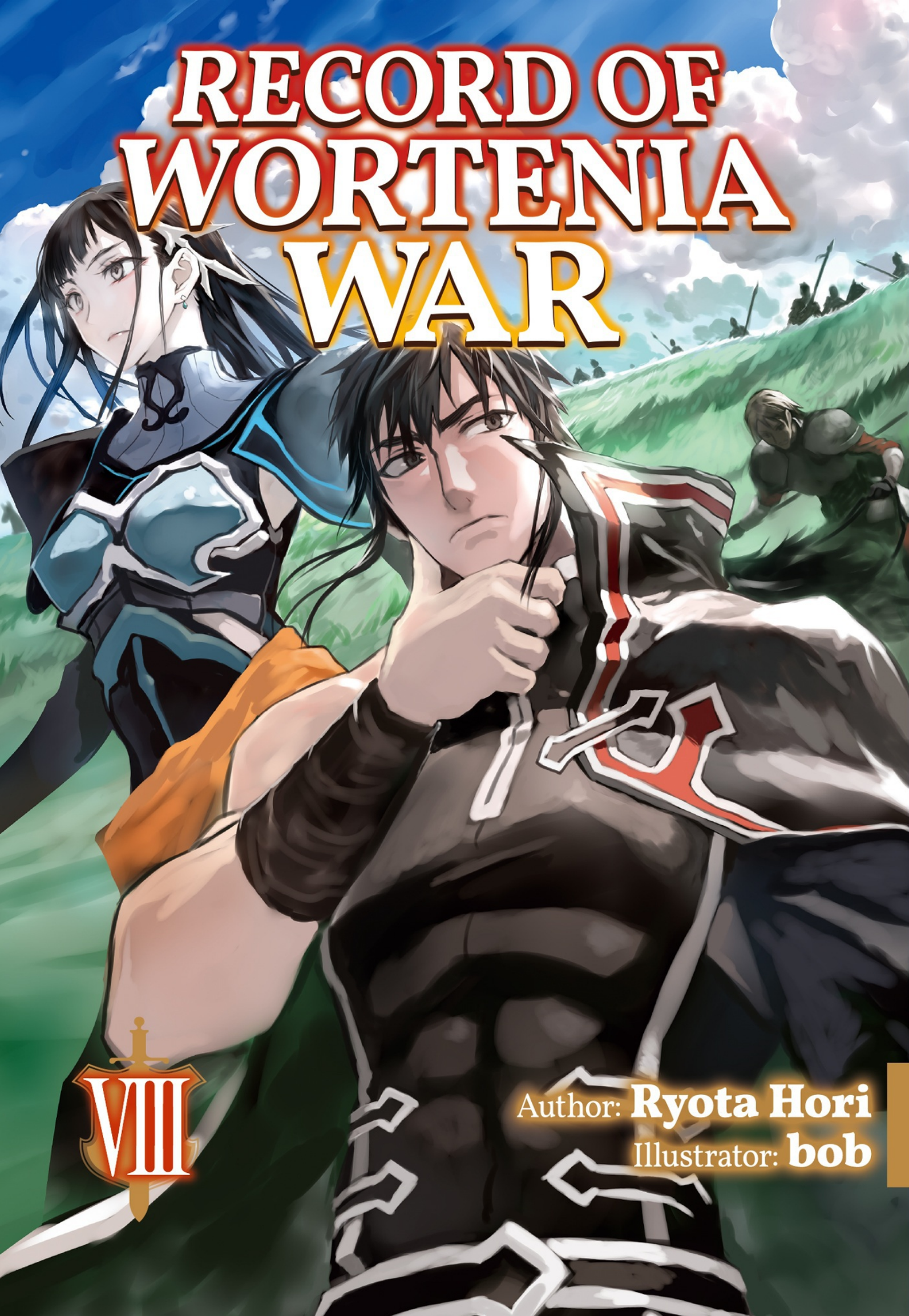
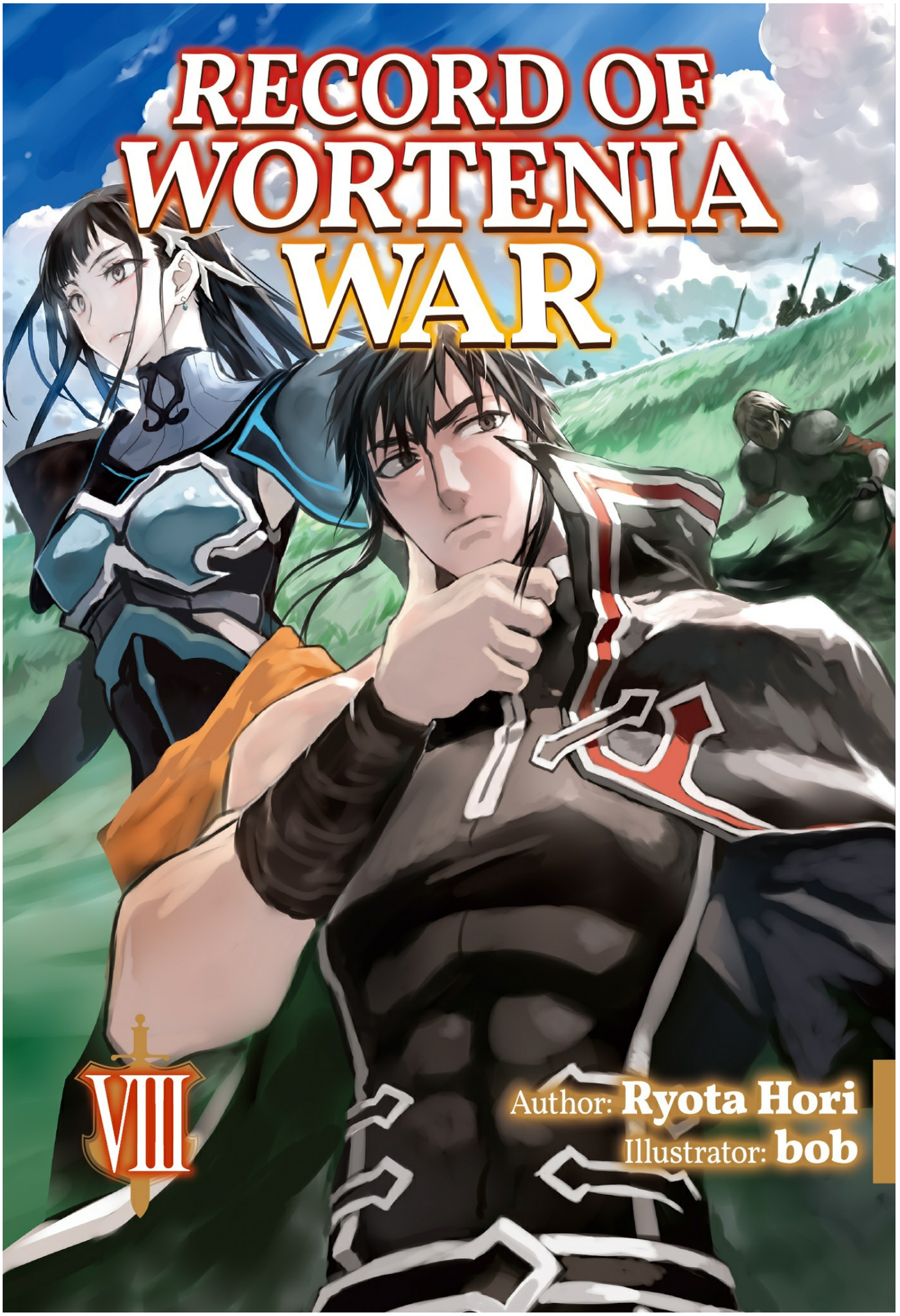
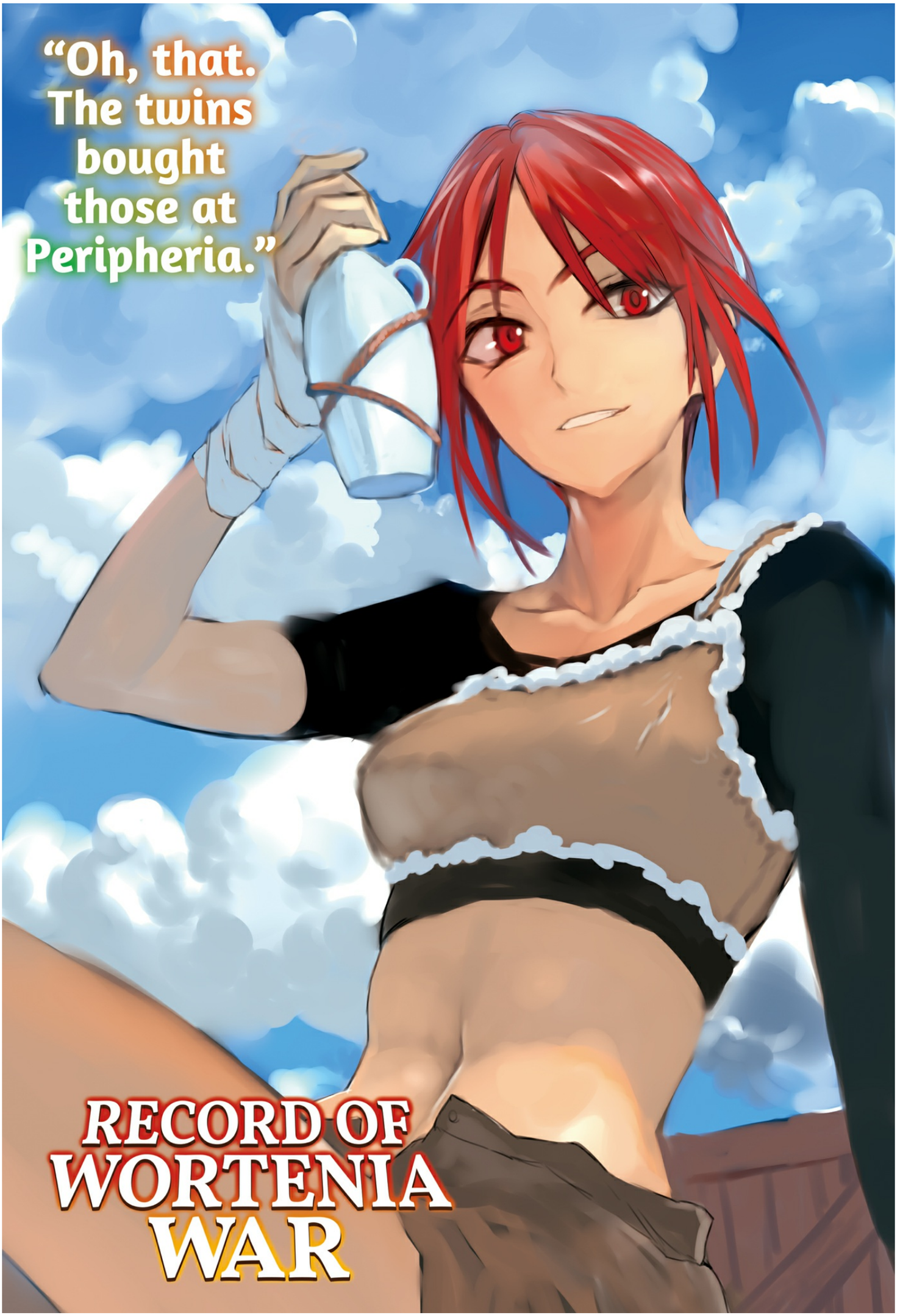
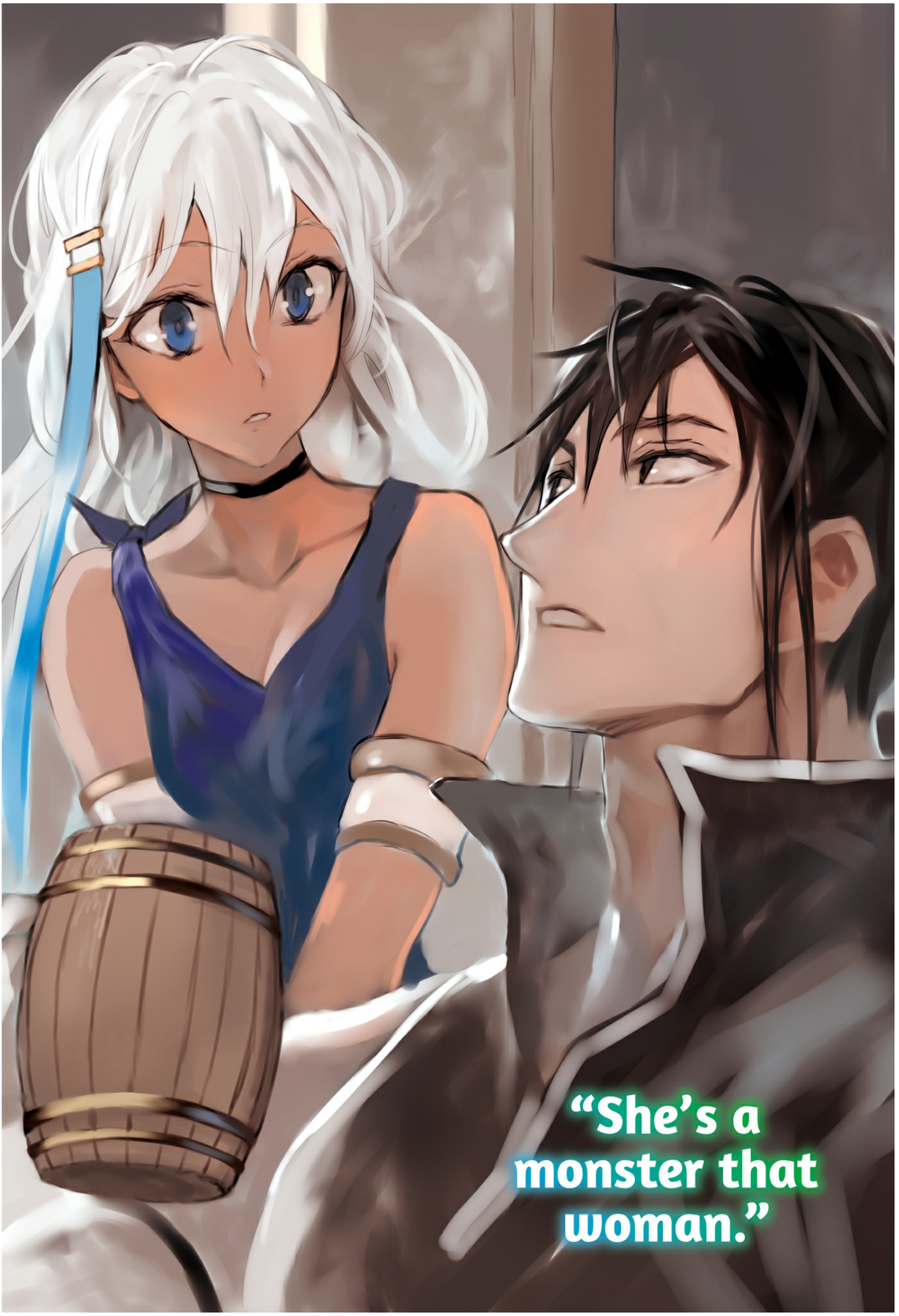

RECORD OF
WORTENIA
WAR
VIII
Author: Ryota Hori
Illustrator: bob


RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR
VIII
Author: Ryota Hori
Illustrator: bob


“Oh, that. The twins bought those at Peripheria.”
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR


“F-Fire! Fiiiiiiire!”
A dying cry left one of the soldiers’ mouths.
“Allow me to display my power as the daughter of the Mad Demon Nelcius.”


“She’s a monster that woman.”



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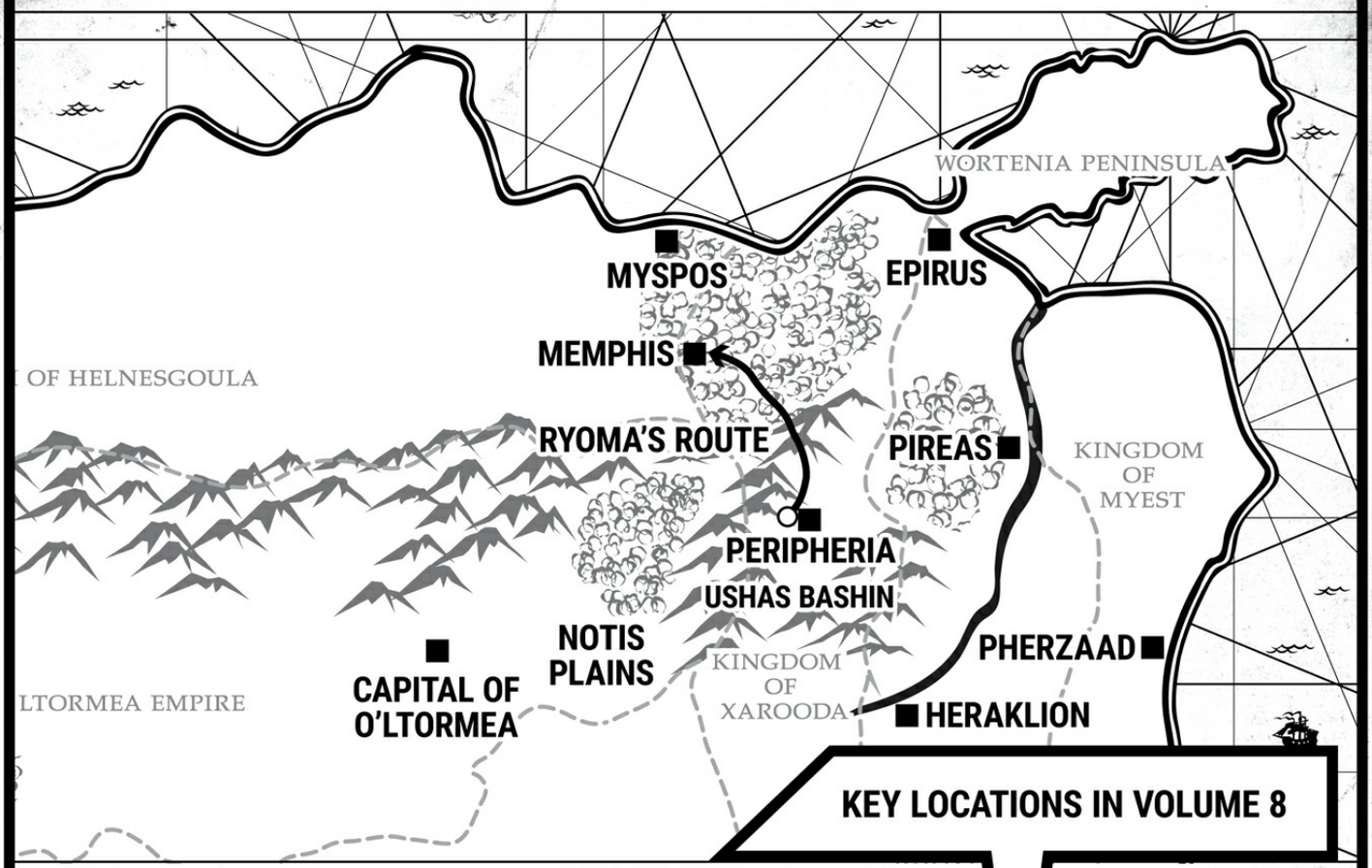
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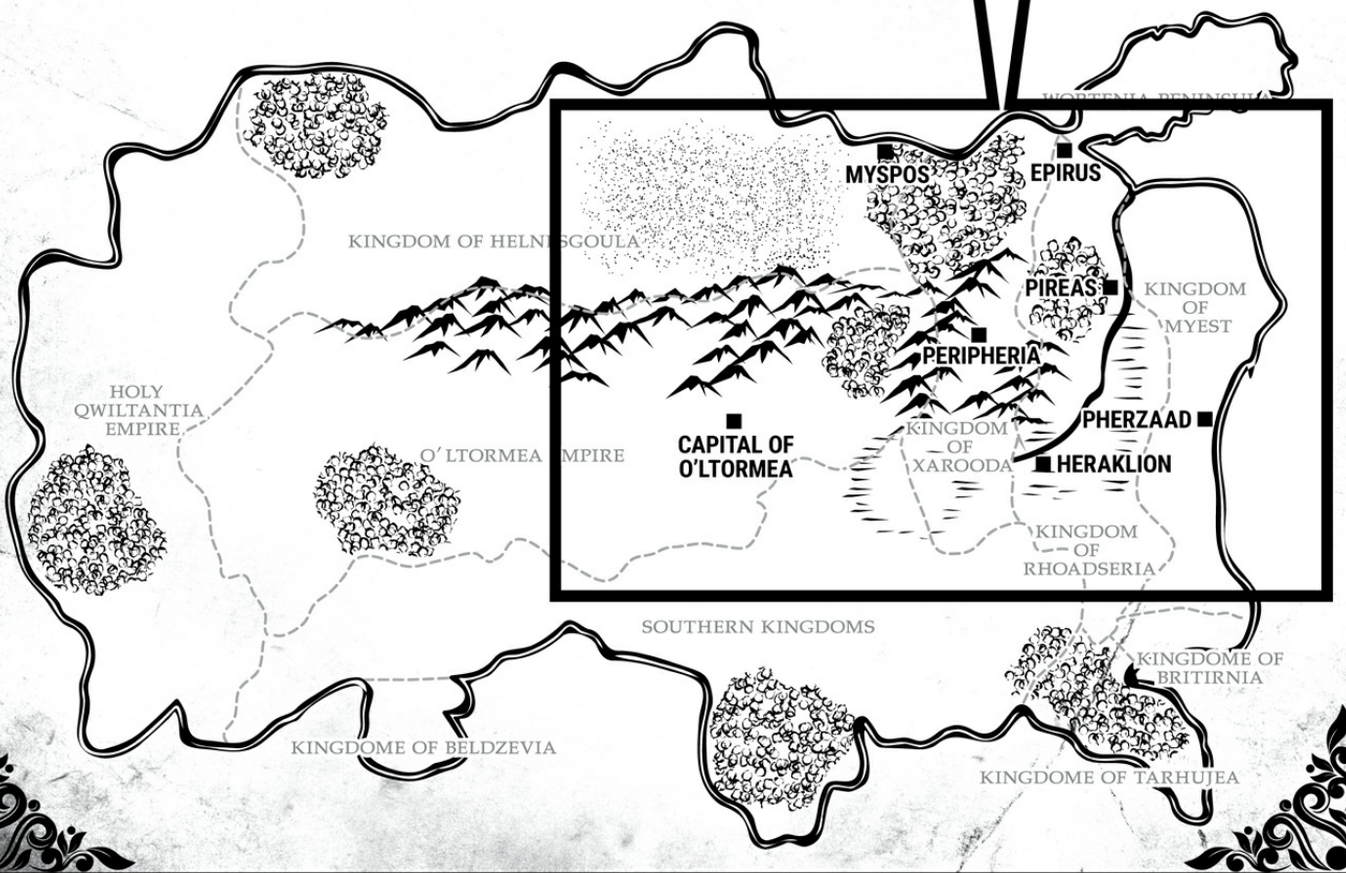
AFTERWORD

WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》



KEY LOCATIONS IN VOLUME 8

MAP OF THE WESTERN CONTINENT



Prologue

The sun was dipping into the horizon. The sunlight burned red as it streamed into the room from the window facing west. Asuka Kiryuu threw herself on her modest bed, having concluded her afternoon training and bathing to wash off the sweat afterwards.

