cautious of me...*

When Dilphina returned to Sirius after Ryoma rescued her from the pirates and returned her to the village, Ryoma simply regarded her with a somewhat confused expression but didn't say anything in particular. And when she asked to escort him on this expedition, he simply warned her to hide her identity as an elf from the others and allowed her to come along.

Dilphina didn't know what his intentions were, but she did know this man paid close attention to her.

*Perhaps I should sleep with him once... I heard humans find our appearance attractive...*

In truth, the idea of the filthy humans finding her attractive made her sick to her stomach. Elves were called living jewels and were sold for high prices among humans. And Dilphina was considered incredibly beautiful among the elves. Should she offer her body, no man alive would refuse.

*Sharing his bedchambers should allow me to easily assassinate him...*

With that thought in mind, Dilphina took off into the dark night, with no one being aware of her sprinting shadow...

And so, Ryoma Mikoshiba, who had arrived as reinforcements from Rhoadseria, prepared to plunge into war with the Empire of O'ltormea alongside Rhoadseria's knights.

# 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.

By the time I write this afterword, half of the year has already passed by, and while I am grateful, June means I must celebrate my growing older by a year. I'll admit I didn't expect to receive any birthday presents, and this day is but a grim reminder that I've grown older by one more year. But that would make me feel all too pitiful, and so I went to an eel restaurant and ordered the first-class plus chopped kabayaki eel on rice.

Personally, I find just about anything tasty, but eels have been a favorite of mine for a long time, and I often insist on eating eel only when it's cooked over live charcoal. I don't pretend to be some kind of gourmet, but I often have to eat eels cooked over gas, which I don't like.

Eels are considered a food that truly depicts the skill of the chef, and so I developed something of a preference toward them. Stores that use live charcoal are often considered famous, and the price is accordingly high. Except I'd gone to one such so-called famous store full of expectation, only to eat something that was closer to badly cooked grilled fish. That taught me you can never be too cautious...

If any of you readers know of any good restaurants that serve eel, I'd gratefully appreciate it if you let me know!

Now then, putting aside trifling matters like my age and eels, allow me to summarize the plot of this book for those readers who start reading from the afterword, as is customary with this series.

Ryoma is only set to lock swords with the O'ltormea Empire at the next volume, but for some reason Ryoma is even forced to fight his allies, Xarooda's knights. One characteristic of this series is its emphasis on examining internal

power struggles and factional feuds, and as such our protagonist is always surrounded by opponents on all sides, forced to fight friend and foe alike.

In truth, I wanted to incorporate more showy descriptions, but it turned out to be rather difficult. The actual strategies are something you'll have to look forward to in the next volume. In terms of other highlights, there're also developments in Ryoma's relationship with the demi-humans. In truth, his bond with them hadn't developed very far, as part of the series's setting places humans and demi-humans as mortal enemies. Having that relationship improve all of a sudden would be too unrealistic and abrupt of a development.

Ryoma seeks cordial relationships with the demi-humans in the name of his own values. Nelcius, on the other hand, puts his life on the line in the name of his tribe's survival. And Dilphina seeks to support her father. All three of them have their own intentions, and their intentions and ploys tangle against one another.

I would appreciate it if you pay attention to Nelcius and his daughter Dilphina as they start taking center stage starting in this volume.

And one mustn't forget the Kingdom of Myest and their actions. At volume 2, I introduced them as one of the three kingdoms of the east, and at volume 7 they finally rise to the surface. Starting with the next volume, they're set to take a more central role, so do look forward to that.

I would like to take this time to tell you about *Record of Wortenia War*'s manga adaptation. The first volume is on sale, and its second edition is being printed. The sales are looking favorable, and volume 2 should be on sale before the end of the year. As an author, I get to see my work being adapted into manga form, and as a fan I look forward to seeing the chapters being released monthly. The battle scenes are all so much more compelling in manga form, after all...

I will have to work hard to make sure I match Yukari Yagi — the mangaka's — level. I hope both the novel and manga adaptations remain together until their mutual conclusion.

Lastly, I would like to extend my thanks to the editors who helped in the publishing of volume 7, as well as everyone who was involved in working on it.

But in the end, this series can only continue thanks to warm support from readers such as yourselves.

I should have volume 8 out by late November of this year, and so I hope you will continue to support *Record of Wortenia War* in the future.

# Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter 1: The Clouds of War Brew

Chapter 2: A Messenger from a Neighboring Country

Chapter 3: The Gap Between Ideals and Reality

Chapter 4: To the West

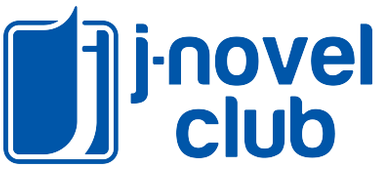
Chapter 5: Proving One’s Power

Epilogue

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright




Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 8 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

# Copyright

Record of Wortenia War: Volume 7

by Ryota Hori

Translated by ZackZeal Edited by Nathan Redmond

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2017 Ryota Hori Illustrations Copyright © 2017 bob Cover illustration by bob

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: August 2020