Hers was a roughly five square meter room, but the room's problem wasn't that it was cramped. Aside from the bed that was pressed against the wall, the only things the room had by way of furniture were an old, battered chair and a small table. It was by no means a room one might expect to be inhabited by a girl in the prime of her youth. It was far too cold and lacking in human warmth.

By the standards of modern Japan, this environment felt like it belonged to the lowest rungs of society. The difference between this room and the one Asuka had in Japan was like night and day.

But by now, this cramped, spartan-looking room was the only place Asuka could call home, or something resembling it.

And so another day... passes...

The fading sun cast a crimson glow over Asuka's face. Twilight. Thankfully, this world had enough points of resemblance to Asuka's Earth. Days were 24 hours long, and a year was 365 days. The sun still rose from the east and set in the west. People still lived in countries. Society and customs differed, true, but this world was still similar enough to her Earth.

Except...

Her field of vision distorted as if something had seeped into her eyes. She'd seen days come to an end an untold number of times in Japan, but now, the sight only weighed on her heart.

Except, yes, something was different. It had been several months since she was summoned to this world, and it was perhaps only natural that Asuka grew emotional.

I wonder what Grandpa's doing right now...

The image of her grandfather, Kouichirou Mikoshiba, flashed in Asuka's mind. But it wasn't the form of the witty and kind, if slightly cynical old man she knew all too well. It'd been months since they parted ways as they escaped Beldzevia's palace, and the image etched into Asuka's mind was that of Kouichirou holding a bloodied sword, his face like that of a ferocious demon.

That of a murderer who mercilessly cut off the head of a screaming woman, clutching her severed hand.

Even if he had done it to protect her, Asuka was born in pacifistic modern Japan, and Kouichirou's act had infringed upon the set of values and morals she'd been cultivated to have for the entirety of her life in a way that was all too intrusive. Perhaps seeing that scene, which defied her sense of ethics and common sense, take place so suddenly inflicted emotional trauma on Asuka.

But despite that trauma, Asuka's condemnation of this act was actually a very feeble voice in her heart. She couldn't accept, nor did she want to affirm what her grandfather did, but Asuka couldn't outright deny it had happened, either.

After all, had Kouichirou not done what he did back then, Asuka's purity would have been deprived from her in a terrible way. What Misha Fontaine, the court thaumaturgist of the Kingdom of Beldzevia, told Asuka soon after her summoning was no threat or exaggeration. Asuka, with her youthful beauty, would surely have been made the subject of the lusts of influential men. Since she was an otherworlder called from Rearth, she would even match an elven woman, said to be a living jewel, in terms of value.

This was a world where the law didn't function to protect people. Or perhaps, in a way, it did function, in the sense that it was used as a tool to control people. Over the last few months, Asuka had learned all too well and all too terribly that Japan's morals and common sense meant absolutely nothing in the cursed lands of this world.

These are all things you could never find in Japan... Everything is fundamentally different here... Too different, in fact.

Different countries had different laws. People's customs, morals and perceptions of common sense differed from place to place. But as obvious as

that was, it wasn't something Asuka had been aware of so far. She never needed to be aware of it. It was true that laws differed across different regions of her world. Especially the countries in the Islamic sphere had firm religious laws that differed in a way a Japanese person might not be able to tolerate.

But those topics didn't crop up in Asuka's life. At most, they appeared momentarily in the news when an overly enthusiastic social commentator would bring them up. It was all information detached from her reality, as distant from her life in Japan as this world once was.

But life on this Earth was different. The image of the bloody events of several months ago flashed in her mind, and Asuka could feel her stomach turn uncomfortably. She placed a hand against her mouth, suppressing the disgust that crept up her throat.

She was taken to the back alleys of the capital, Menestia, to learn the truth of this world. In one corner of that place was a square where countless slave merchants sold their 'wares.' They spoke with polite vigor to anyone who passed by their storefronts as if selling meat or vegetables. She saw women who had sold their bodies in the pleasure district to pay off debts — women clad in gaudy makeup, tugging at the sleeves of potential customers. Some of them would even give themselves up for as little as a single copper coin.

Most of those women also struggled to cover the interest from their debts, and so weren't able to leave their lives of prostitution. Any romantic cases of a beautiful prostitute stealing the heart of an affluent customer who frees her from her plight were effectively one in a million, if not lower. Most of their customers were like sharks that wouldn't let go of their prey no matter what.

This world had no concept of regulating interest rates, after all. A debt's interest was decided in nothing else but a mutual agreement. A daily interest deal — where each passing day adds an interest of 10 percent, was allowed to be used as what was almost the typical interest rate in this world.

Things were worse, though, as in some cases contracts weren't written ahead of time. Some merchants even took interest without lending the money; in those cases, it was hard to tell if it was actually money lending or just plain robbery.

That was all because the literacy rate in this world was low. In Japan's Edo Period, even the commoners boasted a 70 to 80 percent literacy rate. But in this world even a rough estimate would bring you to a 10 to 20 percent literacy rate, and it was concentrated in particular layers of the population — namely, merchants and nobles.

Most commoners didn't know how to write their own names, and even fewer were capable of basic arithmetic.

I didn't really think about it at the time...

Asuka thought back to some political program she saw on TV once. Some university professor had argued vehemently about how education was critical for impoverished populations to escape from the lower strata of society. When she heard him speak, she recalled being surprised that such poor countries still existed in the world. The most she could say was that she felt bad for them, nothing more.

Most people in Japan would likely feel the same way. For better or worse, people can only measure things by the standard of living they know. But thinking back to what she believed back then, she realized just how critical education can be to a country's foundation.

This was a world where the educated and knowledgeable preyed upon the ignorant. Where the former were the strong and the latter were the weak, passive victims. The idea that favors were to be answered in kind, and goodwill was to be met with goodwill didn't exist here. Favor would be met with enmity, and goodwill would be met with malice.

Asuka had been born and raised as a Japanese person, and it went without saying that the values and ethics which came with that seeped into her very bones. And so, this world was nothing short of hell to her.

If I think this world is a mistake, I need to grow strong enough to force that opinion on others...

Those were the words Menea Norberg, the guarantor for her identity who also helped her out in many ways, told Asuka upon seeing her outrage and disgust at this world's nature. They were harsh words, but also the kindest words she could offer Asuka. They meant that, if nothing else, she didn't mock

Asuka’s feelings, and she didn’t look down upon them as the childish rambling of a naive girl, either.

In fact, ever since she’d split up from Kouichirou, she’d begun looking up to Menea as an older sister of sorts.

I want to go home... I wanna see Mom and Grandma again...



Her weak heart got the better of her for a moment. That was one wish Menea couldn't grant her, though. But no one could fault Asuka for being overcome by those emotions in between days of arduous training.

The indignation she felt when Menea showed her the reality of this world and her desire to change it were by no means fake, but the price she had to pay was too harsh. To grow stronger, she studied this world's knowledge and learned how to handle weapons.

Her desire was one that was easy to put into words, but hard to realize. She had been trained a bit by Kouichirou Mikoshiba, and was part of her high school's archery club — which was good enough to have a real shot at the inter-high school competitions. Thanks to those, she had more muscle strength and stamina than the average high-schooler.

But any interest she had in martial arts was limited to the level of a hobby. She certainly wasn't prepared to fight for her life, and that required a different kind of knowledge compared to the things she studied in school. This had nothing to do with equations or chemical formulas. No, she needed more advanced knowledge that would contribute to her combat skills.

She chose to tread this path willingly, but Asuka was still only a high school student. It was a path of thorns, a road rife with burdens. And at the same time, it was Asuka herself who willingly made the choice to head down this path.

I'll grow stronger... And someday, I'll find Grandpa again and ask him for the truth...

Once someone had found their way into this world, there could be no going back. That was the absolute truth of this Earth. After Menea told her of this, Asuka did all she could to find a way back. And even then, that cruel truth was thrust before her eyes.

But if that was the truth, Kouichirou's actions and words didn't line up. As Asuka lay on her bed, she turned her gaze to a Japanese katana resting on the table. Its name was Ouka — one of Kouichirou's prized katanas. The existence of this mystical sword she had received from him — with its terrible sheen and mysterious powers — was the key to everything.

Chapter 1: Those Who Writhe in the Shadows

The Kingdom of Xarooda — a kingdom that had its territory divided by steep mountains, and one of the three countries of the western continent's eastern regions. In its capital of Peripheria, Ryoma Mikoshiba was in the room allotted to him in the kingdom's castle. Kneeling before him were five boys and girls. Their ages were somewhere in the mid-teens.

"I gave you hard orders to carry out, but you followed them well. Good job, Kevin. You all did spectacularly," Ryoma told them, taking care to appear as dignified as he could.

Perhaps he wasn't used to speaking like that, but Kevin couldn't help but smile at seeing his respected master speak with such a high-pitched, high-strung voice.

Miss Lione probably told him to talk like that... It's a bit disrespectful to think of my master like this, but it's kind of funny...

Kevin regarded this unexpected side of his master with something close to affection. Looking around, Kevin saw Ryoma's aides were all deliberately looking away. They were trying to hide it, but their shoulders were shivering with repressed laughter — they were just as amused by this as Kevin was.

The Ryoma Kevin knew was a much more open-hearted man, with a wild disposition. He wasn't as violent or vulgar as the many mercenaries and adventurers he worked with, but he wasn't a stick in the mud that was bound by the formalities and dignity of the nobility, either. He was, simply put, mostly natural and casual.

And yet, he was still a noble of Rhoadseria. A man of privileged class.

Thanking his vassals is probably harder than I thought... But...

His gestures were awkward to be sure, but it was clear he was worried for Kevin and his comrades' wellbeing. Not many commanders in this world would worry for a soldier's safety this much. And Kevin appreciated the fact he had

the privilege of serving under such a commander.

Goddammit... Everyone's just having a good laugh at my expense, huh...

Slightly irritated at the amused reactions all around him, Ryoma stuck to his facade as a ruler. Ryoma intended to increase his territory further. It was one thing when he was with people like Lione and the twins, but he was bound to be around people that would insist on sticking to formalities.



Ryoma himself preferred to stay friendly whenever possible, but acknowledged he couldn't always have that attitude in the forefront. Some situations required making the other person feel uncomfortable or pressured. Ryoma grew up in a country without a class system, so putting on airs around others didn't come naturally to him, but that wasn't necessarily a good thing.

This is troublesome... But I'll need to get used to it either way...

It was about time he started to show such a side in the city of Sirius on the Wortenia peninsula. Lione and the twins were chiding him, telling him to treat the soldiers in a more dignified, formal manner, especially when it came to rewarding or punishing.

It was an understandable suggestion. Lione was like Ryoma in the sense that she wasn't good with keeping up a formal attitude, but it all depended on the situation. For example, if someone won a tournament, there was a stark difference between having the certificate haphazardly dumped into one's hands compared to receiving it in an official, dignified ceremony.

The end result was the same, but the nuance was clearly different. And what mattered wasn't Ryoma's perspective on it as the one praising his men, but how the people he was praising and those around them saw it. There was no need for him to stick to an approach that would displease the ones being praised. Ryoma had no intent of insulting the people he needed to encourage, and if all it took was for him to tolerate this facade for a bit, so be it.

And so, a few months had passed. He still felt a bit awkward, but he was getting used to acting like a noble. Ryoma always disliked people who stood above others, but this world operated on a class system, and acting too kind to commoners could buy him the scorn and disdain of other knights and nobles.

But dignity wasn't something one could hide behind a thin veneer. A person can say anything, but one's true attitude had a way of shining through.

And indeed, Ryoma's facade was still unrefined and clumsy. That was all too natural, since he was just a high school student when he was summoned to this world. And while he was wiser than his age might suggest, adopting the demeanor unique to the nobility wasn't a simple task for him. Truth be told, the whole affair felt absurd to him.

Still, Lione and the twins keep getting mad at me over this, so...

Ryoma couldn't help but crack a wry smile upon noticing everyone realized how high-pitched his voice was. What mattered was where one's heart lay. Ryoma still saw ceremony as just a superficial pretense, but knew he needed to know where to draw the line.

A pompous, haughty attitude wouldn't buy him his men's trust, but toadying up to his subordinates would make his army undisciplined. And sometimes his feelings couldn't shine through unless he insisted on ceremony.

And Ryoma couldn't deny that he wanted to have Lione and the twins to stop scolding him over this topic already.

"Your words are wasted on us, Lord," Kevin said with his head bowed, and the other four behind him followed suit.

'Lord' was how Kevin and the other children referred to him respectfully. Calling him 'Baron' felt too based on nobility, so Ryoma didn't like it. They mulled over using 'Governor' and 'Young Sir,' but something felt off about those. And they couldn't call him 'Boy' or 'Lad' like Lione and the mercenaries did. So eventually, they settled on following Gennou's example and calling him 'Lord.'

Indeed, Ryoma lived in an estate set up in the center of Sirius, and calling him the lord of that house wasn't a mistake. Of course, the 'Milord' Gennou spoke of was different due to his origin as a ninja, but the people of this world didn't know that.

"We've successfully carried out your orders, without having to use our last resort," Kevin said, his hand clasping around a small bottle hanging from his belt.

Ryoma nodded back at him wordlessly. It was an ace they'd prepared for the sake of this battle, but they managed to achieve their objective without having to use it. Lione, who stood behind Ryoma, gave a satisfied smile.

"Ya were all too nervous over this. I told ya you'd be fine, didn't I? And ya were." Lione punctuated her words by beating on her chest once with a punch.

Kevin and his group were soldiers she raised personally from zero. To her and

the other Crimson Lion mercenaries, they were like their own children and proteges. Seeing their power in a clear, visible form naturally made her happy.

Ryoma couldn't help but crack a sardonic smile as he looked at her. After all, it was she who showed the most disapproval at the orders he gave Kevin's group earlier that day. Of course, he wasn't foolish enough to say it to her face.

"Yeah, using that would win ya the match immediately, but it would complicate our relations with Xarooda. That just means ya didn't just do good, ya did real good."

Alongside their training as a group and mastering thaumaturgy, Kevin and his group were given this last resort. Using it would allow them to win easily. The bottles contained a paralyzing agent the Igasaki clan developed from the monsters infesting the Wortenia peninsula.

It was tasteless and odorless, but its effects were instant and ignored most forms of poison resistance. On top of that, an antidote capable of negating its effects was hard to come by on the market. The best way of dealing with it would be to consume an antidote ahead of time or have a thaumaturgist heal the victim and remove its effects.

The paralyzing agent's biggest fault was that the reagents needed to refine it were rare, so gathering large amounts of it was difficult. But otherwise, it was versatile — one could spray it into the wind and have the victim inhale it, or smear it on a weapon. It was a paralyzing agent, but it was non-lethal, making it a good way of winning the match.

But it was also a double-edged sword. Using it on a battlefield would be one thing, but resorting to it in a match would have been seen as cowardly. Even if the match was supposed to emulate true combat, it was different from hiding the fact they were capable of thaumaturgy to gain the advantage. And even though they had the discretion to use a non-lethal one, no one would listen to them if it became known they used poison.

I did figure they'd win without using it — that's why I picked these five. And the results speak for themselves.

The five kneeling before Ryoma were among the more talented and loyal soldiers from the slaves he bought and raised. Their bodies were built up by

surviving in Wortenia and fighting the monsters living there, and their skills were developed by arduous, daily training. On top of that, rising up from the harsh circumstances of their life afforded Kevin and his allies an unrivaled sense of unity and an obsession with staying alive.

They were still young and had room to grow, but they already reached a level that put them on par with other soldiers and knights. Of course, seasoned veterans like Lione and Boltz were still far above them, but that was something time would solve.

So long as they stayed alive that long, of course...

“Yes, Miss Laura instructed us about using it...” Kevin said. “She told us only to use it if we feel we’re certainly about to lose. However, if we were to sense any danger to our lives, she permitted us to use it freely.”

The other four nodded. The light of intellect and the firm resolve to lay down their lives in the name of their mission shined in their eyes. It was proof that they perfectly understood their role, and that was something a noble could never achieve by haughtily commanding commoners.

Trust, huh...?

To gain the soldiers’ trust, Ryoma dined in the same dining room as the soldiers as often as time would allow, eating the same kind of food they did. That was something a noble of this world would never do. But to gain someone’s trust requires understanding that person, and having that person understand you.

In that regard, Ryoma received a great deal of loyalty and respect from Kevin and the children. If Ryoma ordered them to die, they would gladly discard their lives. Ryoma managed to do this by treating them fairly after they’d had all their human dignity and rights stolen from them upon becoming slaves.

But even so, Ryoma had something he had to tell them now, no matter how.

“Yes, the mission is important... And I’m pleased to see you’re willing to risk your life to serve me. But the one thing you’re not allowed to do, no matter what, is die. Survive at all costs... That way, we can share a meal again.”

For a soldier like Kevin, this order was a contradiction. They couldn’t hope to

succeed in a mission that required them to be prepared to die and be ordered to survive at all costs at the same time. If he didn't want them to die that much, Ryoma wouldn't order them to go on such dangerous missions.

But the reality of this world wouldn't accommodate that. So long as Ryoma pursued his aspirations, the blood of both his foes and allies would stain his hands. But despite knowing this, Ryoma couldn't help but say those words to Kevin.

No matter what, I don't want to see you die...

"My Lord..." The children's shoulders trembled slightly.

They realized that he cherished them. And to children like Kevin, who were sold off to reduce the number of mouths to feed in their homes, this was the sort of affection even their parents never granted them.

"We will etch your order onto our hearts, My Lord." The five of them bowed their heads at once.

For this man, I will do anything...

Kevin swore to himself he would answer Ryoma's expectations.

"All right... Still, you've done well. I can only reward you like this for now, but I hope you enjoy this," Ryoma said, handing Kevin a leather sack.

Ryoma watched the five accept the sack and leave the room, after which his thoughts wandered to Julianus I and his expression.

Choosing Kevin's group for the job was the right decision. I would have preferred a draw without any fighting, but... They understand that. And so did that old man...

They couldn't afford to lose this battle, but winning wouldn't have given them the best possible result, either. They could win if their objective were just to bring more fame to Ryoma's name. But the best possible scenario was for the match to stop before it's decided, while Ryoma's power was displayed for the onlookers to see at the same time.

Ryoma wanted to find the right timing to suggest this, but Julianus I came to that decision before he did. That was a happy coincidence for all Ryoma was

concerned. After all, knights stressed honor and reputation more than anything. Ryoma couldn't afford to have himself and his soldiers be seen as weaklings, but crushing the knights' honor would make his future relations with Xarooda shaky.

In that regard, the results of this match were perfect. Julianus I was known as 'The Mediocre King,' and so Ryoma didn't expect much of the man. But his impression of the king changed little by little following their audience. He could aptly tell where the tides of battle were going, and chose the method that hurt his country's dignity the least.

"So far everything's going as planned, then?" Sara asked Ryoma, who had sunk into his seat.

"Yeah, one way or another... With this, they shouldn't ignore our proposals in the war council tomorrow," Ryoma said and sighed, taking a sip from his glass of red wine.

It didn't matter how good a plan they might come up with unless they had the power to apply it. In that regard, this Earth was similar to Ryoma's world.

"'Sides, that king being sharper than we thought was a stroke of good luck," Lione said.

"I felt the same way. Master Ryoma, Julianus I stopped the match there because...?" Laura nodded and asked.

"He realized losing there would put him in a bad spot. You can tell that much because he didn't order the judge to stop the match, he went directly to Grahalt. He probably figured I wouldn't insist on winning the match there."

Kevin's group was obviously winning. Having the king use his authority to stop the match halfway through was a risky move to make, even in this world where the king's authority carried as much weight as it did. Had Ryoma not accepted the draw, it would have greatly damaged Julianus I's authority. And that would be a crippling blow to the Kingdom of Xarooda as a whole — especially with the ongoing war with O'ltormea.

The fact that he elected to stop the match there meant he saw through Ryoma's true intentions.

“And he also used it as a chance to smoke out a parasite eating away at his country. That man’s more cunning than I thought,” Lione added, to which Ryoma clicked his tongue.

“Yeah, he’s a real cunning fox, that one. He didn’t just see through my intentions, he used it to his favor.” Ryoma nodded.

He wasn’t as displeased as his words might have implied, though. Quite the opposite, in fact — Ryoma found Julianus I to be a reliable ally. Nothing could be more dangerous than an incompetent ally, after all.

Sara poured some wine into Ryoma’s empty glass.

“Count Schwartzheim and the noble that served as judge... I think his name was...” Ryoma trailed off.

“Baron Slater,” Sara said.

“Right, right, that was his name.” Ryoma nodded.

He didn’t pay the old noble much attention, but when Julianus I stopped the match, Baron Slater flared up and argued against the king. That made Ryoma wonder if he had some kind of ulterior motives.

“My gut tells me Count Schwartzheim was just pushed by someone to do this... But either way, we should look into the people around them. All right, Sakuya?”

“Understood, Milord. I shall perform my duties well enough to bring pride to my grandfather.” Sakuya nodded resolutely.

Sakuya’s grandfather, Gennou, was assigned as supervisor of Sirius’s defenses. As such, he and Boltz were left behind to guard the city. The other members of the Elder Council were all busy with work of their own, and so the one dispatched with the expedition was Sakuya, the leader of the younger members of the Igasaki clan who was set to join the Elder Council in the future.

“You don’t have to get worked up over this. Just work the same way you always do.”

“Thank you, Milord...” Sakuya bowed her head, but her expression seemed just as nervous.

Ryoma exchanged a glance with Lione, and the two regarded her with a wry smile.

I guess telling her not to be nervous is asking for a lot... But still, her skills are fine, she just needs some confidence...

Gennou approved of Sakuya's skills, and everyone around her appraised her favorably. Her only flaw was her lack of experience, and the only way of gaining that was through work. And namely, she needed experience leading other ninjas as their superior. This was part of the Igasaki clan's way of ensuring their next generation matures.

And indeed, despite Gennou's harsh treatment of Sakuya as a ninja, seeing his granddaughter mature and blossom into a full-fledged ninja did make him nervous. The fact that he selected thirty of the clan's most skilled ninja and had them slip in with the transport unit gave a glimpse into how serious he was about the whole matter. They were all capable of assassinating a commanding general if need be, or of being sent to commit subversive activities within the enemy base.

"The good thing is the situation's much better than we first thought. Your plan may yet bear fruit, boy." Lione turned her eyes to Ryoma.

"Yeah, I wasn't sure if anything would come of that plan either, but we got our chance," Ryoma said with a smile. "It's a good thing it didn't have to go to waste after we got Lupis's permission ahead of time."

"So the rest depends on tomorrow's war council..." Sara said, to which Ryoma simply took another sip of wine.

He then gazed into the glass, twirling it in his hand as he enjoyed the mystifying way the lamp's light reflected off the red surface of the liquid.

†

Just as Lione and the others discussed their future policy in Ryoma's room, a group of men were sitting at a round table in an estate elsewhere in the city of Peripheria. Their expressions were all perplexed.

"This is quite an unexpected turn of events..." one of the men said, to which everyone else nodded in agreement.

“Yes, I don’t think any of us thought this would happen.”

“Greed’s a careless one, it seems. To think his subordinates would lose to mere children...”

Eight men sat around the table. Their attire — and indeed, the haughty, confident expressions on their faces — made it clear they were all high-ranking nobles. Theirs were the faces of those who were confident in the absolute value of their pedigree and the fact that others existed only to wait upon them.

“What are you planning to do, sir...? We arranged this match so as to drive a wedge between Rhoadseria and Xarooda. He wouldn’t be satisfied to see it end in such an unsatisfactory way.”

“Quite true. With this, what was the point of me bullying that stubborn fool, eh?”

The other men chuckled at this comment. A malicious laughter, the kind with which one mocks a pitiful jester. And indeed, to them, Count Schwartzheim’s patriotic actions were nothing more than a badly performed comedy.

“Count Schwartzheim... Ridiculous. I had to hold back my laughter when he pulled that little performance in the audience chamber.”

“He fell for our deception too easily. Who exactly was he planning on fighting? It seems that man is incapable of discerning friend from foe.”

“Aye, indeed. I hear the first head of House Schwartzheim achieved great military feats during the founding of the country, but their current head is a fool with no mind for diplomacy or gambling, it seems.”

“The stubborn fool doesn’t know his place. When I imagine the face he’d make upon realizing his actions only served to hurt his beloved kingdom, I can’t help but laugh.”

Thinking back to how Count Schwartzheim admonished the king at risk of death and out of loyalty to his country, the men burst into laughter again. They found Count Schwartzheim and his constant prattling about the pride of the nobility and loyalty to Xarooda to be utterly irritating.

That said, all the people present were in good relations with Count

Schwartzheim, at least on the surface — or rather, they maintained that facade of camaraderie with him in public.

And, after they finished laughing, the man that sat at the back of the room whispered quietly.

“The problem is that whelp, though. He’s dangerous... I can understand why Sir Saitou and Princess Shardina are wary of him.”

At those words, everyone else exchanged gazes of disbelief.

“Do you think so? That boy didn’t look so dangerous to me...”

“I agree. While it’s admirable that he was able to gather soldiers while governing a backwater region like Wortenia, war is decided by numbers. He can’t take to the battlefield with a mere five hundred troops, and forming a mixed unit with an unfamiliar noble wouldn’t achieve much, either.”

The others nodded in agreement. His judgment stood to reason. It would take a knight order — 2,500 knights — to really shift the tides of a battle. Mobilizing a unit of less than five hundred troops on its own was just risky, to say the least. In true battle, he’d have to form a mixed unit with another noble’s forces.

But if that was the case, Ryoma Mikoshiba’s unit would be just one part of an army. And as skilled as Ryoma might be, if he couldn’t operate effectively with the other noble he’d be paired with, his forces’ combat capabilities would fall dramatically.

“Yes, I understand that. But still, I can’t help but feel this way...”

A silence fell over the room, and the gazes of everyone in the round table gathered on the man they called ‘sir.’ He possessed too much power — both in terms of his authority and the martial prowess he possessed — for any of them to scoff at his words and call them a delusion.

“Will Ryoma Mikoshiba really interfere with the Empire’s invasion, just like that man?”

“The possibility exists that he will. True, his forces are too small to change the tide of battle, but he’s resourceful enough to train troops of such strength... If we don’t act carefully, our pact with Princess Shardina might be revoked.”

All the men in this room had one thing in common. They were all haughty and power hungry, starved for a chance to gain more glory and authority. And they were all governors coming from leading noble families in Xarooda, who possessed vast lands.

But their biggest common feature was that they were all traitors to the kingdom, who would sell their country if it would earn them glory and power.

“General Belares was taken care of in the first battle, but things have not gone our way since.”

“Yes, we did everything we could to make it difficult to gather troops, but nothing we’ve done since then has worked. And since that man had to go about complicating things, we need to rethink our plan from the ground up.”

The battle of the Notis Plains was the opening skirmish in the O’ltormea Empire’s invasion of the east. O’ltormea’s operatives managed to seal the flow of intelligence, preventing Xarooda from taking sufficient defensive measures. Normally, that battle alone would have sealed Xarooda’s fate.

Even if it was impossible to gather all of the country’s soldiers, pushing back an O’ltormean invasion with just the forces belonging directly to the kingdom would have been far too reckless.

That said, normally they would have been able to conscript soldiers from around the capital and the nobles near the border areas, as well as call in volunteer soldiers. But in reality, the only forces Xarooda deployed in the battle of the Notis plains were twenty thousand knights. Arios Belares was lauded as a master general, but even with him in the helm, charging into battle was reckless.

And the cause for that decision lay in the machinations the men gathered around this round table performed.

And yet, despite O’ltormea winning the battle of the Notis Plains and being positioned to storm into Xarooda’s territories by force, a man stood in the way of Shardina’s plans.

“Joshua Belares. Rumors called General Belares’s third son an uncouth lout, so why, why...?! How has he been such a thorn in Princess Shardina’s side for an

entire year?”

The men all heaved sighs of exasperation. There was no name they wanted to hear less now than that of Joshua Belares. They’d managed the grand feat of removing General Belares from the equation, but as soon as he was gone, that young man appeared out of the woodwork to completely blot out their achievement.

“People have been holding him up as some sort of war hero lately. Some of the nobles that have maintained a wait-and-see approach have even decided to send him reinforcements.”

“Apparently he’s been using the mountainous terrain to employ unconventional tactics. I’ve received word that Princess Shardina’s supply units have taken great losses...”

“Applying pressure on him now would be a bad idea. As much as I’m loath to refuse Princess Shardina’s requests, we can’t make our intentions too clear.”

“Which means that this is poor timing to have him assassinated, too.”

The men exchanged gazes and hung their heads in silence. They weren’t above resorting to assassination, nor did they sense any guilt at the prospect of killing a young man fighting to defend their country. They simply didn’t want to take a risk. But after a long silence, the man they called ‘sir’ finally parted his lips.

“Hmm, no matter. We don’t have a play we can make right now, anyway. We can decide after we see how the war council tomorrow goes.”

The others exclaimed in agreement.

“Now, let us all pray for our prosperity,” he said.

The men all took up the wine glasses set on the round table.

“All in the name of our clan’s prosperity.”

“”””In the name of prosperity.”””””

They all drank the liquid and then smashed the glasses against the floor simultaneously.

“No one... No one will get in our way,” the one called ‘sir’ whispered, and stomped on the shards of glass littering the floor.

It was as if he were trying to crush an insect under his feet...

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The day after the match in the maneuvering grounds, over 30 people gathered in a large meeting room in the castle.

“That’s the situation in our country. I hope today we can discuss our position and find a way to break this deadlock,” Grahalt said.

A map of Xarooda was spread on the large table, with game pieces resting on it to signify the deployed units and fortresses.

“We need your help to protect our country,” Julianus I, who was seated near Grahalt, said.

They used a large meeting room in the castle for the first war council of the unified eastern nations. Selected generals and knight captains of Myest, Rhoadseria, and Xarooda were all gathered in one room, along with high-ranking nobles in charge of diplomatic relations and economic affairs, where they all met each other for the first time.

Among the people gathered there was the king of Xarooda, Julianus I. This alone showed just how grim Xarooda’s position was. Any war council attended by the king was bound to be a critical one.

“No, I think we ought to maintain the front lines and have our neighbors tighten the noose around O’ltormea!” one enthusiastic noble called out. “Thankfully, General Belares’s third son is maintaining the front lines. We should make good use of the time he buys us.”

A knight sitting beside the noble cut into his words.

“What are you saying?! We’ll be playing into O’ltormea’s hands by doing that. They want us to sit on our hands and do nothing while they occupy our territories one by one! Thankfully, we have the reinforcements from Myest and Rhoadseria. And despite the loss of General Belares, we still have the nobles from the central regions of the country and their troops. We need to

consolidate our remaining forces and drive O'ltormea out of our borders in one fell swoop!"

With those two opposing opinions as the catalyst, the surrounding people descended into a heated debate.

"Calm yourselves. In my opinion, our three countries alone aren't able to stand a chance. We should wait for the Kingdom of Helnesgoula to join the fray as well."

"That's been going on since the war started, but it's been a year and they haven't made any progress."

"Still, even with Myest and Rhoadseria's help, our number of soldiers is limited. Holding the line for much longer would be difficult. We need to draw Helnesgoula into the war. Should we not do everything in our power to win this?"

"Are you some kind of fool?! Helnesgoula won't help us! You know well enough what they call their queen!"

"Indeed! She's been lazily delaying our messengers with meetings while sneakily moving her armies toward our border! She's no doubt aiming to steal territory from us!"

"Precisely. They occupied one border town and haven't made any movements since, but that's not to say they'll lend us their help!"

The more elderly nobles stressed that O'ltormea's greatest challenge was their line of supplies and insisted Xarooda should enter a state of protracted war. Meanwhile, the younger knights claimed that going on the offensive would be critical for maintaining the conscripted commoner soldiers' morale.

Each opinion had its merits. The elders noted that O'ltormea was attacking a central zone in the continent that was surrounded by rival countries, making protracted war a favorable possibility. Meanwhile, the younger knights pushed for an immediate, decisive strike, and this was understandable given Xarooda's limited national power.

Everyone used their knowledge and wisdom to make proactive suggestions and argue. But as they did, Ryoma, Lione and the Malfist sisters sat in a corner

of the room as if to avoid attention, watching over the proceedings with cold eyes.

“Hmph, and you call that a heated discussion...?” Ryoma whispered. “At this rate they’ll lose before they reach any decision. What’s the point of yelling about the obvious this late into the war?”

Lione cracked a wry smile. Ryoma was considerate enough not to say it loudly, but even so, that wasn’t something he should say in a war council. Still, there was a clear reason Lione didn’t chide him for it.

The boy’s harsh... Not that I can defend these people. Fact is, they really ain’t smart enough...

The contents of this argument were already guessed and predicted ahead of time by Sakuya, who was absent from the war council. And so to Ryoma, this entire exchange was a farce. Xarooda’s national power was less than a third of O’ltormea’s to begin with. Only by uniting with the other two countries of the east could it hope to match the Empire.

But Rhoadseria’s national power was weakened by its civil war, and Xarooda itself lost much of its military might during its defeat on the Notis Plains. True, O’ltormea’s army was surrounded by rivals on all sides, but the same could be said for Xarooda. They had Helnesgoula in their northwestern border, and the southern kingdoms on their south, and each of them was eyeing Xarooda greedily for a chance to steal land.

The southern kingdoms were especially known for their savage warriors who focused on raiding and pillaging, and if they were allowed to invade Xarooda, the country’s southern regions would be turned to hell.

The men would be killed, the women and children would be enslaved. Houses and fields would be put to the torch, and all the food and items of value the raiders could find would be stolen away. That was how they resisted countries several times their strength and size. And it was because Xarooda knew this that they couldn’t move their southern garrisons to help in the war effort.

Still, at this rate, they’re definitely going to lose...

Ryoma’s sense of judgment did not waver. He had the mental fortitude to see

the uncomfortable truths thrust before him, and Lione knew this was how he survived this far.

“This war is over once the frontline is pushed as far back as the capital’s region... At this rate, their territory will be divided into the north and south, and each one will be taken out on its own. That’ll be how this country ends...”

Xarooda’s territory could be described as almost a rectangle extending to the north and south. The capital, Peripheria, was right in the middle of the country. The frontlines were three days to the south of the capital currently, in a basin surrounded by mountains. There, the fifteen thousand men under Joshua Belares’s command maintained the line with a do-or-die resolve.

But the truth of the matter was, this was only slightly delaying the O’ltormean invasion into Xarooda’s soil. Joshua’s forces needed reinforcements, and they needed them as soon as possible.

“Well, overturning this situation with conventional means is probably impossible. It’d take a gamble to break this deadlock. But I wouldn’t wanna make that kind of poor gamble...” Lione shook her head with a bitter smile on her lips.

The Kingdom of Xarooda’s current situation was already well-known to Ryoma and his group. Ryoma thought back to the map they used in their discussion the previous night...

Having won in the battle of the Notis Plains, the O’ltormea Empire’s army charged eastward, crossing the mountainous regions of the border into a basin region, where they halted their advance. They built up a stronghold, using their vast national power as the monarchs of the western continent to send a large amount of soldiers and supplies into Xarooda’s land. They would need to use that fortress as a staging area for their eastward charge.

But the direction they were marching made it clear that O’ltormea wasn’t planning on forcibly charging the capital, Peripheria. They crossed to the south of Peripheria. Their intent was clearly to divide Xarooda across the north and south. And once they achieved that, the war would be theirs.

If the nobles that held territory along Xarooda’s south were cut off from the capital, they would be stricken by fear and end up becoming unable to fight in

an organized manner. And that would make defeating each individual side of the country a simple task.

Some would even surrender to O'ltormea. After all, the southern kingdoms were also preparing to make their move. The regional governors couldn't hold on for long against them with their private soldiers.

"I don't think anyone but you could come up with a strategy to break this deadlock, Master Ryoma..." Sara said, to which Lione smirked and shrugged.

"Yeah, it'd be tough otherwise. Not many options we can take now," she said. "But if we pull the same stunt as yesterday, we might be able to turn things around."

Lione's words were heavy with insinuation, which prompted Sara to frown.

"But the question is, can we really manage to do that...?"

Any strategy might seem as if it would absolutely succeed before it's actually put into practice, but the question of whether it would work and achieve the desired result was another matter altogether. From that angle, Ryoma's ploy looked like a foolish, delusional trick. At least, at this point...

Of course, being the one to propose it, Ryoma knew this well enough.

"Well, the proposal doesn't look good. It won't be easy to convince anyone... All the countries are trying to keep themselves safe," Lione said.

"The problem is Myest's movements... And whether they'll cooperate with us." Laura nodded lightly.

"Myest isn't the issue. I had Sakuya gather information on them. Hell, I haven't even told King Julianus about it yet... Still, she's going to be a key person in all this."

Ryoma's gaze fell on a woman standing behind Grahalt and Helena. She had long, sleek, almost lacquered-looking black hair that extended down to her waist. Her skin was white as snow, and she looked to be in her mid-twenties. Her demeanor was so graceful that if one were to claim she was some kind of princess, Ryoma wouldn't be surprised. In terms of beauty, she was a match for Princess Lupis.

But regardless of whether they went on the defensive or turned to offense, the ten thousand knights this woman led would be the key to victory.

“Ecclesia Marinelle... One of Myest’s great generals, known as ‘The Tempest’... I guess you couldn’t tell just from seeing her face, though,” Lione said, her face contorted unpleasantly.

As far as Ryoma could see, Ecclesia looked like a woman of nobility, as far removed from the savagery of battle as could be.

“Oh, right, you faced off against her once before, right, Lione?” Ryoma asked.

Boltz told him about it before they left for Xarooda. Lione’s eyes widened in surprise — apparently she didn’t expect Ryoma to know about that.

“Boltz told ya, did he...? Him and his big mouth... Yeah, I did. It was a few years ago. One of the southern kingdoms clashed with Myest over a territory. That’s when I fought her... Not like we had much of a name back then, so we were just one pawn on that battlefield. I doubt she’ll recognize me.”

Lione thought back to that bitter, shameful defeat.

“We were tearing into their frontlines and it looked like we were gonna win, but... It was bad.”

It was her first defeat since she began leading a mercenary group on her own. Lione kept speaking, spitting the words out with frustration.

“We were lucky that I gave up on pursuing them. Thanks to that, we got away with none of my men taking any losses. But the other people, the soldiers on their rear were all surrounded and wiped out... And that’s when it turned to a losing battle for our side. If I didn’t believe my gut feeling back then, I’d have been killed by that woman’s plan with the rest of my men... Shit, for how harmless she looks, that woman’s scary.”



Ryoma smiled slightly. For how frustrated she was, Lione admitted Ecclesia's strength. And Ryoma held Lione's own capabilities as a commander in high regard. She was capable of calm judgment and knew how to keep her soldiers inspired. She was slightly hot-headed, but was aware of that fault and made efforts to keep it suppressed.

In terms of personal combat prowess, there were probably many warriors that were greater than Lione. But when it came to commanding soldiers, Ryoma only knew a handful of people who could perform better than her. If she weren't bound by her commoner status, she could surely serve in a key position in some country.

If Lione feared her that much, Ecclesia Marinelle wasn't a commander to be trifled with.

Having more capable people around isn't a bad thing. Helena and I aren't enough to overturn this inferior position we're in... I should probably talk to the man holding the enemy back on the frontlines, Joshua Belares... The only problem is Myest. What are they gonna do in this war?

Ryoma still didn't know much about the commanders leading Myest's reinforcements. What was their aim? How many losses could they afford to take? Without knowing that information, revealing the plan he brewed up was too dangerous.

"Guess we'll just have to trust in their capabilities..." Ryoma whispered to himself as he watched the foolish argument from the corner of the room.

How much were they willing to sacrifice to defend their country? Julianus I wasn't the only one who ought to have been asked that question...

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Late that night, when most of the castle's residents were already fast asleep, a loud shout echoed through one of the rooms.

"Do you really think you can do that?! How much shame do you intend to bring upon Xarooda... upon us knights?! Any fellow countryman would rather die than withstand such ignominious shame!"

Contained in that furious shout was the roar of a lion whose pride had been wounded. Grahalt's face was red with anger, and he howled at Ryoma with bloodshot eyes. They had everyone irrelevant to the matter escorted out of the room, but Grahalt was so loud that Julianus I had to turn his gaze to the door.

Grahalt's loud voice was a boon when it came to encouraging his men on the battlefield, but when it came to confidential talks like this one, it became an issue instead. Helena sat next to Ryoma, while Ecclesia sat to Grahalt's left. Both had bitter smiles on their lips.

"It's not a question of whether we can afford to do this anymore," Ryoma said, not batting an eyelash while taking Grahalt's anger head on. "We have no other choice... Or would you let O'ltormea destroy your country?"



This exchange was very much a duel of words and eloquence. Indeed, if they were to refuse this offer, Ryoma had no backup plan. Ryoma couldn't afford to back down here, both for Xarooda's continued existence and his and his comrades' survival.

"How can you say that?! This war hasn't been decided yet! To begin with, your proposal is a foolish daydream at best! If it was just our country it would have been one thing, but getting Rhoadseria and Myest involved is madness! If you honestly think either of the other countries would accept this idea, you're a hopeless fool and a lunatic!"

"Yes, I suppose that much is right... But can you come up with any other way to win, Sir Grahalt?" Ryoma shrugged at Grahalt's bellowing. "I have a few ideas, if pushing your defeat back by a few years is good enough for you. But if you want this country to actually win... There's no other way."

"We had the war council to discuss that! And you have the nerve to ask me that when you spent the whole council sitting quietly in the corner?! Your Majesty!" Grahalt turned his eyes to Julianus I and rose to his feet. "I came here out of deference for Lady Helena, but I can no longer stand for this. This is a waste of our time! I will be retiring to my room."

"Now wait, Grahalt," Julianus I said, narrowing his eyes at the man as he stroked his white beard. "We gathered here in secret late at night for this. There's no need to rush to conclusions."

Ryoma asked that this meeting be done in confidence, and so great efforts and preparations were expended to ensure the secrecy of this meeting. There was no need to end the talks when things were still undecided.

"But, Your Majesty... The man speaks nonsense. And besides, if we do as he says, Xarooda will end up becoming a vassal to Helnesgoula," Grahalt said.

But the next words to leave Julianus I's lips exceeded Grahalt's imagination.

"And that's fine, Grahalt."

A heavy silence settled over the room. Even Helena had her eyes wide with surprise.

“Y-Your Majesty?”

“Why are you so surprised? If we stand back and watch things unfold, we will either become vassals to O’ltormea or sacrifice our people and die an honorable defeat. Either way, the result will be the same. That being the case, are we not better off becoming vassals to a party who will offer us better terms?”

Fighting to the very end would bring chaos to Xarooda’s territories, ravaging the livelihood of their subjects. But the same would hold true if they were to become vassals to O’ltormea. In the end, most wars were a form of economic activity. There was no telling how long O’ltormea was prepared to drag out the war with Xarooda, but if they intended to invade and destroy an entire country, the preparations likely cost them a great deal of funds. And the bigger their losses, the more they’d extort Xarooda after the war should they make an offer of vassalage.

The tribute they’d demand would increase yearly, and the tariff taxes would grow all the more unfair as time went on, eating away at Xarooda until there would be nothing left to consume. In the end, choosing to fight O’ltormea as things stood was the difference between picking a swift death and a slow, agonizing one. Whichever choice they made, they would surely die.

But this wasn’t because O’ltormea was a particularly cruel or evil country. They too had to regain the war expenses they wasted from somewhere, lest they were the ones to face an imminent death.

“Becoming Helnesgoula’s vassals isn’t something I mind in and of itself,” Julianus I said, looking fixedly at Ryoma. “However, Mikoshiba, that will be meaningless if it ends up being the same as us being exploited by O’ltormea. Am I wrong? After all, given the movements that Helnesgoula has been making, I find it hard to believe they would act the way we want them to.”

Ryoma nodded wordlessly. That was an understandable question to ask.

“That’s why I gathered representatives from Myest, Rhoadseria and Xarooda here. Though I should make a correction. My idea wasn’t vassalage to Helnesgoula, but creating an alliance of four countries with Helnesgoula at the top... Though I suppose your choosing to regard that as vassalage might not be

far from the truth.”

At Ryoma’s explanation, Grahalt once again cut into his words. That man truly didn’t like Ryoma’s plan.

“And that’s the part I find the most detestable! Why must we involve another country in our affairs? We’ve sent Helnesgoula messengers regularly since the battle at Notis, but they’ve been beating around the bush and doing nothing for the better part of a year! I can’t imagine they’d cooperate with this plan of yours.”

While his words stemmed mostly from dislike for Ryoma’s idea, he was by no means wrong. That wasn’t to say he was entirely right, though.

God, why won’t he let me finish...? It’s like talking to Mikhail. Is being stubborn as a mule in a knight’s job description or something? Ryoma heaved a sigh internally.

Grahalt’s doubts weren’t unfounded, but Ryoma built his plan while taking that problem into consideration. He didn’t mean to brag, but there was absolutely no way he or his comrades wouldn’t think of any flaw Grahalt could point out ahead of time. It would be understandable if Grahalt would simply let Ryoma finish, but whenever he tried to explain anything the knight kept cutting into his words. It was grinding on Ryoma’s nerves.

He could understand being impatient after all their attempts to defend Xarooda had turned up dry, but Ryoma’s patience was nearing its limits.

It’s because you’re so fucking bad at your job that I had to be sent here in the first place. You only lost at Notis because you were dumb enough to rush headfirst into the enemy’s plan, you stupid assholes! If you hate my plan that much, then try growing enough of a brain to wipe your own bullshit up!

But of course, as a general for Rhoadseria he couldn’t afford to make such a childish outburst. As utterly bitter as he was, he had to handle this like an adult. And besides, Ryoma had his own reasons to maintain Xarooda’s existence, which were separate from Rhoadseria’s interests.

If the east were to lose the shield that was Xarooda, O’ltormea would rush into the east, conquering its countries one by one. Myest could probably hold

on for a while, since it had a powerful economy that would allow it to maintain a force of knights, but Rhoadseria's national power was still diminished from last year's civil war. Or rather... Since Lupis's policies weren't functioning, it was possibly even weaker than it was last year.

If O'ltormea were to send an invasion army under these conditions, Rhoadseria would be in no state to push them back. Ryoma used all his knowledge to probe for a way to prevent that hopeless scenario. He needed Xarooda to remain where it was, at least until he was prepared to break off from Rhoadseria.

And despite that, this moron keeps getting in the way...

Ryoma couldn't afford to shout and storm out of the room — it would agitate Julianus I. So despite the fact that he couldn't show it publicly, Ryoma's heart was filled with the dark flames of anger, which ate away at his reasoning, little by little...

Maybe I ought to just have him liquidated and be done with it... The thought crossed his mind.

If he were to send the Igasaki clan's leading ninjas, they could quite possibly assassinate even a knight captain. Ryoma and Grahalt both glared at each other, their eyes locked in a fierce gaze. Each of them knew that looking away now would mean relinquishing the initiative to the other. A chill settled over the room.

"Aren't you rushing to conclusions, Sir Grahalt?" The bright, all too inappropriately cheerful voice of a woman cut through the tension. "Lord Mikoshiba hadn't finished his explanation yet. Like King Julianus said, we've gone to the trouble of arranging for this secret meeting. We can decide whether this plan is good or not after we finish hearing everything he has to say, yes?"

Hearing those words, Ryoma felt those flames of anger die down.

Crap, my thinking's getting too impulsive... This situation is putting me up against the wall too...

Removing nuisances by force wasn't a mistaken choice in and of itself, but it

didn’t apply for every situation. If he’d planned out the assassination meticulously it might have been a viable idea, but he couldn’t afford to act recklessly and create new enemies for himself in the process.

And given how bad their situation was, he couldn’t afford to lose any allies, as stupid as they may have been. Cutting this man down would have to be a last resort.

“Lady Marinelle... Do you truly think there’s any merit to listening to this man’s plan?” Grahalt’s expression contorted at the sound of these surprising words leaving the lips of the woman he didn’t expect to say them.

If a general of an expedition sent by a neighboring country was willing to listen, even Grahalt couldn’t afford to insist. Ecclesia had far more achievements and merit under her belt, after all.

“But of course. It is a fascinating idea...” Ecclesia said, turning her gaze to Ryoma. “Lord Mikoshiba, yes...? I’ve heard of you. You made quite the name for yourself when you helped Queen Lupis quell her civil war. Isn’t that right, Lady Helena?”

“Yes, he’s the finest tactician and strategist I know of...” Helena nodded deeply. “I’ve already told Grahalt of this before, but it seems my words fell on deaf ears.”

Helena shook her head regretfully. She realized that this was a critical moment for them, and if she were asked if there was another way out of this situation aside from Ryoma’s idea, her honest answer was that she could see no viable method.

“B-But his idea, it’s so preposterous that it’s not even worth paying any—”

“Enough, Grahalt,” Julianus I chided him. “You will be quiet and hear Lord Mikoshiba through to the end.”

Grahalt’s expression was overcome with doubt. He’d realized no one here was on his side.

“I apologize for the interruption,” Julianus I continued. “Grahalt understands his position here now. Please, continue.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Ryoma nodded deeply and began explaining his tactic.

His explanation included his prediction of what the queen of the kingdom of Helnesgoula, Grindiana Helnecharles, was planning.

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With the meeting over, Helena and Ecclesia remained in the room. The two sat on two opposite sofas set by the window.

“My apologies for asking you to stay, Lady Helena,” Ecclesia said as she filled the wineglass in front of her.

It was an expensive bottle of red wine brought in from the central continent. A distinct, exotic aroma filled the air, making it clear it was made from the finest grapes of the central continent. Even in Myest, which had rife access to the sea’s trade routes, it was hard to come by such a bottle.

“Oh, don’t let it worry you. I’m just glad to have a chance to speak to the famous, heroic Lady Ecclesia,” Helena said, bringing the wine glass to her nose. “And I even get the chance to have this wonderful wine.”

After taking a long breath to savor the aroma, Helena took a sip.

“They don’t call it Shadora’s Blood for nothing. Such a thick flavor...” Helena nodded in satisfaction, relishing the sublime balance of sourness and sweetness spreading in her mouth.

But with that said, Helena placed the wineglass back on the table soon after taking that sip. That wasn’t to say the wine wasn’t to her liking, but simply that she wasn’t here for merrymaking. Ecclesia aptly realized Helena’s intent and parted her lips.

“Lady Helena. That one is... very sharp.”

“Yes. As far as I know, he’s a first-rate warrior. Indeed...”

“And a master tactician.”

Helena nodded. Ryoma’s capacity as a warrior was clear from his physique, but his true worth lay in his intellect. He was capable of truly ingenious stratagems, and even had a way of reading other people’s hearts.

“But his proposal there wasn’t... something I can honestly call wise,” Ecclesia whispered, her voice tinged with confusion and some fear.

That was something Helena felt once before. But since Ecclesia was closer to being in opposition to him, her fear was even stronger. Helena knew, however, that submitting to that fear would only leave them on the path to ruin.

She’ll be fine, though... If anything, she may see him as a worthy rival.

A person’s heart can be a complicated thing. Some people submit to their fear, while others are capable of properly controlling it. And some people are capable of using fear as sustenance, of growing through overcoming it. With that thought in mind, Helena replied to Ecclesia’s words.

“No, it isn’t. Even during the war council, people have mentioned the idea time and again...”

“But over the last year, no one has managed to make that ploy work. Do you think Lord Mikoshiba is capable of it?” Ecclesia asked her imploringly.

“I don’t know.” Helena shook her head. “I did feel, for a moment back in the meeting, that he might be able to do it... But I’m not sure if he’ll be able to get the Vixen of the North to make her move.”

There was no falsehood to her words. It was a perfectly plausible possibility. But if she were asked if she was absolutely, positively sure of it, she would have to shake her head in denial. Truth be told, she thought it was a 50-50 chance at best. But the hypothesis Ryoma brought up earlier was certainly convincing.

“What do you plan to do next, Lady Ecclesia? Are you going to report this to Myest...?” Helena asked Ecclesia.

If Ryoma’s plan were to work, it would have major consequences on the power balance in the western continent. Even though she was given command over Myest’s armies, Ecclesia’s authority as a general wasn’t enough on its own to decide whether to accept Ryoma’s proposal. Even if it was for the sake of winning the war, it would have lasting effects on the diplomatic and economic aspects of the country, no, on the country’s entire way of being.

“Of course. I’ve already sent a runner. I can’t make that decision of my own accord...” Ecclesia said, directing a firm gaze at Helena. “But I do think we ought

to adopt his proposal. I think that upon reading my written opinion, my liege will agree."

Her eyes were alight with honesty. This was proof that she admitted that Ryoma's plan was viable.

"I see... But will it not take a while until we get their response?"

Regardless of whether they agreed with Ryoma's plan or not, neither Ecclesia nor Helena had the authority to make that decision. But there was a major difference between the two generals. Rhoadseria's national power was greatly exhausted, and they had few choices left. They were unlikely to refuse Ryoma's idea.

But the same didn't hold true for Myest. They had the military strength and finances to drag out the war for several years, if necessary. Were Myest's king to reject Ryoma's proposal, he could elect to enter the war himself.

And regardless of what he chose, it would take time to come to a decision on this matter. But despite Helena's concerns, Ecclesia's response was decisive and clear.

"I will wait for the king's decision to the very last moment, but if his word does not reach me in due time, I will have no choice but to push things along by my own decision."

Those were words that, depending on how one interpreted them, could be seen as a declaration of revolt. One couldn't say this without a great deal of resolve.

"You would act beyond the king's orders? In the name of the kingdom?"

Ecclesia answered Helena's question with a mischievous smile.

"Considering the war's aftermath, Xarooda, Rhoadseria, and Myest ought to act as one here. That much is undeniable truth. His ploy will only work for so long. I'm sure you know this, Lady Helena, but if we let this timing pass us by, our chances of winning will decrease significantly."

Helena nodded silently. Even the most brilliant of ploys can change with the passage of time. Every passing minute or hour can make things swing in a

different direction. What might have been the most successful tactic one day could be rendered obsolete and hopeless in the next.

Having led soldiers to war for many years, they both knew this perfectly well. Abiding by the king's word was the duty of a general in service of the country. But if the pursuit of that duty led to them letting the chance for victory pass them by and led to their countries falling to ruin, it would defeat the whole purpose they were fighting for.

"Should my liege refuse the proposal, I shall hand over my head. Though I will admit that seeing everything turn out exactly as Lord Mikoshiba predicted does strike me as a bit unpleasant, too..."

Having earned for herself the title of 'The Tempest,' Ecclesia could count the number of times she'd had the initiative snatched away from her during a war council on one hand. Even in cases where she didn't quite hold the initiative, she always spoke her mind as a general. Not this time, though. She hadn't been this easily manipulated since her late teen years, when she became head of House Marinelle and set out on her first battle.

But while she did believe Ryoma Mikoshiba to be an impudent one, Ecclesia was overjoyed. She could vividly feel the presence of a rival worthy of her prowess.

"My, would you look at the time..." Helena furrowed her brows, hearing the clock installed on the wall ring out. "I apologize for keeping you up this late."

The time was already past midnight. They had so much to discuss that the time had passed by before they knew it. Helena believed knights were to maintain a strict lifestyle, and so it wasn't often she stayed up so late outside the battlefield.

"That's not true," Ecclesia replied with a calm smile. "It's my priceless chance to speak to Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War. I quite enjoyed it."

"My. Hearing the Tempest herself say that is more flattery than I have any right to accept."

The two laughed, and then took up the glasses resting on their tables and drank them up in one go.

“I was quite anxious as to what would happen when I was ordered to join the reinforcements and go to war, but thanks to Lord Mikoshiba, things are shaping up to be interesting...” Ecclesia murmured.

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A key fortress was set up by the O’ltormean army in Xaroodian territory, meant to facilitate their invasion of the kingdom. The name of that place was Fort Noltia. It was on the east side of the mountains along the Xaroodian-O’ltormean border.

The fort was built on the entrance to the Ushas Basin, forming one of the key positions for the O’ltormean invasion of Xarooda alongside the fort they set up on the Notis Plains. It had several layers of empty moats and a wall made of sturdy stone. Sentries kept vigilant watch over important points in the base. All of this made the fort’s importance clear.

Sitting in one of the fort’s rooms was Shardina. She reclined against a sofa while Celia delivered a report.

“The supplies and soldiers gathered in Fort Notis should reach the planned numbers within two weeks time. Taking into account the time it should take them to travel, they should reach here within a month, assuming no interruptions from the Xaroodian military... That’s the report regarding our supplies.” Celia cut off her words, raising her eyes from the white sheet lined with numbers.

Fort Notis was a depository for the supplies they’d gathered within the empire. From there, the convoy went along a winding path around the mountain to enter Xarooda’s land.

“Good... It seems we’ll finally be able to settle this.” Shardina heaved a sigh, shaking her head tiredly.

War never does go the way you hope, does it...?

The invasion of the east was a long-lasting endeavor, set to take a great deal of effort and years of time. The first battle in that campaign, the battle for the Notis Plains, went smoothly enough, but the war took an unexpected turn following that.

Shardina had assumed that, however long the initial outbreak of the war dragged on, she would conclude that stage within six months at the latest. But the year that had passed since had very much been a cursed one for her.

Defeating General Belares cost her as many knights as she slew, and Helnesgoula invaded Xarooda's northern border, forcing her to hold back her main force's advance to probe for their actions.

That was the beginning of her troubles.

To counteract that turn of events, Shardina split her army in two. Separating her main force, she sent one half of her army to keep Helnesgoula in check, which in and of itself was a sound and obvious play to make as a commander.

Even looking back now, Shardina didn't think she was mistaken to do so. But the fact of the matter was that this choice was one factor that led to how drawn out the invasion of Xarooda had become.

Had she given swift pursuit with her full forces following her victory on the Notis Plains and wiped out the remnants of the defeated army, she would have surely conquered Peripheria by now and began planning the invasion to Rhoadseria...

And to add to it all, splitting up her army made organizing her forces take longer than it should have, and that only served to make her position worse. A single man used that small amount of time to gather up the remnants of the Xaroodian knights and hole up in the mountainous region.

"We can finally crush that irksome man...!" Shardina whispered the biggest reason the war had dragged for so long, biting on her properly maintained thumbnail furiously.

Biting her thumbnail was one of Shardina's bad habits, which manifested whenever she was terribly annoyed. Seeing this, Celia heaved a slight sigh, gentle enough to not be noticed by her angered liege. Truth be told, Shardina's behavior wasn't fitting for a member of the royal house. Some countries' nobility would outright mock it. Still, Celia couldn't criticize Shardina for it, since she shared that same habit.

Nonetheless, if a soldier were to see the imperial princess bite off her nails in

anger, it would cast shame on O'ltormea's reputation.

I should ask a maid to do Her Highness's nails after this...

Making that mental note to herself, Celia spoke the name of the man who had been the source of Shardina's headaches for the past year.

"You mean Joshua Belares, Your Highness?"

"Because of that accursed man, all my plans have been going awry..." Shardina spat out the words, and then heaved a heavy, exasperated sigh.

After his father, General Belares, died an honorable death on the Notis Plains, Joshua consolidated the remaining forces and made a retreat. While both sides lost an equal number of troops, the fact that Xarooda's side lost its supreme commander meant victory went to Shardina. As impressive as the knights of a militant country like Xarooda were, coordination and command mattered more in a war.

From Shardina's position, claiming the life of the man known as Xarooda's Guardian Deity so early into the war was a victory in and of itself. And indeed, Xarooda didn't have anyone else to match General Belares's glory.

The captain of the royal guard, Grahalt Henshel, and captain of the Monarch's Guard, Orson Greed were known among the surrounding countries, but only in regards to their skill as warriors. They may have been capable of commanding their knight orders expertly, but they lacked the capacity to oversee the battlefield as a whole. Their capacity for tactics and strategy was greatly inferior to Shardina's.

Still, the invasion that should have gone on to be easy pickings for Shardina was met with a counterattack by Xaroodian forces led by Joshua Belares. Despite making severe sacrifices, her attack ended in failure.

Her preparations against a Helnesgoulian attack meant she had fewer forces to launch an invasion with, but even so, she was leading the armies of O'ltormea, the supreme ruler at the heart of the western continent. Even when divided, she'd prepared more than enough troops to crush a defeated army, whose chain of command had been destroyed due to General Belares's death, and march deep into Xarooda's lands.

But her plans were dashed by Joshua. And it wasn't that Shardina had made any foolish decisions. Joshua made apt use of the mountainous terrain's characteristics, the valley's poor visibility and winding roads, to swiftly exterminate the pursuing units sent after him.

He then turned to defensive tactics, exhibiting skill and command ability worthy of his fabled father's name. His actions motivated the Xaroodian nobles, who were racking their brains as to how to protect their country and territories and saw him as a national hero...

That was how the third son of General Belares — the one seen as an uncouth, disgusting whelp — took the stage by storm. By now he'd gathered reinforcements from the surrounding nobles and volunteer soldiers from among the commoners, creating an army of 15,000 soldiers, which exceeded Shardina's expectations.

"At your request, we've specifically brought in knights skilled with fighting in mountainous regions and unconventional warfare from across the empire. Joshua Belares will find beating us isn't as easy as he thinks," Celia said.

"Good... I should send a thank you letter after this." Shardina nodded.

Numbers give one the advantage in war. This was generally true, but wasn't always applicable in every single battlefield. Xarooda's territory was divided by precipitous peaks and thick forests, making it hard for a commander unaccustomed to such terrain to mobilize an army.

Furthermore, while the full-body metal armor the knights wore offered excellent defense on even ground, on the elevated terrain of the mountains, it only weighed them down and wasted their stamina. Xarooda's knights were accustomed to the terrain, but the same couldn't be said for O'ltormea's.

Still, O'ltormea gathered information from the locals over a long period of time and at considerable expense, successfully drawing a detailed map of the area. With this and the use of knights practiced in the use of non-conventional warfare gathered from around the empire's vast lands, victory should have been within arm's reach. If two armies were equal in terms of the quality of their troops and the locational advantage, numbers would become the deciding factor.

If we can push Xarooda's nobles to double-cross their country, we will have gained the strategic victory... I just need to make sure I don't make any needless mistakes. I don't need to have my prey escape my clutches a second time...

Negligence, conceit, arrogance... Shardina knew all too well that it only took one error in judgment to push one off the pedestal of the victor and into the quagmire of the defeated. A strategic victory elevated one's chances of winning up to 99 percent. It was winning on the tactical level that pushed one's chances up to 100 percent.

"Also, His Majesty has sent you a letter..." Celia took a letter out of her pocket while Shardina was still lost in thought.

"Oh, Father... He must be urging me to finish the conquest of Xarooda faster."

Over the past year, he'd sent her weekly letters by carrier bird or courier on horseback. She could guess the letter's contents easily enough. Truth be told, the repeated letters felt bothersome by now.

But while they were parent and child, there was a great difference in standing between Emperor Lionel and Imperial Princess Shardina. Shardina absolutely could not afford to stuff the letter into her drawer without unsealing it. Sighing once, Shardina sat up from the sofa.

I can understand Father's impatience, and yet...

As vast as O'ltormea was, there was still a limit to its national power and how many troops it could mobilize. Regardless of this campaign, there was still constant fighting on the borders with Helnesgoula and Qwiltantia. They were only minor skirmishes, but they could develop into full blown wars at any time. The emperor's desire to see this campaign end as soon as possible was understandable.

"Let me see it," Shardina said.

Celia handed her the letter without a word. Shardina broke the seal and skimmed through the letter from the emperor, but as she did, her expression darkened. A click of the tongue escaped her well-shaped lips. It was a far cry from Shardina's normal conduct, where she strove to maintain the dignity and grace expected of the empire's first princess.

Whatever's in that letter, it can't be good...

Seeing the change in her liege's attitude, Celia felt dread settle over her heart.

"You should read this as well..." Shardina said, handing her the letter.

"M-May I?" Celia asked as she took it.

I see... So that's why... Celia quickly read the letter, her expression clouding over just like Shardina's.

"The Vixen of the North's finally made her move..." Celia uttered.

Helnesgoula's army is on the move.

Seeing those words etched on the letter, Celia couldn't help but sigh in irritation.

"Their second formation is still only garrisoned near their border with Xarooda, but..." Shardina said.

They'd suspected things might turn out this way since the beginning of the war. But it had been a year since the battle at Notis, and Helnesgoula had done nothing. And now, just as O'ltormea was about to launch a full-scale offensive on Xarooda, they made their move. To call this bad timing would be an understatement.

"And just as we're on the cusp of dividing Xarooda... Why does nothing ever go our way?"

It was as if the god of fate was opposed to O'ltormea's prosperity. But realistically speaking, Helnesgoula likely sent countless spies to Xarooda to keep a close eye on Shardina's movements.

"Did our plans leak somehow...?"

"In all likelihood..."

From the Vixen of the North's perspective, O'ltormea's expansion was a developing risk to her country's safety. If O'ltormea were to annex Xarooda's territories, Helnesgoula would be surrounded by its most powerful rivals. It would have Qwiltantia to its west and O'ltormea to its south and east.

"Do you really think they'll join the war?" Shardina asked.

“Who’s to say? Personally, I think that chances are this is another bluff. A year ago, Helnesgoula declared war on both us and Xarooda, but they’ve only occupied a northern border town. They haven’t made any signs of heading south since. If they were going to interfere proactively, they’d have done it back then.”

“So you think Helnesgoula has no desire to advance south?” Shardina asked.

Celia nodded. After the battle at the Notis Plains, Helnesgoula broke through the Xaroodian border and occupied one of its border towns. But while the Helnesgoulian military remained garrisoned there for a year, it hadn’t made any movements since. They’d simply remained on the border, accepting Xaroodian messengers every now and then.

“One year ago, you stopped our military’s march upon hearing of Helnesgoula’s interference with the war. So I have to wonder if this is another bluff meant to prevent us from launching an assault...”

“Even if it is, we’ll still need to think of a countermeasure,” Shardina concluded bitterly.

The most bothersome part of this whole affair was, even if it was a bluff on Helnesgoula’s part, Shardina would still need to be prepared for the possibility that they did something. Otherwise, she’d be powerless in the event that Helnesgoula’s army marched south on them. Even if they had no intent of doing so now, that wasn’t to say they never would.

When Helnesgoula first broke the Xaroodian border, Shardina sent them a messenger. She knew it would be ignored, but figured it didn’t hurt to try. She proposed that they split up Xarooda’s territory half and half, but the messenger was sent away without a chance to give his message.

With the situation being what it was, Shardina couldn’t afford to send out her entire army and expose herself to attack from another rival.

We’ll wait for our reinforcements to arrive, draw Joshua Belares out into a field battle, and win there... Then, once Xarooda’s morale plummets, we swoop in and divide the country to the north and south at once... A swift, decisive battle... That’s our only choice.

Shardina thought back to the plan she'd devised beforehand. The northern power wouldn't even come to the bargaining table. If she were to keep being wary of their movements and hesitate to act, the war could linger for years and she wouldn't be able to occupy Xarooda.

Shardina spread out a sheet of fine quality paper on the table and began writing on it with a quill.

"I'll call Sudou back from Rhoadseria. Once the units sent around finish their battles, they'll begin preparing for the decisive battle. And I'll send this to Father... You confirm it, too."

Abiding by her liege's words, Celia opened the letter. Upon seeing its contents, her eyes widened. Akitake Sudou was currently in Rhoadseria, acting as an operative of O'ltormea. On paper, his position was that of a close aide to Radine Rhoadserians. But much like last year during the battle at Notis, he could function as a temporary staff officer for the war effort.

To begin with, Sudou was an otherworlder, but Celia's grandfather — Gaius Valkland — had acknowledged his capabilities. Within O'ltormea's intelligence organization, he was distinguished for his skills and service.

Now that Gaius was gone, it wouldn't be odd for him to take over the organization as his successor. The fact that he was still out and about, operating in the field, was down to how he was capable of dealing with things swiftly and decisively, coupled with Sudou's own preference for being in the thick of things. And so, in exchange for being allowed to do so, Shardina summoned him to aid her at times.

I imagine he'll create some kind of clever pretense and come swiftly to Her Highness's side. He does love war... But all the same.

The problem was the other name on the letter.

"I understand calling Sir Sudou, but why Sir Rolfe, Your Highness?"

The captain of the royal guard, whose praises were sung across the empire as the Emperor's Shield. As one of the emperor's most trusted subordinates, he was the chief executive in charge of the emperor's security. Rolfe would only take to the frontlines when the emperor himself entered the fray.

“No commander can best Sir Rolfe when it comes to defensive battles. I have no other choice... We can’t allow this fort to fall while we storm the frontlines.”

“You think Xarooda’s army might move to cut us off from the rear?” Celia asked.

Shardina nodded silently. If the enemy were to take advantage of the opening while Shardina’s forces moved forward to conquer the frontline fort, they would be cut off from the rest of their army. Given Xarooda’s remaining forces and the quality of their commanders, Shardina didn’t think it was likely they would make such a gamble, but Shardina aimed to be perfectly prepared for every contingency.

“So you would have the royal guard defend this fort?” Celia asked.

Calling Rolfe, the captain of the royal guard, inevitably meant calling the knights under him. Shardina shook her head, however.

“No, I don’t intend to put the royal guards in motion. I’ll have him defend this base with his personal aides. Sadly enough, this is the only way I can possibly conceive Father agreeing with... We can’t afford to lose this war.”

Celia nodded silently, sensing the firm resolve in Shardina’s words. She then bowed, turned on her heel and left the room.

“That’s right... I can’t afford to lose... For Father’s sake, and in the name of my ideals...”

Now alone in her room, Shardina whispered those words to herself one more time, as if to reaffirm her determination. She stared out the window, at the eastern sky.

If one were to establish lasting peace in this war-torn western continent, they would have to become absolute sovereign. Electing to go to war in the name of peace sounded contradictory, but it was the honest ideal held by the Lion Emperor, Lionel Eisenheit, and his daughter Shardina.

As the motives of many crossed and intersected, a battle which would decide the fate of the Kingdom of Xarooda drew closer by the minute. And all the while, the sound of the massive beast of the north’s footsteps echoed in everyone’s ears, as it made its way south...

Chapter 2: A Restless Heart

Hiding in the mountainous terrain along the border, Joshua looked down on the column advancing below the cliff. It followed a trail nestled between two mountains, and looking at it front above, the column of men walking below him looked like a regiment of ants. They were, indeed, not entirely unlike ants — the only difference was their size, perhaps.

Looking down at the transport unit carrying the O'ltormean banner, Joshua brought the cigarette pinched between his fingers to his lips. This unit carried supplies Princess Shardina gathered from across the O'ltormean empire. It was hard to count just how many supplies and men she intended to carry in. O'ltormea was one of the three greatest countries on the western continent, and it was as if this was some kind of attempt to show off their massive national power.

It's just like the reports said... Guess that woman's really running out of patience, eh?

Bringing in this many people and supplies for just one battlefield would be difficult for any country, even if it was as vast and powerful as O'ltormea.

Sure is a hard worker, that princess...

With a crooked smile on his lips, Joshua conjured the image of O'ltormea's first princess, his opponent over the last year, in his mind's eye. Her face, however, was blotted out. Joshua had heard from the rumors that she was apparently a beautiful woman, but this world had nothing in the way of television or photographs. He had no way of knowing what the princess of another country looked like.

For that matter, since he'd obstinately refused to attend any balls sponsored by the royal family since he couldn't stand formal affairs, Joshua wasn't familiar with what his own country's princess looked like.

This lazy man was now being put on a pedestal as a patriotic hero for one

simple, awfully ironic reason. Life had a nasty tendency of not going the way one intends it to.

The only things I need are the finest booze, the finest food, the finest cigarettes, and the finest girls. Just gimme a way to make more money on top of that and I won't ask anyone for anything ever again.

With that modest wish in his heart, Joshua cracked a self-deprecating smile. Most people would be satisfied for the rest of their lives with that much, but Joshua Belares was still, despite appearances, a member of the aristocracy. Compared to the greed of most other nobles, his wish was almost modest in comparison. And indeed, until the day O'ltormea's army marched upon the fields of Notis, Joshua's life was one of idly drowning in the delights of Peripheria's pleasure district.

Being the third son, his chances of inheriting the position of family head were slim. This free life in the embrace of the pleasure district was Joshua's way of living in this world as he wished to without causing trouble for his family. Even in the militaristic society of Xarooda, House Belares produced exceedingly superior warriors. And of course, everyone expected such martial brilliance from the successor to Arios Belares, the man known as the Guardian Deity of Xarooda.

But unfortunately, Arios's blood and talent ran most thickly through the veins of his third son, Joshua. He had the talent to read his opponent's intentions and the tactical mind to use it against them. Had Joshua not played the part of an uncouth, lustful lout, people would have called for him to inherit the family headship. And that would lead to secret feuds with the factions supporting his two older brothers, regardless of whether Joshua himself had wished for it or not.

They're trying to use their superior national power to crush us in one go... That's what they picked in the end. Well, that is a reliable strategy.

His expression seemed somehow indifferent and lacking in vigor. His chin was covered in stubble, as he'd neglected to shave for several days. His hair was unkempt, and the stench of alcohol and cigarettes wafted up from his body. For once, the scent of a prostitute's cheap perfume wasn't on his person, but if he

didn't wear a vest of leather armor that was reinforced with iron fittings here and there, one would assume he was some disgusting pauper from the capital's refugee sector. Indeed, the same uncouth third son everyone loathed.

But contrary to his appearance, his mind was calculating things at high speeds.

They probably caught wind of Helnesgoula's movements and want to strike fast before Helnesgoula can get in their way. Someone finally lit a fire under the princess's pampered butt... Still, we're just as backed against the wall here...

Joshua used thaumaturgy, producing a spark at his fingertip to light the cigarette in his mouth. Breathing in a long, silent puff, he savored the cigarette's aroma. Joshua's mind already realized Xarooda was running out of time, and that O'ltormea's position wasn't all that different either.

Over the past year, Joshua had employed this mountainous terrain and unconventional tactics to hold back the O'ltormean invasion, but he wasn't any closer to finding a solution to the fundamental problem. He was like a doctor, continually providing life-extending treatment to a terminal patient. All he could really do was cling to the faint hope that some as-of-yet unknown miracle drug might appear and heal his patient. And Joshua wasn't optimistic enough to think his 'treatment' would remain effective for much longer.

And now, as he looked down at the row of people walking along the trail beneath the cliff, it seemed like the Grim Reaper was now riding forth on his pale horse to claim the life of that patient. If he couldn't shake off their malicious intent, Xarooda wouldn't live to see tomorrow.

Well, so be it. Whatever happens, I decided to put my life and the fate of this country in the hands of that man and his plot... I only need to play my role here.

The face of the man he had only met and first spoke to several days ago surfaced in Joshua's mind. People often whispered behind Joshua's back, calling him a whelp, but this man was even younger than he was. A commoner of unknown origins who rose to noble status.

With that in mind, perhaps Joshua was mad to have gambled everything on that man's plan so recklessly. Those working alongside Joshua had raised their voices in displeasure at that decision more than once. But Joshua was confident

that Ryoma Mikoshiba's plan would allow him to protect Xarooda.

Joshua thought back to their meeting a few days ago.

That man can probably read other people's hearts... Same as me.

Joshua could easily sniff out the fact that Ryoma was capable of the same thing he was. Joshua called it reading other people's hearts, but what he was reading didn't come across as numbers or letters. Joshua only examined how many times a person breathed every minute, and the stress and sound of their breaths.

Between those and a person's expression, Joshua could accurately assume someone else's pulse. It was by no means some kind of special ability. Most people could guess at another person's emotions without any words exchanged, though the degree of accuracy varied by the individual. Theoretically speaking, the variance mostly lay in whether one could consciously make use of this skill.

But that minute variation made all the difference. By using this ability, Ryoma Mikoshiba was primed to decide the fate of a country. His plan wasn't a particularly novel one on its own. Just about anyone could probably come up with this idea if they put some thought into it. After all, put simply, the Kingdom of Xarooda lacked the power to solve its own problems, so all they had to do was bow their heads to Helnesgoula and ask them for help.

But while thinking of that idea was easy enough, actually implementing it was another matter altogether. Normally, this would simply be an empty theory. But that man showed them a way of putting that theory into practice.

He's an interesting man... Very interesting...

With the image of Ryoma's smile on his mind, Joshua's own lips curled up to a smirk. Joshua was well aware that he loved taking gambles to an unhealthy degree. He'd been through countless dangerous scrapes in Peripheria's pleasure district, risky affairs where one's life was on the line, where blood was spilt and heat jolted through one's body. Joshua loved nothing more than those gambles. Thinking back on those moments, Joshua felt a sweet shiver rush down his spine.

“Alrighty... Should be about now.”

What Joshua was about to do now was a greater gamble than any he had ever taken. A gamble with the continued existence of the three countries sitting at the western continent’s east hanging in the balance.

He threw the cigarette at his feet and stomped it out under his boot. And at that moment, Joshua’s lethargic expression was filled with the ferocity of a beast.

“I swear, ya dump all the work on me just so you can kick back and watch from afar. Talk about livin’ the good life...” A voice spoke to Joshua from behind, its tone voice equal parts teasing and exasperation.

Behind him was a woman with her lips curled up in a lopsided smirk.

“Ya ready?” he asked her.

The crimson-haired woman behind him was a knight who was originally a mercenary. When Ryoma came to the frontlines a few days ago, he left this woman in Joshua’s care. Seeing her red hair blow in the wind, he realized that her moniker, ‘The Crimson Lioness,’ wasn’t for naught. And over the last few days, Joshua came to see that her skill lived up to her reputation, as well.

“Yeah, ready whenever.” Lione nodded confidently.

They had very limited time to prepare, but apparently she’d successfully made her adjustments. Joshua’s men were skilled, but that made it hard for someone else to handle them.

“Right... Good work.”

“Yeah. They’re a bunch of troublesome imps, yer boys,” Lione said with a smile.

Joshua heaved a small sigh. He knew this wasn’t as simple as Lione put it. Their unique upbringing made them quite different from the normal soldiers under his command or the commoner conscripts sent to Joshua by the surrounding nobles. Depending on their ability, the people they lead could become either fearsome soldiers that were unflinching in the face of death, or weaklings that would flee the battlefield altogether.

“My people are all skilled, but they’re fellows with a personality. They won’t listen to a word you say unless they admit you’re stronger.”

And indeed, they stubbornly ignored the instructions of the knights from Peripheria. They were a special army corps put together by the deceased General Belares. They were something of a privateer unit, focused on disturbing the peace and reducing the national power of enemy countries.

With his father’s death, they completely became Joshua’s personal troops. They were originally criminals, bandits and outlaws that caused trouble within Xarooda’s borders. General Belares was both a skilled knight and a skilled strategist, and adhered staunchly to a knight’s fighting style. But he did realize that eventually, they would buckle under O’ltormea’s superior national power.

The size of their country, their economy, their manpower — they exceeded Xarooda in every imaginable factor. As militaristic as the Kingdom of Xarooda may have been and as skilled as their knights were, numbers were what decided wars.

To top it all off, Xarooda itself wasn’t a monolithic country. Its territory was demarcated by mountains and forests. While there were kings and governors across Xarooda’s history, there was never a despot. O’ltormea was unified under a single emperor’s will, while Xarooda’s king couldn’t make any critical decisions without consulting with the nobility. Even a child could tell which side held the advantage.

And so, General Belares took measures to cover the gap between O’ltormea’s national power and Xarooda’s. And some of those measures meant straying away from the path of chivalry. One such method was employing this privateer unit to disturb the peace within O’ltormea.

To do it, General Belares pardoned the bandit leaders’ death sentences, and sent them to stir up trouble within O’ltormea’s territory in exchange.

These were men that led lives that were even rougher than a mercenary’s or an adventurer’s. The fact that they obeyed Lione without much complaint was proof of her abilities. But at hearing Joshua’s words, Lione simply narrowed her golden eyes and laughed.

“They ain’t that bad. They’re a bit rambunctious, that much I’ll grant ya, but

it’s nothing a little kick in the ass can’t fix. Cute is what they are.”

And Lione wasn’t lying. Breaking in Joshua’s subordinates wasn’t a difficult task for her. She didn’t lead the Crimson Lion group as a woman with just appearances and whimsical behavior.

Yeah, I can see what he meant... This woman’s useful. And she trusts him.

Ryoma wasn’t present for what was about to come. He was heading to Helnesgoula, to meet with the Vixen of the North in an encounter that might decide the fate of the three countries of the east. He entrusted the task of stalling O’ltormea’s invasion of Xarooda for as long as they could to Joshua’s and Lione’s hands.

Most people would think they’re being treated as a disposable pawn and panic.

But Joshua didn’t see so much as a hint of anxiety on Lione’s expression. There was no shaky loyalty or sense of duty between them. This was proof that there was true trust between the two of them.

“By the way... Is that his idea of a parting gift?” Joshua asked, looking at the wooden crates being carried over one after another behind them.

“Oh, that. The twins bought those at Peripheria,” Lione said, signaling with her hand for one of the soldiers working behind them to approach.

“Oh, I see... Ceramic vases full of fish oil, with fabrics stuffed in to serve as corks...”

The ceramic vases were overall poorly made. There wasn’t any overglaze applied to them, and their shapes and sizes weren’t uniform. They were quite crude — likely the result of an apprentice practicing in the workshop. These were low-quality vases, and Joshua doubted anyone in his house — no, not even the servants working his family’s estate — would use such low-quality pottery.

But for this particular usage, the quality of the pottery they used mattered little. The size wasn’t a major concern, and so long as the oil inside them didn’t leak out their shape didn’t matter either.

I'd bet the ceramic workshops in Peripheria were happy to have someone buy all this useless stock off of them...

Joshua picked up one vase that was small enough to fit in his hand. Confirming its weight a few times, Joshua nodded at Lione.

"Just gotta light the cloth and dump it... It's a good idea."

"Yeah. It's easy to carry, and the moment you throw it to the ground, the oil inside splashes around," Lione said, puffing out her chest. "It's hard to throw it as far as a fire arrow, but it's perfect for times like this, when we're attacking from above."

Truth be told, the idea of stuffing oil in these bottles and throwing them wasn't a particularly good method of attack. Their range was far shorter than a fire arrow's, and the containers were consumables that couldn't be saved for future use. They could get enough of them this time, but they couldn't necessarily get a steady supply of them in the future if need be. The amount of oil wasted on crafting these was considerable, too.

But on the other hand, this method did offer a burning speed that far exceeded that of a fire arrow. This was a far more efficient method of burning down the enemy unit in this particular situation. It was a method used in siege battles — pouring boiling oil down the walls to kill the enemy, but this time it was developed to be even more efficient.

"That's a pretty interesting idea, that... Did that guy come up with it?" Joshua asked.

"Yeah, 'twas made with the boy's instructions. Pretty convenient," Lione replied with a large smile.

It was an innocent smile, as if Joshua had just complimented someone from her family. She likely saw Ryoma as a troublesome younger brother.

"I see... So his accomplishments are the real thing." Joshua couldn't help but crack a wry smile at having her show off this much trust in Ryoma.

He then turned his eyes to the row of people moving beneath them. They were halfway through the passage. They were out of time for idle chatter.

“So we’re ready, yeah? Begin.” Joshua nodded at Lione, judging the time was right.

“Alrighty. Roger that.” Lione obeyed, holding her hand hand up for those behind them to see.

†

“All right, you hear?!” one man on horseback called out. “There’s no telling where the enemy might strike from next. Tell our scouts to keep a careful eye on our surroundings.”

A runner sprinted ahead to relay the message at once.

“Aren’t we being too cautious here?” the vice commander asked.

“No... I think we’re as careful as we ought to be.” The other man shook his head.

While some part of him did think he was being overly cautious, he also knew many other officers had been killed by Joshua Belares’s surprise attacks. He had no intention of falling to the same trap as his predecessors. And even more importantly, this transport mission was one duty they couldn’t afford to fail.

“Her Highness was very clear with her orders. Or are you trying to make sure I fail this mission?”

This officer was the sixth son, and an illegitimate child at that, to a viscount family. He’d been given a noble’s strict education, but wasn’t in any position to inherit the headship of his house. And so, he chose to become a knight.

Thankfully, his pedigree seemed to have afforded him some talent. But upon entering the military, he wasn’t ordered to take up a position on the front lines. This wasn’t the result of unkind treatment. In a manner of speaking, it was even a very good position to receive. This man was more adept at handling numbers and negotiations than at commanding people, and his talents were a boon for O’ltormea in their own way.

He went on to become a leading figure in O’ltormea’s supply department. Handling supplies meant facing off against the sly merchants in a true battle of words. The amount of supplies an army consumes is massive, after all, and all

the more so during wartime. Depending on the contract being signed, sums of money large enough to construct a fortress or two could change hands. It was, for all intents and purposes, a battle without weapons.

And this man gained victory after victory in this theater. As a result of his successes, he'd climbed up the ranks, becoming the head of Fort Notis's supply division. Still, given his training as a knight, it wasn't unnatural for him to wish to gather merit on a true battlefield. And so, this mission was a special one for this man.

"Surely you jest..." His lieutenant shook his head hurriedly at his superior's provocative words.

The man was indeed joking, of course. But giving a wrong answer to that joke could bring down retribution on this lieutenant. A difference in classes is fundamentally absolute in this world, after all. He'd be lucky to get away with a demotion. At worst, his family's heads might fly in the most literal sense.

Of course, his superior wouldn't do anything that unreasonable for no reason. But that is only to say that he *wouldn't* — not that he *couldn't*.

"Then be quiet and do as you're told... The scale and importance of this mission go beyond anything we've done before... You understand this, don't you?"

At Shardina's orders, a large number of soldiers and a mountain of supplies were gathered from around O'ltormea and sent to Fort Notis. But it didn't matter how many supplies one stored in their depot if they couldn't be carried to the frontlines.

The lieutenant nodded wordlessly at the man's question. Their mission could very well decide the battle to come. But that sense of duty and resolve would crumble all too quickly and all too easily...

†

"We're starting! Are you ready?!"

Over two hundred soldiers nodded at Lione's exclamation and began chanting as one.

“““Our Mother Earth, extend thy sturdy arms to guard thy children from misfortune! Stone Wall!”””

Large walls of what could only be described as crags rose up from the ground. But that was only a mere wall. There were plenty of other ways one could use verbal thaumaturgy to kill a man, and so this spell’s usefulness on the battlefield was at best reserved to offering cover from arrows.

Or at least, so everyone believed until that day...

“Push them off!” Lione issued another order.

“Ooooh! Push it! Heave, ho!”

The soldiers abided by her orders and threw their weight against the walls.

“Put more strength into it!”

“What, was all the food you mooches sucked up for nothing?! C’mon, you can push harder than that!”

Walls weighing several tons were gradually pushed forward. With this weight, even they, with their muscle strength reinforced by martial thaumaturgy, couldn’t easily push it. Their faces turned red as they worked in squads of several people. Their muscles bulged and the blood pumped intensely through their veins. And eventually, their efforts were given a fair assessment.

“Keep going and drop it down the cliff!”

“““Ooooooh!”””

With one final push, the soldiers used the last of their power to push the stone walls over the cliff’s edge, where they plummeted a hundred meters down, flattening the O’ltormean forces below...

†

“What was that noise?!” The man looked around, hearing a rumbling sound ring out from above him.

“Th-Those are rocks, sir! There are rocks falling down on us from the cliffs!”

At that moment, the commander felt all the blood drain from his face at once. He turned his gaze in the direction his lieutenant pointed at, seeing massive

crag slabs tumbled down the cliff one after the other.

Since the slabs weren't circular, they crashed against each other and fell at a disorderly pace, changing their trajectory as they plummeted down. That made it harder to predict where they'd crash, and therefore harder to avoid them. To top it all off, they kicked up a large amount of sediment on their way down.

"Kuh, a Xaroodian ambush...! What are our scouts doing?! I'll have them beheaded once they get back!" the commander cussed at the incompetence of his scouts.

That said, the man would never act out those intentions. The scouts he sent were already reduced to lifeless corpses at Joshua's hands.

"We can handle that later, sir! We have to run!" the lieutenant said, guarding the commander's body from the sediment kicked up by the rolling crags.

His attempt was for naught, though. They had no way of escaping this.

What do we do? What can we do to get out of this alive?

The leading pack was already completely out of sight behind the sediment and rocks. It was hard to tell if they were all right, but regardless, if this was an attack by Xarooda, their fate was likely already sealed.

In which case, the man had to prioritize defending another, relatively safe supply unit.

"Fall back! All forces, fall back!" The commander shouted as hard as he could, as if trying to tear his throat out.

As a decision made in the heat of the moment, it wasn't a bad choice to make. But his orders wouldn't be fulfilled.

"We can't, sir. We can't turn back on a road this narrow!" the lieutenant said, denying the possibility.

Their ranks filled the narrow trail entirely, and while they could move forward without any problems, turning around would be impossible... But the worst was yet to come. Countless bottles were thrown down the cliff one after another. Small ceramic containers, their mouths stuffed with burning cloths.

"F-Fire! Fiiiiiiire!" A dying cry left one soldier's mouth.

The bottles crashed against the ground and shattered, splashing their surroundings with liquid.

“That smell... This is fish oil!” The lieutenant went pale upon recognizing the distinct stench.

Fish oil was more flammable than one might imagine. People in the Edo Period often used cheap fish oil to light paper lanterns. Lione placed precisely that kind of oil in the ceramic jars and bottles to create impromptu Molotov cocktails.

Several months ago, Ryoma ordered Sakuya to burn down the pirate stronghold on the Wortenia Peninsula, and she, along with her ninjas, used this method to do so. The fact that the bottles had to be thrown by hand meant that while they were inferior to fire arrows in terms of range, they were easier to carry and made their fire spread out that much further. They were also easier to gather compared to bows and arrows, and required no training to properly use.

And in situations like this one where they were dropped from atop a cliff, their lack of range wasn’t an issue whatsoever. The higher they’re dropped from, the stronger the shockwave they produced and the more the oil within them would scatter.

Joshua nodded in satisfaction as he watched the pandemonium beginning to unfold beneath the cliff.

“All right, time to finish them off,” he said.

“Ya got it. We’re at a disadvantage as it is, so we’ll need to cut down their numbers as much as possible for when the plan falls apart,” Lione replied with a ferocious grin and turned to the figure behind her. “Ya were listenin’, yeah? Sorry, but we’ll need you to move out, too.”

The figure, which was covered in a robe and hood, nodded lightly.

“Yes, that man told me to help you. Allow me to display my power as the daughter of the Mad Demon Nelcius.”

The figure was that of a woman, her fair voice as clear as the ringing of a bell. A fascinating, mesmerizing voice that melted the hearts of men. Joshua, who seemingly didn’t know who this woman was, regarded her with surprise. Ryoma

told him she was a practiced warrior, but the alluring quality of her voice came across as a surprise.

“Right... Looking forward to it then, Dilphina.” Lione simply nodded curtly at her words.

“Leave the matter to me... And watch. I shall bring you the head of their commander before long.” With that said, Dilphina sprinted toward the cliff.

And the next moment, she elegantly soared through the air, entrusting her body to gravity, which pulled her down a distance of 100 meters.

“Is that... the second secret measure he left behind?” Joshua asked Lione, as he watched Dilphina’s form grow smaller and more distant as it approached the ground.

He’d accepted Ryoma’s demand to not ask questions, so Joshua didn’t intend to inquire too deeply about that woman, but curiosity got the better of him.

“Yeah, I suppose ya could say that.” Lione nodded.

Lione herself didn’t quite know what Dilphina was capable of. All she knew was that among the demi-humans living in Wortenia, she was apparently an exceptionally experienced warrior.

“That’s a pretty unreliable answer,” Joshua said with displeasure in his voice.

“Sorry, but it’s the only answer I’ve got for ya,” Lione shrugged. “All I can really say for now is let’s just see how this plays out... But the boy did say our chances of winning here are good.”

Lione had seen plenty of warriors and knights who were praised as one-man armies die all too easily on the field of battle. One’s individual strength was important, yes, but Lione knew this wasn’t enough to survive on the battlefield.

Even so, Lione didn’t plan for a situation where Dilphina might die. Martial thaumaturgy used the body to produce superhuman strength. Verbal thaumaturgy manipulated the power of gods or spirits by offering up one’s own prana. Endowed thaumaturgy granted assorted powers and effects to tools by placing a curse mark onto them. Those were the three types of thaumaturgy passed down in this world.

But the elves had long been said to possess unrivaled techniques in the field of endowed thaumaturgy. Ritual objects of elven production found their way to the market every now and then, but their price was always ten times that of similar tools produced by human hands. Depending on the object, the price could be even a hundred times the price of a human product.

But that said, few people had seen these ritual objects put to use on the battlefield.

Well, I guess this is a good chance to see if the rumors about their endowed thaumaturgy are real...

They were confirming the legitimacy of the techniques used by the elves of the Wortenia Peninsula. Their skills had the potential to change Ryoma's future plans. And so Lione kept her gaze fixed on Dilphina's shrinking form. Carefully, so as to not miss a single detail...

As gravity tugged her body ever closer to the ground, Dilphina took a deep breath and then exhaled. It was very similar to the kind of deep breathing one often saw in yoga meditation. As she took a few breaths, she felt her senses swiftly become more acute.

The serpent of energy coiled in her perineum — her prana — reared its head, rapidly awakening and coursing through Dilphina's body. It quickly reached her fourth chakra, the Anahata chakra, forcing it into operation.

"Awaken." One short word escaped Dilphina's lips.

It was far too short to be an incantation for a spell, and yet its effects were immediate and extreme. The black leather armor Dilphina wore under her robe abided by that single word, as did a short spear she held in her right hand. What looked like a hieroglyph lit up on the head's surface and the armor, forming a luminescent pattern.

At that moment, Dilphina's body was freed from gravity's pull. Dilphina landed gently on the ground.

"The creed activated perfectly, I see," Dilphina said, looking around.

"Who the hell are you?!"

“An enemy?!”

A few dozen O’ltormean soldiers who worked on putting out the flames noticed her descent from above and turned their spears toward her. Of course, they were only soldiers of a supply unit working in the rear. While O’ltormea’s soldiers were generally well-trained, these soldiers weren’t nearly as skilled or organized as the elites fighting on the frontlines.

It’s a pity that man isn’t here to see this with his own eyes... But it’s a good chance to make a show of our power.

They would either go to war, or cooperate with one another. Since Ryoma Mikoshiba refused to take a stance of non-interference, there were only two ways their interactions with him could go. But if they went to war, even if Dilphina’s side were to defeat Ryoma, their fates would be sealed. Mankind would bring their great numbers to bear on the elves and stomp them out.

As such, the elves had no choice but to choose cooperation with Ryoma, however begrudgingly. And if they were to do it, they wanted that relationship to benefit their race as much as possible.

“Now then... Let us begin.”

Dilphina casually swung her short spear. The spear let out a savage howl, kicking up a violent gale of wind that beat against the O’ltormean soldiers’ faces. At that moment, the soldiers reflexively saw the figure before them as violence incarnate.

“M-Monster...” One of the soldiers muttered with a mix of terror and sorrow.

Hearing that word, Dilphina smiled gently under her hood.

“Yes, that’s right... I am a monster. A demon that shall feast upon your lives.”

The next moment, countless flowers bloomed across the battlefield — as red petals of blood scattered across the earth...

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On that day, Joshua Belares led a raid on the O’ltormean military that resulted in great losses for the empire. The speed of O’ltormea’s invasion deteriorated even further as a result. This bought Ryoma a good deal of precious time.

A certain group was heading northwest along a highway cutting through a forested area near Xarooda's northern border. This wasn't a very active trade route, though. Had it not been for this region's main products, no merchant would ever cross this road. Especially now that Helnesgoula's movements were unclear, the only ones to pass through here were the local peasants.

Thanks to that, they could let their horses gallop as fast as they wanted and weren't met with any kind of incident. After all, the sound of the hooves traveled far, and anyone could notice the approaching cloud of dust and move to the sides of the road.

The group was clad in shabby, dirty clothes. They had likely strayed out of the highway, which was protected by a monster-repelling barrier, in order to cut down the duration of their journey. The cloaks they wore to protect themselves from the cold were torn, as if by the claws of monsters.

A stench rose from their bodies, a testament to the fact they hadn't bathed in days. They likely slept outdoors instead of staying at an inn. Had they not been on horseback and armed, they might have looked like commoners fleeing from the war. The 20 people that made up this group were all clearly fatigued by the journey.

"Captain, it's in sight!" one young knight who was riding ahead turned around and called at the top of his lungs.

It was land occupied by Helnesgoula — a country which they didn't know if they could call friend or foe yet. As such, the vanguard of the caravan also doubled as scouts. The knight's voice was thick with relief at being freed from this duty at long last.

At the words of that knight from the Monarch's Guard, who was known for being especially hawk-eyed, everyone's eyes turned to the small hill ahead of them.

"The citadel city of the north, Memphis..." Orson Greed, who rode alongside Ryoma, pointed ahead.

Ryoma looked in that direction, where he saw a small back dot which grew gradually larger and clearer as his horse moved along the road. Eventually, a city covered by multiple layers of walls came into view. Atop the ramparts

flapped the flag of the Kingdom of Helnesgoula.

“Aah, finally...” Ryoma said, fixing his eyes on the walls while retaining his horse’s current pace. “It’s taken us four days, but we’re finally there...”

The Malfist sisters, who rode parallel to Ryoma, heard him whisper. His words were mixed with annoyance and anxiety.

“I would think this is faster than it would usually take us...” Laura said. “We had to ride day and night while keeping our horses strengthened using thaumaturgy to do it. The fact that we changed horses in the towns along the way also made things go that much faster. We didn’t have to waste time on letting our horses rest.”

Sara nodded wordlessly in agreement. Endowed thaumaturgy was applied to the horses’ saddles and hooves, which allowed the rider to share their prana with the horse, granting it increased speed as well as recovering their stamina little by little. This allowed them to maintain a higher speed than usual horseback riding would allow for a longer period of time.

They rode their horses as fast as possible, and upon reaching a town, Greed would use his position as captain of the Monarch’s Guard to arrange for the town’s garrison to exchange their horses. This shortened their journey even more, and was likely the fastest method of transportation in this world.

This was the result of their best efforts. This method required using thaumaturgy while on horseback and being able to exchange horses. These were very particular conditions, and in that regard, they were fortunate to be able to have matters align the way they did.

But Ryoma was still displeased.

“Guess that’s how it’ll have to be...” Ryoma whispered in annoyance and kept his gaze fixed forward.

“Are you dissatisfied, Master Ryoma?” Sara asked with concern.

Ryoma silently shook his head and raised his horse’s speed.

Well yeah, I am... Telling them that wouldn’t help, though...

Ryoma was used to airplanes and automobiles, and so riding on horseback

was lacking in both comfort and speed by comparison. He couldn't help but feel dissatisfied by it, especially in situations like this one, where every minute and every second counted.

But Ryoma understood that expecting anything resembling a car in this world was asking for the impossible. There was the extremely unlikely scenario of a summoner calling forth someone who was in a car and brought it along with him. But practically speaking, using a car here would be utter nonsense.

After all, there weren't any mechanics to perform maintenance work on it, and if it suffered any type of malfunction — especially a flat tire — there would be no spare parts to fix it. And then there was the even more fundamental problem that Ryoma couldn't see himself obtaining a constant supply of gasoline.

The idea completely fell apart the moment someone put any kind of thought into it. Those were problems one didn't need to consider when living in Ryoma's world, but in this world everything was different.

What's more, even if all those conditions were to be satisfied, the condition of the roads in this world didn't allow for a vehicle to run properly to begin with. Perhaps near a city it would be more possible, but the highways were mostly made up of soil. If there were to be any rain, the ground could turn muddy, which could get the car stuck. Unless it was a military jeep, driving an automobile in this world would be difficult.

This was a good example of how a technology being extremely optimized in a certain field makes it harder to effectively utilize a tool.

That said, developing the sciences here would be hard... Not impossible, but it would take a great deal of manpower, time, and money to do it.

Ryoma had studied science in the 10 years he'd spent from elementary to high school. He knew some chemical formulae, and he could probably produce chemical reactions using certain chemicals. But that was only within the boundaries of schoolwork, and he could only mix together materials that were prepared ahead of time.

It wasn't unlike cooking. When making a carbonara, any amateur could make something decent given the materials and a recipe. The Japanese were

especially fond of that kind of pasta, as well as others. But while one might be familiar with pasta, not many people could make it from flour. Most people would be hard-pressed to use raw ingredients to make something halfway decent, at worst giving up halfway through.

Science was similar to that, except it was even more complicated and dangerous. Failing to cook a dish would just end with a frown as one throws away the results. Failing in science could put one's life at risk.

In that case, using thaumaturgy which is far more developed in this world is a much more realistic choice, but...

Thaumaturgy was convenient and had broad applications, but it wasn't without its flaws. Endowed thaumaturgy in particular felt rather generic and limited in what it could do. To begin with, there were few thaumaturgists capable of branding objects with curse seals. It stood to reason that objects enchanted with endowed thaumaturgy sold for so much.

On top of that, most of the few people who were capable of placing curse seals made their living by creating enslavement equipment meant to bind slaves. They had little interest in developing the field, and new ways of applying endowed thaumaturgy simply weren't being discovered.

Ryoma elected to stop thinking about it at that point. The technological aspects of this world were a topic worth deliberating over, but right now he needed to tackle the issue at hand.

We did the best we could so far... But will this be enough? Will we make it in time?

Would they make it in time or not? Everything depended on that. This was why Ryoma took every effort to cross this land as quickly as possible. No matter how much one empowered a horse, it was still a living being. It gradually grew fatigued, and there were limits to how fast it could go. This was why they changed horses along the way.

To maximize their speed, Ryoma and his group minded the clothes they wore on the journey, so as to not further burden their steeds. Xaroodian knights often wore full plate armor, but this time they were clad in the kind of leather armor mercenaries typically used. Had it not been for the Xaroodian coat of

arms, a sword held before a shield, woven into their cloaks, one would be hard-pressed to recognize them as knights.

For armaments, each carried a single sword, sheathed at their waists. They had no spears or spare weapons. Besides that, they each had a canteen of water and a leather sack with beef jerky as their preserved rations attached to their saddles. In this world, this was the lightest one could travel. In fact, it bordered on recklessness. Even if they resupplied in the towns along the highway, unlike in Ryoma's world, there was no telling what might happen in this world's environment. Ryoma would never travel this light under ordinary conditions.

But despite being well aware of the dangers involved, they still embarked on what bordered on being a gamble because they knew that these deciding moments were their last chance. Now, when Helnesgoula's army was beginning to augment its numbers...

O'ltormea's army is too large. If we clash with them now, the fighting would only last a few days, and that's even with our side having the locational advantage...

The spies Joshua sent into the empire risked their lives to deliver the news of the upcoming large-scale offensive to him. Ryoma had to succeed in the negotiations to come, or their efforts will have been for naught.

With Lione and Joshua Belares leading the battle at the mountain pass, we should definitely be able to crush the supply line. But...

Ryoma could imagine the worst case scenario, and he clicked his tongue despite himself. He could envision an inferno of bloodshed and smoldering flames. O'ltormean soldiers washed over the battlefield like tidal waves with superior numbers, overwhelming the Kingdom of Xarooda and destroying everything in their wake.

Talk about fighting with our backs against the wall...

Ryoma was confident that his plan was the best, most ideal chance the Kingdom of Xarooda had at the moment. But it was still a literal gamble. It was very much like treading a tightrope, and only should everything fall into place perfectly would all his actions come together to form a meaningful whole.

Ryoma hadn’t made such blatant, reckless gambles since he escaped O’ltormea after killing Gaius, except when he made the bridgehead on the river Thebes. And even as slim as his chances seemed back then, they were still more favorable than his chances now.

But he knew he had no other choice, so he had to tread down this path while knowing how dangerous it was.

I’m wavering here... But doing that after the dice have been cast isn’t like me.

Two faces surfaced in Ryoma’s mind. The first was of his confidante, Lione. He had perfect trust in her, and that was why he left matters in her hands. He trusted her no less than he trusted Laura and Sara, who were always at his side.

The other was someone he’d only known for a short amount of time, Joshua. But Ryoma recognized that Joshua carried a scent similar to his own. And given his achievements so far, there could be no doubting he was a commander few could rival on this western continent. That was why, despite giving him one of his aces, Ryoma could send him on what was very much a suicide mission without doubting he would return.

Here’s to hoping that Helnesgoula’s queen is even half the cunning, capable person the rumors make her out to be...

They had a chance of winning, of course. But that was only a possibility, and not absolute fact. Ryoma bit his lip hard as he glared at the Helnesgoulian banner flapping ahead of him...

Chapter 3: The Vixen of the North

Ryoma and Orson Greed were guided toward a room, and were now standing before its door, where a man greeted them with a grin. But Ryoma could tell that behind that smile, his eyes were alight with fierce will.

“So you are Lord Ryoma Mikoshiba and Sir Orson Greed... I’ve heard you were messengers from Xarooda...” The man eyed Ryoma appraisingly. “You’re quite young. You must be quite capable, to have been entrusted with the will of a country.”

Despite their sudden visit, his expression didn’t betray a hint of displeasure.

“The long journey must have been quite exhausting. Why don’t you come in and have some tea and sweets?”

With that said, the man motioned for Ryoma and Orson to enter the guest room and take a seat on a sofa, as if to say this was all planned ahead of time.

They really did predict our arrival... Well, if they couldn’t do that, there’d be no point in us dealing with them to begin with, Ryoma whispered to himself upon seeing the man’s expression.

As soon as they introduced themselves at the castle gates, they were ushered in without being asked to show any proof of their identity, and then led to this room. That alone made it clear that Helnesgoula’s people were keeping an eye on Ryoma, or at least gathering information on his actions.

Even with their cloaks embroidered with the Xaroodian royal house’s coat of arms, they were still allowed inside. Anyone could probably prepare cloaks like these without much trouble, so they could not have counted as indisputable evidence of their allegiance...

“My apologies for not introducing myself first... I am Arnold Grisson. My rank is that of a general of Helnesgoula’s military, and my position is supreme commander of the eastern front.”

Arnold Grisson was a thin man with a pale face. He looked to be in his late

thirties, and while he was roughly 180 centimeters tall, his body couldn't be called muscular. Looking at the back of his hand, Ryoma noticed it was frail, which implied the man wasn't quite healthy.

His blond hair was parted down the middle, but despite his youth there were already a few white strands here and there. Perhaps a result of stress and concern, Ryoma reckoned. He wore a pair of silver-rimmed glasses, and overall his appearance didn't give the impression that Arnold Grisson was a man of war. If he were to introduce himself as a merchant or a scholar, Ryoma would find it easier to believe.

But his eyes alone told a completely different story. Sharp, blue eyes that seemed to pierce into others, like an eagle's.

"We sincerely apologize for the sudden visit, Sir Grisson," Ryoma bowed politely after taking a seat. "The Kingdom of Xarooda is currently under threat of ruin, so we ask that you pardon us for coming without notice. I am Ryoma Mikoshiba. Sitting beside me is the captain of Xarooda's Monarch's Guard, Sir Orson Greed."

"Oh..." Grisson remarked, gazing at Ryoma's face calmly. "For one so young, you do abide by etiquette. I've heard you were originally of commoner status, but you've grown accustomed to your position, I see."

Grisson then took off his glasses and wiped the lenses clean. His remark didn't carry any malicious nuance to it. It seemed his opinion of Ryoma was positive, in fact.

I wonder if that's how he really feels, though... Ryoma pondered suspiciously.

Ryoma knew that in this world, believing what people said at face value was exceedingly dangerous. That was all the more true when the person in question was a noble. So while this man's attitude seemed quite amicable, Ryoma knew he could very well be hiding his true intentions. Perhaps he looked down on Ryoma with disdain, just like Xarooda's nobles did.

Ryoma had seen time and again that the influential people in this world had a tendency to be impulsive. They believed themselves privileged and protected by this world's class system, and so they felt no need to regulate the way they addressed others.

Nobles were, for the most part, haughty, cold-hearted, cruel monsters.

But even that reality had its exceptions. But apparent exceptions could present a friendly exterior as a way of cloaking their lethal, venomous fangs. Regardless of Arnold Grisson's true intentions, Ryoma couldn't afford to relax right now. The negotiations were still ahead of him.

I'll need to be especially careful of him...

Ryoma steeled himself in case some unexpected opponent might try to strike out at him. Of course, he knew better than to let it show. He, too, was capable of hiding his heart and faking a smile.

First, I'll need to seize control of the conversation and see what his attitude is like.

And to do just that, Ryoma cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"My apologies, but we're quite pressed for time, so I'll need to get straight to the point of our visit here."

Making one's intent so clear wasn't conventional in negotiations, but put conversely, that alone is precisely why it would catch the other side by surprise. And a surprised person could accidentally reveal their own true intentions.

But this negotiation wasn't the kind of place where such a childish trick could work.

"Very well. I, myself, do not have the time for leisurely chatter." Grisson shrugged, prompting Ryoma to go ahead.

"Our business here is quite simple. We ask that the Kingdom of Helnesgoula assist us, as we are currently in a position of inferiority in our war with O'ltormea," Ryoma said.

Grisson raised an eyebrow shrewdly, his expression seemingly somewhat surprised. The cold smile on his lips, though, reflected his true feelings.

"Hoh. You ask for our assistance, you say..." General Grisson whispered.

"Yes... Please." Ryoma nodded curtly.

The two glared at each from across the table for a moment, a silence settling

over them. It was as if they were trying to discern each other's intentions. But then, Grisson abruptly parted his lips.

"Yes, I suppose that given Xarooda's current predicament, you wouldn't come here for any other business..." Grisson cut off there, his lips curling into a sneer. "But you *are* persistent. This is like being pestered by a beggar in the slums."

His voice was serene and collected, but the disdain contained in his words was intense. Even if his country was great enough to be called the Beast of the North, speaking like that to another country's diplomatic envoy was unacceptable.

Those words were a powerful blow — the kind one would only deliver when prepared to go to war.

And that was why those words were likely a summation of his true intent. No... Not just his. It was likely the true intent of Helnesgoula's leadership.

"How dare you!" Greed shouted in outrage.

True, it was his side that came asking for help, and Greed knew full well that since he came as Xarooda's representative, his words and actions had implications on the entire kingdom. But even still, he couldn't tolerate Grisson's insult.

But as Greed rose to his feet in anger, Ryoma raised a hand to stop him. He then turned his eyes to Grisson, as if nothing had happened. If Ryoma was right about Helnesgoula's intentions, their lack of patience and use of such language was understandable.

To begin with, Xarooda was in a position where it was asking Helnesgoula for assistance. If such a cheap provocation was enough to stir up their anger, they wouldn't be able to act properly when the need called for it.

And besides, he's probably testing our character and motives.

Intentionally angering the other side to gauge their reaction was a tactic Ryoma used often. And so he knew that succumbing to anger and expressing their indignation here would be a poor move. Grisson would only take advantage of them that way.

“I’m sure it feels that way, after all this time...” Ryoma said, as if nothing was wrong.

Grisson pleasantly raised an eyebrow. It seemed he sensed something in the smooth way Ryoma sidestepped his insult.

“It’s been the better part of a year since we’ve occupied Memphis. You’ve sent us many messengers, asking that we come to Xarooda’s aid. I think that alone should tell you all you need to know of our policy on the matter.”

“Yes, I understand that much. From your perspective, having O’ltormea occupy Xarooda first would be convenient. Stabilizing the territory after the country falls would take them time, and that’s when you plan to strike... Right?”

General Grisson laughed heartily, with an expression far darker than anything he’d shown so far. It was the laughter of a carnivore, licking his lips expectantly at the sight of prey.

“I see you’ve guessed at our intentions, Lord Mikoshiba... You’re as shrewd as the rumors say. Hmm, it wasn’t for nothing that you rose up to noble status from your humble origins at such a young age. Your grasp on the situation is impressive.”

Grisson then cut off his words, and raised the teacup on the table to his lips before continuing.

“You’re quite right. We have no interest in Xarooda’s survival. Given the situation, the most Xarooda can offer us is a cession of their territory, but that’s not enough to tip the scales into balance... At least not when all-out war with O’ltormea is on the other side, hmm?”

The moment those words reached his ears, all the color drained from Greed’s face. That was the worst thing he could have heard. But in contrast to Greed, Ryoma calmly and carefully repeated Grisson’s words in his mind.

It’s just like I thought... In that case...

General Grisson’s words had truth to them. Helnesgoula had no reason to save Xarooda, at least not to the extent where they’d willingly lock blades with O’ltormea. Rather than accept half-baked terms like cession of some territory, it’d be that much easier for them to let O’ltormea occupy the country, and then

reoccupy it under the banner of ‘liberation.’

Of course, it would take the right timing to do so. It would only work before O’ltormea’s occupation regime established itself, when hatred and unrest festered in the hearts of Xarooda’s commoners.

So long as the Xaroodian citizens living in the territories weren’t all slaughtered or forced to migrate elsewhere, a new ruler would always be forced to contend with the possibility of revolt. This was why Helnesgoula showed no movements in the year that passed since they occupied the border town, Memphis.

But Ryoma could tell Grisson hadn’t divulged the full depth of their plans.

“Of course not.”

Ryoma affirmed Grisson’s statement without changing his expression whatsoever. This made Grisson’s expression change. His eyes filled with confusion and suspicion. Ryoma’s attitude and words were incoherent and contradictory. At least, that was the only way Grisson could interpret them.

“This is peculiar...” Grisson cocked his head. “It seems you’ve read the situation ahead of time... But if you understand our goals, you must realize we don’t intend to send reinforcements to Xarooda. In which case, what did you come here for?”

Grisson couldn’t fathom why a man who understood Helnesgoula’s intentions so well would come to them in the middle of a war.

“To ask for your help, of course,” Ryoma said.

“I see. So I’m to interpret this as your way of saying that you’re prepared?” Grisson directed a questioning glance at Ryoma.

“If by prepared, you mean that we’re willing to become a vassal state of yours, Sir Grisson, I’m afraid to inform you that you’re wrong.” Ryoma simply shrugged at him.

At the sounds of those words, Grisson’s face contorted for the first time. His features were full of anger, disdain, and mockery. This was by no means a surprising reaction. If anything, given the flow of the conversation, the fact that

Grisson didn’t fly into a rage was nothing short of a fortunate coincidence.

“I see now that you’ve come here to make a mockery of us...” Grisson rose from his seat, as if to bring the conversation to an end. “And while it was a pleasant exchange, to be sure, I do think drawing it out any longer would be a waste of time. I apologize, since you’ve come from afar, but I must ask that you leave.”

“What?! Wait!” Greed, who had simply watched over the exchange so far, couldn’t help but raise his voice.

He’d been briefed ahead of time, but Ryoma was entrusted with handling the negotiations. Greed knew he wasn’t suited for these kinds of matters, and so he sat quietly and watched over the talks. But the negotiations were on the verge of falling apart. Greed couldn’t help but say something.

“Is there anything else to speak of? I fail to see how you two are any different from any other messenger you’ve sent to us this year,” Grisson said bitterly.

His voice was as cold as a blade of ice, meant to cut down the other party. Faced with that frozen anger, Greed couldn’t say anything more. But Ryoma, by contrast, hadn’t changed his expression one bit.

“This farce is over. Leave,” Grisson said, directing a dagger-like gaze at Ryoma.

That was an absolute order. Despite the fact this young man seemed too thin to be a warrior, Grisson was a general in charge of Helnesgoula’s eastern front. Any ordinary man would be forced to obey.

Ryoma’s expression, however, did not change.

This is where I do or die...

Ryoma took a deep breath to calm himself, and used the final ace he’d prepared for this situation.

“I see... In that case, I’d have you let me speak to Helnesgoula’s ruler, Her Majesty Queen Grindiana. Right here, right now.”

The moment those words left Ryoma’s lips, the air in the room froze over. Grisson and Ryoma glared at each other from across the table. Ten seconds passed, then 20... A mechanical clock resting on one of the room’s fixtures

alone counted the passage of time, with its ticking feeling much louder than it should have been. The oppressive atmosphere made time slow to an interminable crawl.

What did he just say...?! Grisson repeated Ryoma's words in his heart as a shiver ran down his spine.

The queen of Helnesgoula, Grindiana Helnecharles, was currently nowhere near this frontline city of Memphis. She was in Dreisen, the kingdom's capital. That was the one and only truth the young man standing before him should have known.

Most of Helnesgoula's own citizens should have known that much, too. And so, what the boy gazing directly at him had just said should have been nonsense. He thought to heartily laugh off what Ryoma had just said as nonsense, but before he knew it, his throat had dried and clogged. His voice wouldn't come out. Grisson lifted the teacup from the table and carried it to his lips, doing his finest to hide his agitation.

It can't be. Did he really see through Her Majesty's intentions?

Spies and merchants had already reported to him news of this young man, stating he was exceedingly intelligent and sharp. So much so, that despite his origins as a commoner, his intellect was enough to overturn the fate of an entire country...

But perhaps Grisson underestimated the validity of those reports. He admitted Ryoma was bright, but the idea of someone being a match for the mistress he served was unthinkable.

No, impossible... Him reading through her ploys would mean he's a match for her wisdom. And that can't be...

At that moment, the boy smiling composedly before him looked like a monster to Grisson. A monster in human form, not unlike his mistress, Grindiana.

"Th-That cannot be arranged... Her Majesty is in Dreisen..." Grisson broke the silence, finally managing to utter the words.

But his voice lacked the same intensity it had earlier. And upon seeing

Grisson's expression change, Ryoma knew he'd won this gamble.

"She's at Dreisen, you say...?" Ryoma smirked. "I don't think that's possible."

His piercing gaze made Grisson contort his face angrily.

"What basis have you to suggest that..."

Up until now, Grisson had control of the situation. But now, things had completely turned around. The boy sitting on the sofa before him had complete command of the conversation. Grisson never intended to look down on Ryoma and assume he was an ignorant whelp, but this exceeded his wildest assumptions.

Grisson directed an almost pleading look at the mirror hanging in the room... Unintentionally.

"I have my reasons... But I'd rather explain them to Queen Grindiana. It would save me trouble."

"Th-That's..."

Grisson was once again rendered speechless. He could neither confirm nor deny those suspicions.

"Well, this is a problem..." Ryoma said in a rather bothered manner.

He couldn't afford to waste his time on a person without any authority. Instead, Ryoma turned his gaze to the mirror on the wall.

"I'm sure you're aware of this, but we don't have much time," he said.

Grisson went pale upon realizing the meaning behind his gaze and words.

He's... How?!

A negotiation could very well be called a battle where each side tries to gauge the other's intentions. And by whatever magic he used, this man somehow realized the mechanism behind the room they were in. And that meant that he truly and honestly understood Helnesgoula's plans.

And more than anything, it meant that Ryoma won the preliminary battle that was this meeting. And yet, he didn't hurry or press the issue at this point.

"But I suppose appearing so suddenly and asking to see the queen would be

rude of us... I suppose we'll do as you said, General, and head back for today..."

With that said, Ryoma rose from the sofa and urged Greed, whose eyes were bolting in every direction in confusion, to follow him.

"Let's go, Captain Greed. We should make ourselves scarce."

Ryoma then bowed respectfully at the mirror, and headed for the door. Only Grisson and one other person understood the meaning behind that gesture.

"H-Hey, wait!" Greed hurriedly bowed at Grisson and took after Ryoma.

Even without knowing the details, his intuition as a seasoned knight spurred him to obey Ryoma.

"We'll take our leave, then. Our subordinates have taken up lodging in Memphis's castle town. We will inform you of the inn's name later. I apologize, General Grisson, but I'd appreciate it if you could relay word of me to Queen Grindiana."

Bowing his head respectfully once more, Ryoma turned the room's doorknob. But his hand then suddenly stopped — when the voice of a third party, which supposedly wasn't in this room — rang out.

"You can do away with your attempts to bait out a reaction. I'm sure we're both sick and tired of this farce."

Ryoma turned out, where he was faced by a woman who wasn't standing there a moment ago.

So that's where she came out of...

Ryoma noticed one of the bookcases was now slanted. She was likely observing Ryoma through the one-sided mirror. And having judged he was worth negotiating with, she left the adjacent hidden room.

"I've heard all sorts of reports about you," the woman said, a delighted smile on her lips. "A young hero of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, and an otherworlder summoned by the Empire of O'ltormea. That is you, isn't it? Ryoma Mikoshiba."



Her voice was as fair as a bell's chime, but full of the desire to see others fall prostrate before her. She stood beside Grisson, radiating an overwhelming sense of presence. Ryoma simply bowed his head, his expression collected and calm.

"I'm honored to bear witness to your countenance, Your Majesty the Queen, Grindiana Helnecharles."

As Ryoma looked at the woman and the glittering crown resting on her head, Helnesgoula's young queen, Grindiana Helnecharles, parted her lips in an elegant smile.

"Then, let's start this talk over, shall we?"

Grindiana sat on the sofa, looking at Ryoma, who sat opposite of her.

Hmm... I see.

Ryoma looked back at the smiling queen sitting before him. True to what he'd heard, she could not be called a beautiful woman. Her white dress was adorned with lace and gemstones, but in terms of her features and personal appearance, there could be no comparing her to Lupis or Shardina.

That said, if one were asked if she was an ugly woman, the answer would have to be no. If nothing else, anyone who would go so far as to call her a plain-looking woman would likely only do so out of some kind of personal grudge. Her well-combed golden hair undulated gracefully, and the blue eyes sitting atop her almond-shaped face were alight with an intense will that seemed to tug at one's attention.

She's pretty, but not too beautiful.

Her features were certainly fair, at least by Ryoma's standards. But while she lacked the dignified beauty Shardina and Lupis were graced with, she did have a certain attractive charm. A certain atmosphere that induced friendliness. A face that made people like her more easily. She looked to be somewhere between her mid twenties and edging into the thirties. But it felt like she could have even been 10 years older, but skilled enough to hide that age.

"Then, where should we start?" Ryoma replied to her question without any

reservation.

Grindiana's eyes widened for a moment before she let out an amused chuckle. Ryoma's demeanor was far too direct, given he was speaking to a country's queen for the first time.

Maybe I can expect even more out of him than I thought.

She hated nothing more than having to deal with fools.

"Let's see, then. Grisson seems rather flustered, so perhaps you could explain how you knew I was here in Memphis. You're all right with that, yes, Grisson?" Grindiana turned her eyes to Grisson, who stood beside her.

He simply nodded wordlessly, after which Ryoma began speaking.

"Honestly speaking, I didn't know you were here beforehand. I simply considered the conditions, and assumed you must have had some kind of tightly-knit way of staying in touch with Grisson, who's stationed here in Memphis."

"In other words, I can take this as you saying you understand my goal here?"

"Maybe not in its entirety, but... For the most part, yes. I think I do."

Ryoma nodded quietly, and spread out a map of the western continent on the table. Seeing his attitude, Grindiana clapped her hands, her eyes gleaming gleefully. She felt like a child who had just been presented with the Christmas gift she wanted most.

"I like you. I've wasted a precious year of my life, giving these buffoons from Xarooda all the clues they'd need and then some, but they still wouldn't get it... Honestly speaking, I'd been starting to ask myself if they're trying to get themselves destroyed by O'ltormea. Imagine setting up a puzzle and it remaining unsolved forever. Could anything be more painfully anticlimactic?"

Despite speaking of the fate of an entire country, Grindiana's tone was as light as if she was engaged in small talk. The contents of what she was saying, though, were unbearably heavy.

"Well, if that were to happen, I'd simply adapt myself to that situation... Right?" she appended meaningfully.

The words were spoken so lightly and naturally that one could easily have misheard them. And upon seeing that, Ryoma confirmed his suspicions were true.

So she set up matters so that no matter how the chips fall, she'll be fine... No wonder they call her a vixen.

She was capable enough to manage a large kingdom like Helnesgoula at her young age; that much was indisputable fact.

"Then let's hear your answer," Grindiana said, her eyes shining like a child faced with a toy.

From her perspective, what Ryoma was about to embark on was the cracking of a puzzle and nothing else.

"All right, then... The first thing I noticed is that Helnesgoula raised its army swiftly and declared war, but stopped after occupying Memphis." Ryoma's thick finger drew a circle around Helnesgoula's position on the map. "It probably goes without saying, but if O'ltormea were to end up taking Xarooda, Helnesgoula would be pincered between its strongest rivals on three fronts — east, west and south. To the north you have the sea, but in the interest of Helnesgoula's national defense, Xarooda falling isn't something you can tolerate. But even still, you stopped your armies in Memphis, which felt like an appeal for negotiations."

"Hmm. Yes, your analysis is correct there." Grindiana gave a satisfied nod.

True enough, O'ltormea occupying Xarooda's territories wasn't a situation Helnesgoula could ignore. But even so, Helnesgoula's interests in Xarooda were too slim for them to offer honest cooperation. If they were to offer assistance simply in the name of securing the country, the kingdom's subjects would be discontent.

Grindiana needed something more, something tangible, as recompense for her help... But that compensation was the biggest hurdle.

Xarooda was a country built on mountainous terrain, and as such, its lands were unsuitable for food production. But on the other hand, the precipitous peaks of the country yielded high-quality minerals, especially iron. And so, the

country boasted high-quality metallurgy methods and blacksmiths capable of producing exquisite gear.

In light of that, if they were to offer Helnesgoula anything, rights regarding ownership of the mines would be the most apt compensation. But with that gone, Xarooda wouldn't have any other industries to fall back on, and so doing this would effectively be a killing blow to the country.

Furthermore, the actual rights for the mines mostly belonged to the nobles who controlled the territories the mines were in. And while they might have been loyal to the Kingdom of Xarooda, the nobles were fundamentally self-sufficient and weren't absolutely obedient to the king's orders. If anything, the royal house was only nominally ranked as the leader of the nobles.

And so, despite the country teetering on the edge of destruction, the Xaroodian royal house had no right to single-handedly divest the nobles of their property. And if they were to try to do it by force, the nobles would rise up in revolt, tearing the country apart before O'ltormea even invaded.

Julianus I was known as the mediocre king, and it was clear to see why. At best, he filled the role of arbiter or supervisor for the country, but in reality, he most certainly was not its sovereign.

"And it's because we knew this that we brought up the cession of territories from Xarooda as a condition."

Grindiana turned her gaze to Ryoma with a mischievous smile. Her eyes were full with the dark, mysterious glow of a schemer.

"Yes. It probably broke those little fools' hearts to choose to do it, and I'm sure they think it's the greatest, most painful concession they could ever make... But the fact that they thought they could get me to work for so little just shows they underestimate me."

"You don't think it's worth it...?"

"Of course I don't," Grindiana heaved an exasperated sigh. "Especially considering they'd be pushing the management of all those rebellious nobles onto me. And all the lands they offered up for cession were areas where the yearly yield has diminished over the last few years. Anyone can see those mines

are going to close down in a few years. But those fools probably thought I wouldn't notice... See what I mean?"

Xarooda offered up most of its northern territories for annexation, roughly a fifth of the kingdom's total territory, making it a fairly large tract of land. But the true profit to be had in Xarooda's lands wasn't the farmlands, but the mines. And if said mines were slowly waning, there would be no point in Helnesgoula sending out reinforcements.

"At that point, you'd be better off waiting until O'ltormea takes over the land, and attack once the regime there is unstable due to the change in government," Ryoma said. "That way, you'll have an easy excuse to get rid of the nobles, and Helnesgoula would be greeted as a hero who liberated the country from O'ltormea's tyranny."

Greed held his breath despite himself. This had already been explained to him, but this story was too cruel for his ears as a servant of Xarooda. It was as if he'd been told that the survival of his country was a trivial matter. But even with her intentions directly stated, Grindiana didn't seem the slightest bit apologetic.

"That's the obvious choice, isn't it? I am, after all, the queen of Helnesgoula. I need a good reason to order my soldiers to march to their deaths."

Grindiana shrugged in a jesting manner, and the sight of it filled Greed with an inexplicable sort of horror, utterly different from anything he'd felt on the battlefield. Her lips were curled into a smile, but her eyes projected the severe gaze of a ruler burdened with the lives of her subjects.

"I can't say that's the most optimal play you could have made, though," Ryoma said.

"Oh? How so?" Grindiana cocked her head quizzically.

Her true intent was obvious from her tone, though.

"That would mean going to full-blown war with O'ltormea. And though you slightly exceed them in terms of national power, your chances of victory are basically even. The war could go either way. What's more, even if you sent spies there to gather information, you're not familiar with O'ltormea's geography.

Fighting on their soil with just your army is something you'd want to avoid."

The gaze in Ryoma's calm eyes had, at some point, sharpened like a blade.

"And?"

"That being the case, Your Majesty, you occupied Memphis and kept your army stationed here. And you came here yourself, leaving your capital at Dreisen vacant. And here, you waited until the very last moment to see if anyone shows up who understands your goals and could cooperate with you."

At those words, Grindiana raised her voice in amused, satisfied laughter. Her expression then turned severe as she directed her gaze to Ryoma. Her expression made it absolutely clear why she was called the Vixen of the North.

"Of course I did. I have no intention of joining forces with an imbecile... Very well, if you understand this much, let's cut straight to the main topic. What conditions do you have for me?"

It was as if the two of them had just locked blades. That was the only way the atmosphere in the room could be described. And perhaps, they truly did wield their words like blades. Blades in a duel over the fate of a kingdom...

"Yes, I'm confident my offer will be to your liking," Ryoma said, taking out a letter from his pocket and sliding it over to Grindiana.

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Grisson heaved a heavy sigh as he removed his clouded glasses and wiped them clean with a handkerchief.

"For the most part, it went as you had expected, Your Majesty... I suppose..."

His heart was filled with fear at the realization his mistress's assumptions were accurate, and even greater dread at the idea that someone capable of matching her shrewdness actually appeared.

"Oh, Arnold. Don't you know that when you sigh, the joy in your life slips out as well?"

After Ryoma and Greed left the room, Grindiana lay sprawled on the sofa in a sloven manner, and regarded the man who was like a brother to her in a teasing manner. It wrinkled her expensive dress, made by the finest artisan, but

Grindiana didn't seem to mind it. She displayed a lack of manners and dignity one would usually attribute to a child, which prompted a second sigh from Grisson.

If only she would grow out of these childish proclivities...

His admired mistress was well versed in tactics and strategy and even had exceptional talent on the battlefield. Grindiana's skills were very much perfect. But if only she did not act so immature at times...

Still, Grisson didn't think to actually admonish her. He knew she only showed such a slovenly demeanor when in private, and in the presence of those she trusted.

I suppose no truly perfect person really exists...

As her aide, Grindiana's attitude was a source of anxiety for Grisson, but he couldn't deny that some part of him did find that part of her to be precious. It was like proof that she, too, was human...

"Surely you jest, Your Majesty. Working in your service means that any joy I could have ever been entitled to has long since left me," Grisson said playfully, regarding her with an elegant bow.

"Mm, perhaps my ears are playing tricks on me, but did you just say something odd?" Grindiana cocked her head.

"Did I? I'm not sure what you have in mind, Your Majesty, but I swear that I've said nothing but the truth."

That statement most certainly wasn't something a servant would tell his mistress. Grindiana simply contorted her lips in a sardonic smile and elected not to press Grisson any further.

The great Kingdom of Helnesgoula was served by four generals. Of the four, Grisson had served her the longest, ever since she usurped the throne from her father, the previous king. He was the closest of her aides. They would never show it in public, but there was a true bond between the two of them that went beyond just a ruler and her servant. A tight bond that was as strong as that between those related by blood.

“Well, nevermind... Anyway, the army’s prepared to move at a moment’s notice, yes?”

“Of course, Your Majesty. A single knight order will be left behind to protect Memphis, but the rest of our army has been ordered to be prepared to move at any time.”

The preparations for the war were already done. The ten orders of knights led by Arnold Grisson were prepared like a drawn bow, and waited for the beacon of war to be lit. All that remained was deciding where to send them.

“The question is how to approach the attack, but...” Grisson said, but then trailed off.

“I think setting foot in Xarooda’s territory is a poor idea. What say you, Arnold?” Grindiana said, looking up into the air as she lay sprawled on the sofa.

“I’d rather not fight on Xaroodian soil, either. If you order us to win, we will win without fail, but the odds are that it will make our losses all the larger.”

“I figured as much.”

Neither of them cared in particular about ravaging Xarooda’s land. It didn’t matter even if they were to be their allies in opposing O’ltormea. Put more simply, the only thing they cared for was their Helnesgoulian subjects, and the people of another country proved to be none of their concern.

But they did want to avoid fighting on Xaroodian soil. Of course, if one wanted to interpret that as a humanitarian choice, they were free to do so, but they weren’t making such a choice for anything so vague as that. It was out of rational, cold-hearted calculation and nothing more.

Most of Xarooda’s territory consisted of mountainous terrain, and open areas that could allow for the deployment of a large army were exceedingly scarce. On top of that, there were thick forests that limited visibility and narrow, winding mountain paths. Fighting on such terrain would be a daunting task, even for the most seasoned general.

At worst, their superior numbers would only serve to slow their march. In cases where both armies were vast, the optimal field of battle would be a large plain with good visibility, where both sides could move unimpeded.

“Our spies have provided us with some information, but it doesn’t substitute for actual familiarity with the land... Well, I suppose we’ll hear what Mikoshiba has to say during the war council tomorrow. He probably has some kind of plan.”

“I’d imagine he does... Considering this letter, this man isn’t to be trifled with...”

Grisson noticed that Grindiana had frowned slightly.

“The question is whether he is a threat to us or not... What did you think upon meeting him, Your Majesty?”

“Are you saying he came too well-prepared?” she asked, and upon seeing the amused smile on her lips the next moment, Grisson shook his head in exasperation.

“Yes, I’ll admit I didn’t expect him to come so prepared...”

Truth be told, Grisson feared the man who had rested his large frame on that sofa a short while ago. Grisson was a seasoned warrior in his own right, and had survived many battles, but his honest feelings were that he never wanted to face Ryoma in battle. He was confident he could win in battle if they were to lead armies against one another, but he was lacking in comparison to Ryoma when it came to diplomacy or strategy.

After all, he matched Grisson’s mistress Grindiana in those fields, and had the nerve not to flinch even when faced with the ruler of a country. He was a reliable ally, but if he were to turn against them, he would be a problematic opponent to beat.

But Grindiana knew this as well as he did, and there were no traces of anxiety in her expression. If anything, she looked as if she’d finally found a worthy opponent to challenge her.

“I can’t say I’m not paying it any mind, but it’s nothing to be worried about. So long as our four countries remain allied, Ryoma Mikoshiba will never turn against Helnesgoula. I can say that with confidence, since he understands the importance of economics and the profits to be gained from it.”

She laughed off Grisson’s doubts as she eyed the map and the letter sprawled

on the table. Grindiana then took a gumdrop and popped it into her mouth. The Kingdom of Rhoadseria, Myest and, most relevant of all currently, Xarooda; a letter penned by one of the three countries of the western continent's east wasn't something one should simply throw haphazardly on the table.

My word... To think this is how my mistress, the feared Vixen of the North, conducts herself...

Swallowing the words of admonition that climbed up his throat, Grisson pushed the box full of gumdrops to the side of the table and spread out the letter.

"His play was well thought-out, though. Tying a treaty of commerce to the alliance... All four countries stand to profit from this." Grisson sighed in amazement.

Ryoma's suggestion could very well be called a work of art.

"From Xarooda's perspective, they need only acknowledge us as leaders of the alliance and they will be given the reinforcements they need," Grindiana said. "For just that much, they get to keep their precious territories. They'd naturally jump at this proposal without a second thought."

Grisson regarded her words with a deep nod.

"Having been weakened by civil war, Rhoadseria is the least interested in entering this war. The fact that our intervention would bring a quicker end to the hostilities is all the reason they need to rejoice... And since they're planning to recover their national power, this alliance is a godsend for them. Our backing will make their recovery easier."

"Yes, and our economy, as well as Myest's, will flourish thanks to increased trade. A perfect plan no one stands to lose from... On face value, at least."

A plan no one stood to lose from. A plan everyone stood to profit from. But Grindiana aptly saw through Ryoma's true intentions.

"Because while the four kingdoms all stand to profit from this, the one to get the most out of this deal is Ryoma Mikoshiba, governor of the Wortenia Peninsula... Heh."

Grindiana's eyes glinted bewitchingly as they glared at the Wortenia Peninsula's position on the map. The greatest challenge when it came to traversing the north of the continent was the unexplored no man's land known as the Wortenia Peninsula; a dangerous land that stood as a breeding ground for ferocious monsters and a hideout for savage pirates.

But that land could very well be made into a treasure chest, through the formation of the four-kingdom alliance.

Truly well-crafted...

As Grindiana lay sprawled on the sofa, the face of the man who came up with this plan surfaced in her mind. Within the letter she'd received, there were stipulations regarding not just national defense, but also trade and commerce. The suggestion to create a uniform tariff rate across the four kingdoms would lead to an increase in import and export, and his method for a simplified border crossing procedure would allow for people and goods to move more swiftly. That was bound to bring an even greater profit to Helnesgoula and Myest, who traded with other continents frequently.

Did this, however, mean that Rhoadseria and Xarooda, who lacked such large-scale trade, would not receive any favor from this reform? Perhaps not directly, but a stimulated market led to more tax revenue. The four kingdoms would all place more emphasis on commerce and trade.

With this, Helnesgoula would no longer need to conquer and destroy the three kingdoms of the east. Rather than going to war and extorting them, they now had a safer and more efficient way of getting money.

And when that happens... Who will truly profit the most, I wonder...?

In the not too distant future, trade traffic would increase to a never before seen scale. And once that occurred, the demand would grow to an extent where land travel would not be enough to keep up with the market's demands. Merchants would turn to sea routes. Yes, the sea route to the north of the western continent...

"Carrying supplies in large numbers is much faster on sea compared to a land route. Now that the Wortenia Peninsula has been purged of the pirates, the north sea route would inevitably be reconsidered. Before long, the city on the

peninsula will flourish as a relay point for merchants."

The port on Wortenia would not only function as a point for ships to restock, but also as a market for merchants to sell their wares into Rhoadseria. And eventually, it could establish trade with other continents as well. So long as they did not enforce any kind of foolish policy, their prosperity was guaranteed.

"That man's character is quite clear. He's cautious, but bold. And he's cautious enough to never show the full extent of his abilities to others, so as to not draw needless attention. Heheh... He's a frightening one. He'd secured the greatest profit of all to himself, but managed to spin it in a way that makes it so no one is displeased about it... Heh. Though I suppose, given the military might he does have, he has to keep himself from standing out."

The greater the sum of money one receives, the more driven they are to capitalize on it. One could claim that such a trait is rooted in human instinct. But doing so buys the jealousy of others. Of course, if one can shrug off that envy and hold onto that wealth, it might not be a problem, but Ryoma lacked the power to do so. And he knew that fact very well.

"Your plots have veered off course somewhat, Your Majesty. Normally you'd have isolated and taken them in... But I didn't expect them to come with a proposal," Grisson said and then sighed.

Their original plan was to make Xarooda their vassal, and wait for a chance to do the same to Rhoadseria and Myest. In that regard, one could say their plans had been moved ahead of schedule, with one exception.

"I suppose. I didn't imagine he'd be as capable as he is. I might have underestimated him a little."

Grindiana sat up and carried the teacup resting on the table to her lips. She had long since had an interest in the geographical value of the Wortenia Peninsula. After all, so long as something could be done about that land, establishing a sea route between Helnesgoula and Myest would be possible.

Grindiana knew the importance of trade. In her eyes, the fact that Rhoadseria left the vast lands of Wortenia unmanaged for so many years made her doubt the sanity of that country and its government. If that land were hers, she could only imagine the riches she would reap from it.

But it all ended as just a dream. Grindiana knew that mobilizing an army and calling for hostilities with Rhoadseria in the name of occupying that no man's land wasn't worth the effort in any way.

Now, however, a chance to make that dream come true had fallen into her lap. Lupis Rhoadserians had granted that land to a man, whether out of some playful whim or out of true gratitude.

"So be it. We spent quite a bit on gathering information, but I'm not particularly displeased with the outcome."

Ever since Ryoma was given Wortenia, Grindiana had kept a watchful eye on the peninsula and his actions. That was how she learned Ryoma was an otherworlder.

"But are you really sure...? Depending on how the negotiations go, I do believe it's possible for you to gain dominion over the Wortenia Peninsula," Grisson said.

Grindiana smirked at those words.

"I don't intend to persist in directly ruling over Wortenia. At least not so long as that man continues to rule over it properly and bring me profit, that is..."

Indeed, so long as Ryoma managed the peninsula properly, she stood to make a profit. The smile on her lips was truly filled with the mystical dignity one would expect of the Vixen of the North.

For Grindiana, nothing mattered more than the fact that the alliance of the four kingdoms would increase the range of trade. Because in so doing, Helnesgoula would become more plentiful than it presently was.

Expanding her territory was important, of course, but she knew that ruling over a land that's too vast would only be a burden. A land of excessive size would only become a hotbed for rebellion, after all...



While Grisson and Grindiana were planning their next course of action, Ryoma returned to his room at the inn in the castle town.

“Phew, she was every bit as scary as the rumors say...” Ryoma sighed as he took a swig from the glass resting on the table in front of him. “No wonder they call her the Vixen of the North. Lupis doesn’t compare to her in the slightest. She’s a monster that woman.”

The shadow clinging to his expression made it clear just how much awe he felt at Grindiana Helnecharles. Laura had cooled the beer in his glass with thaumaturgy, and the cold drink served to gently chill the heat burning in his chest.

“But the talks themselves went smoothly, did they not?” Laura asked with a gentle smile, tipping the bottle into the glass after Ryoma slammed it against the table.

Ryoma didn’t know when exactly they found the time to do so, but apparently the Malfist sisters had gone out to town to buy new clothes. They’d already changed out of the sooty, filthy clothes they wore on the way to Memphis and were dressed like the local girls. They were ordinary clothes made of hemp, but they were easy to move in and still had something of a florid design.

Ryoma also noticed the aroma of roses wafting up from Laura. They’d likely bought some perfume as they were looking for clothes. They probably saw their personal grooming as a slave’s duty of sorts toward their master, or something to that effect.

“Yes, Captain Greed was quite elated and said it went well,” Sara exclaimed with innocent joy.

“I... guess,” Ryoma said, cracking a strained smile before taking another swig. True, from the twins’ perspective, the negotiations were a great success. An alliance was formed with Helnesgoula as its leader, after all.

“Or does something bother you? Do you think the agreement might end up being annulled?” Laura asked, noticing the shadow that had settled over her master’s face.

True, the agreement Ryoma made with Grindiana was only a verbal one for

now. But even still, it was a verbal agreement between one leader of a country and another. Breaking this agreement would come with its share of consequences. Even with regards to just stopping O'ltormea's invasion, no country would be able to easily turn their back on such a promise.

Rhoadseria and Xarooda didn't have the military might to survive this situation, and so they never had the option of refusing the agreement to begin with. Myest had sufficient forces to go to war, but even if they were to refuse the alliance, it wouldn't change much. In that case, the three other countries would simply form an alliance without them.

True, without Myest's influence as a trade partner, the alliance's profits would be smaller, but it wouldn't influence things much in the long run. If Myest ended up refusing, some adjustments would have to be made in the agreement, but it was otherwise safe to say the treaty could not be revoked at this point.

"Well, I just think I might have overdone it a little..." Ryoma shook his head slowly at Laura's question.

What had bound Ryoma's heart so tightly was the look in Grindiana's eyes just as he had bid her farewell. It was the gaze of a predator eyeing its prey. Ryoma didn't think he'd made any wrong choices there, but perhaps there were a few things he could have done differently.

"Maybe I shouldn't have left that much of a strong impression..."

Perhaps, instead of coming personally, he should have instead sent a Xaroodian noble and manipulated their actions from the shadows. Still, he had a distinct reason for choosing not to do so.

There's a chance it would have made her suspicious, so I figured I'd do it myself...

Had Ryoma tried to stay in the background, Grindiana would likely have viewed Xarooda's sudden change in policy with suspicion. As uncomfortable as it might have been to admit it, had a messenger simply come bearing a letter from Julianus I, there was a good chance it would have been discarded without being read. Refusing a letter was a very reprehensible thing to do from a diplomatic perspective, so hypothetically, it probably would have been

accepted, but things still wouldn't go as smoothly.

"But if we take too long, the fortress in the Ushas Basin might not hold on. So isn't the fact that you finished this as quickly as you did proof that what you did was ideal?" Laura asked.

Ryoma had to nod. The final showdown with O'ltormea was right around the corner, and there was little time to waste.

"I suppose..."

The fact that Ryoma had to feel so cautious around Grindiana was one negative outcome he didn't anticipate, but he could do nothing but try to compensate for this hole in his plans.

For now, I should shelve my countermeasures against Helnesgoula and focus on the war ahead of me.

The alliance with Helnesgoula was coming into shape, but the question remained: how would this war end? The composition of that image was already growing clearer. Two problems remained, however. Firstly, he'd need to discuss what came next with Grindiana and receive her approval. Secondly, they needed to make sure Lione's group could retreat from the Ushas Basin safely.

"We need to send out a bird immediately and inform them of our situation," Sara said. "They haven't sent any messages, so it's safe to assume everything's going as planned for now."

Ryoma glared into the air at those words. Phones and emails didn't exist in this world. This meant that whenever information was being transmitted, there was always some delay, directly proportionate to the distance the information needed to travel.

Thankfully, the technological standards of this world were more or less uniform. The speed with which information traveled was roughly the same across the different countries. Of course, Ryoma was used to the instantaneous exchange of information that modern technology allowed, and this time lag felt like a huge bother to him. But the honest truth was that he was still looking for a better method. And while he did find a possible solution...

How that turns out will depend on how this war ends.

There was a great deal Ryoma still wanted and had to do, but right now he could only focus on one thing. As displeased as Ryoma, a normal high school student, may have been with this situation, it was still the result of his own choices. And that, too, could be called fate.

“Yeah, that’s right...”

His tactic of ambushing the O’ltormean supply convoy to slow their invasion speed was a good one, but he knew he couldn’t hope to completely shut down their supply line. He’d only instructed Lione to inflict some damage on them and then retreat to the fortress in the Ushas Basin. There, the allied forces of the Xaroodian, Rhoadserian and Myestian militaries were to hold the line against the O’ltormean invasion.

If all went according to plan, Lione’s party should have been retreating from the mountainous region at this moment.

But time, time, time... The talks with Helnesgoula were ironed out sooner than I expected, but we’re still hanging by a thread... dammit, we have to make it...

Their odds were already bad, as they had to turn the tables on the enemy while in a greatly inferior position. They had no choice but to make a gamble at some point. With the meeting with Grindiana having gone well, Ryoma was now facing his next challenge.

“But complaining about it now won’t get us anywhere. All we can do is believe that Lione and Joshua can hold on until we can topple the fortress on the Notis Plains.”

Ryoma’s mind turned to the two of them, on that battlefield far to the south.

Chapter 4: The Battle of the Ushas Basin

Over a month had passed since Ryoma Mikoshiba had met with Queen Grindiana Helnecharles in the border city of Memphis.

A large flat land spread out, surrounded by precipitous mountains. Within Xarooda's territory, dotted with mountains and forests, the Ushas Basin was relatively blessed with abundant access to water, making it a grain-producing region. While most of Xarooda's crops were imported from its neighbors, it relied on several grain-producing regions to grow wheat, which was the country's primary food source.

As unfit as their land was for agriculture, food was the country's lifeline. Relying on other countries for it could not be tolerated.

They could, perhaps, afford it financially. The countries' mines allowed for the mining of not just iron, but even precious materials like gold and gemstones. And with the many skilled smiths in the country, the equipment produced by Xaroodian blacksmiths was acknowledged for its quality among the other countries on the continent.

From an economic standpoint, Xarooda was wealthy enough. And yet, no king in Xarooda's history ever considered discarding agriculture. Quite the opposite, in fact — past kings had set aside national expenditures for the sake of cutting down forest and flattening mountains in the name of securing more farmland.

This was because they understood full well how dangerous it was to rely on another country for something as essential as food. One could discard many luxuries, but relying entirely on another country for agricultural produce meant you were creating a major weakness for your country.

Assuming the exporting country remained indefinitely friendly toward you, there would be no problems. But true friendship didn't exist between countries. Even if a country entered a cooperative relationship with another, no man alive could guarantee that relationship would last forever.

Were the relationship to sour, leading to the importing country deciding to cut its exports, Xarooda would be helpless. And even if relations didn't worsen, there could be many other scenarios that would put it at a disadvantage. Maybe bad weather meant the crops were smaller than expected, and the other country would have to export less.

While there were many nobles who did not see commoners as human beings, even they knew better than to starve their own people intentionally. That was why no country would run the risk of relying entirely on importing food from a neighbor.

If such a situation were to take place, Xarooda's ability to be at least somewhat self-sufficient would leave it slightly better off. True, the crops it could produce were relatively small in number, but even that paltry amount of wheat could decide the country's fate.

So with all that in mind, one could truly say the Ushas Basin was Xarooda's beating heart. And the land was important from a defensive standpoint as well. The Ushas Basin was a hundred kilometers southwest of Xarooda's capital of Peripheria. If one were to head to the southern regions of Xarooda from Peripheria, the Ushas Basin served as a key checkpoint that one would absolutely have to cross.

In addition, the terrain of the arable land was mostly flat, making it hard to employ surprise tactics. Any battle taking place here would be one done with conventional tactics. It was a region that didn't easily allow for unpredictable developments.

On the east side of this basin was a sturdy fortress. It was built in a valley between the mountains forming the basin, making it Xarooda's greatest barrier for stopping O'ltormea's invasion.

For many years, the Xaroodian royal house had expanded this fortress. It formed a network of citadels, along with other fortresses built along the mountain range. Thanks to that and the existing locational advantage afforded to it by the terrain, it was very much an impregnable fortress.

It was for this reason that O'ltormea's invasion army of sixty-five thousand men had struggled to topple this stronghold for the better part of a month. And

today, once again, O'ltormean soldiers marched on the fortress, the sunlight reflecting off the tips of their spears. All in the name of victory...

"Everyone! This is the critical moment. With the combined power of the three kingdoms of the east, even O'ltormea cannot hope to take this stronghold! The enemy's supply line is disrupted, and the morale of their men is dwindling! Let us join forces, and bring the pommel of justice to bear on these invaders!"

""""May we know glory! Death to the invaders!""""

The beautiful general of the Kingdom of Myest, Ecclesia Marinelle, spoke. Her voice reverberated within the ramparts, drumming up cheers that seemed to shake heaven and earth. Countless fists thrust up toward the sky. As their commander beamed valiantly at them, her black hair flapping in the wind, the soldiers were filled with unwavering, absolute trust. The fact that Ecclesia was another country's commander mattered little.

Thanks to reinforcements from the other citadels positioned along the mountains and the forces arriving from the capital, coupled with Ecclesia's command, the forces stationed in the Ushas Basin fortress were able to hold back the large O'ltormean offensive.

"Nock your bows! First row, stand at the ready! Second and third rows, remain on standby! There should be siege weapons approaching. Shoot them as soon as they enter your range. Those in the rear, keep preparing those fire arrows! The oil is ready, right? Now, listen! Don't let a single soldier leave this place alive! If you want to survive, kill as many of them as you can!"

The commanding officers' shouts echoed from the walls. Arrows with oil-soaked cloths at their tips were prepared. Large pots filled with oil boiled to several hundred degrees were placed atop the walls.

If these were to be poured down on the O'ltormean soldiers raging beneath the walls, it would surely burn the skin off of them in a most grisly fashion. Even if they were healed, it would take time for those soldiers to return to active duty. In fact, most of them would likely suffocate to death. What would then follow was a baptism by fire arrows.

No one could survive this continuous attack unscathed. War, after all, is an overwhelmingly gruesome affair. To O'ltormea's soldiers, the Ushas Basin was

the very gates of hell, but the same could be said for the soldiers defending the fortress.

“Do not falter, Rhoadserian knights! Now is the time to show your strength!”

As she drew the string of the specially crafted, tightly-drawn bow to shoot down the O’ltormean soldiers trying to cross the moat, Helena shouted rousing words at the knights around her. She knew that if she didn’t do so, their hearts would snap before the sight of the limitless ranks of the enemies pouring down towards them.

Even with the terrain on their side, this was not an easy battle. O’ltormea held control of the continent’s center, and poured every bit of their national power into this war. The number of men they had under their service was truly staggering. Their army was like a tidal wave of malice, and the pressure they induced was out of the ordinary.

Even with them being protected by tall walls, what decided battle was the human spirit. And so, in the face of a constant barrage of arrows and thaumaturgy from the O’ltormean side, Helena wholeheartedly focused on encouraging her soldiers.

A key aspect of siege battles is to maintain the soldiers’ morale. The battle ends once your side cracks under the pressure imposed on it by the enemy. And there’s only one method of preventing that: keep racking up the enemy’s body count.

“They’re bringing in a battering ram!” A warning rang out from a watchtower built along the wall.

It was a simple weapon, built from lumber taken from the nearby forest, its tip reinforced by iron. But martial thaumaturgy could grant soldiers the stamina needed to use it as many times as is necessary to bash through their defenses. Even the thick iron gates of this fortress would not be able to withstand such an assault.

“Fire arrows! Shoot your fire arrows at it!”

The captains quickly gave their orders, and a shower of fire arrows and jars of oil rained down on the battering ram. The hammer was completely covered in

wet clothes as a precaution against fire tactics, but such a cheap countermeasure was of little help. Attacking the Ushas citadel with such impromptu weapons would be difficult.

Their army might be large, but the breadth of their strategy is narrow. And this is the result... All that remains is to hope he manages to pull off his plan, and to keep the soldiers' morale up until he does...

As she gazed down on yet another repeated assault from O'ltormea, the setting sun painted Helena's skin red as her lips curled up in a vicious smile.

"It seems today's attacks are almost over." A voice reminiscent of the chiming of a bell spoke from behind Helena's back, as she kept the soldiers' morale up.

"Yes... The sun is setting, and the enemy needs to regain their bearings. Incidentally, is there a reason the supreme commander is here on the frontlines?" Helena asked, her tone the same as ever.

Ecclesia simply gave a forced smile at Helena's attitude and shook her head in denial.

"No reason in particular. It seems Sir Grahalt has successfully intercepted the enemy force marching through the mountains as well," Ecclesia said, turning her gaze to the mountains towering in the distance.

"That stands to reason," Helena nodded, as if she'd been told something quite obvious. "He is, after all, a skilled enough commander. Joshua is with him as well. I believe we can rest easy, knowing they're handling the matter."

Grahalt Henshel, the commander of the Xaroodian royal guard, was a leading warrior in a country known for its militaristic attitude. Despite their rather short acquaintance, Ryoma's opinion of him wasn't very favorable due to the man's quick temper. However, Ryoma only thought so because he hadn't seen him on the battlefield.

True, Grahalt didn't have the wide outlook or wisdom to command the entirety of a battlefield that General Belares or Helena did. And he was short-tempered and easy to anger, to a fault. But as a commander on the battlefield, he had definite talent and vast experience. Were a rebellion to break out in Xarooda, the ones sent to quell it would surely be him and his royal guard.

Grahalt wouldn’t lose a battle on the peaks of his homeland to O’ltormea’s soldiers. And even if he did see the soldiers of the other two countries as comrades in the fight against the empire, he wouldn’t entrust the last line of defense before the capital to them. Normally, he would see commanding one of the surrounding forts during such a critical time as unacceptable.

Even so, Ecclesia and Helena insisted that he handle defending the mountains. After a tumultuous strategy meeting, Julianus I gave him a direct order to do as they said. Helena and Ecclesia only insisted so much that he do it because he was exceedingly familiar with Xarooda’s topography.

This citadel may have been strong, with a great locational advantage, but if the enemy were to circumvent it, the gates may just as well stay open. And if the fort were struck from behind, the soldiers inside would lose heart. That had to be prevented at all costs, and Grahalt was the right man for the job.

On top of that, Joshua, who had withdrawn his men from the mountain district along the border, served as his lieutenant. So unless something completely unexpected happened, the two of them should have been fine.

“For now, the day seems to be over...” Ecclesia said, watching the O’ltormean soldiers retreat little by little. “With this, we’ve bought ourselves a month, but how much longer must we wait...?”

Contrary to her words, there was an amused smile on her lips. It was proof that she didn’t think in the slightest they could lose this battle. And there wasn’t a trace of carelessness or conceit to her demeanor. Helena could only see cold judgment and a lust for victory.

There was the chance of a night raid, of course, but they were long since prepared for the possibility. Any O’ltormean soldier that might attempt an attack on them would be felled ruthlessly.

“Yes, all that’s left is to pray his plan goes well,” Helena said, turning her gaze north.

As if waiting for the one play that would overturn this war...

†

“Our forces can’t even topple this fortress under your command, Saitou?!”

Shardina’s annoyed shout echoed through the tent.

This was unlike her usual behavior. Her demeanor was quite poor. The mental strain from the prolonged fighting took away the jewel-like glow Shardina usually had. Her hair, which normally looked like molten gold, had lost its luster, and the sacks under her eyes spoke of her current state of mind.

“My apologies, Your Highness,” Saitou bowed his head meekly. “Their valley fortress is proving harder to capture than I expected. Breaking through the main gate will take some time.”

This wasn’t Saitou’s individual responsibility, however. The responsibility for this army fell entirely on Shardina, and this meant the responsibility for how each individual battle played out was also hers. On top of that, Saitou was only the commander of a single unit.

The ones held accountable for this unfavorable situation were Shardina, and, ostensibly speaking, Celia, who served as her newly appointed lieutenant. Saitou wasn’t a child, however, and knew that pointing this out now to Shardina’s face would only earn him her ire.



As a soldier of O'ltormea, the most important thing was to win this battle. Saitou realized this, and so avoided saying anything that might make Shardina's state of mind any worse. But as if to mock Saitou's consideration, a certain nuisance of a man had to part his lips.

"No, no, that's not all. They've split up their raiding parties and sent them through the mountains to interrupt us while we're focused on attacking the fort. Once we counterattack, they run back into the mountains. There's no end to this... If they were to attack us head-on, no matter how many men they had, they wouldn't win, but nonetheless..."

"Mr. Sudou, that will be quite enough!" Saitou shouted.

His report was accurate, but Sudou had such an obnoxious attitude about it that Saitou couldn't help but lose his temper. Saitou never liked the man much to begin with. No, truth be told, he rather hated having to deal with him at all. Despite both of them having been summoned from Rearth and having some things in common, their personalities were basically like oil and water.

Saitou was something of a warrior type of person, while Sudou was more of a schemer. Saitou acknowledged his skills were necessary, and knew he was quite adept, but the two of them weren't made to cooperate.

That held true, even though Sudou helped save him from the edge of despair.

He's not a bad man, but... Something about him is definitely broken. Not like I can fault him for that...

Saitou didn't like plotting or scheming, that much was true. But he couldn't deny their usefulness. The late Gaius Valkland had worked together with Shardina to instigate the turmoil in Rhoadseria, after all, and Saitou wasn't disgusted by them.

I hear Sudou wasn't summoned to this world by O'ltormea... But did something happen back then to make him like this?

As both another member of the organization, and a fellow Japanese countryman, Saitou harbored a certain kind of bond towards Sudou, more so than other members of the organization. And so, he felt that if something could be done about that darkness in Sudou's heart, he wanted to see it happen. But

Sudou was still his superior, and sticking his nose into the man's private matters would only serve to open up old wounds.

Even so, Saitou was anxious about Sudou, so much so that Saitou dreaded letting him have his way here. Sudou had a certain liking for bloodshed. Saitou got the impression that something about his human nature was fundamentally broken.

I'll have to disregard that for now, though...

The problem was their situation at present. Saitou was concerned that Sudou's provocative way of speaking would disturb Shardina's heart. Surprisingly, though, Shardina regarded him composedly.

"No, go on, Sudou. If you have something to say, say it," Shardina said, cutting into Saitou's words with an air of resignation.

In no way did she actually want to hear what Sudou had to say, but even Shardina admitted that the man's skill and knowledge when it came to tactics and strategy was first-rate. That was why she summoned him here despite his operations in Rhoadseria, even if affairs there had subsided somewhat by now. His personality was flawed, that much was for certain, but Shardina knew better than to ignore him when it came to matters of strategy.

At Shardina's permission to speak, Sudou directed a victorious glance at Saitou and spoke with a smile.

"The Ushas fortress is even more impregnable than the rumors say. Especially since we're ill-equipped in terms of siege weapons, too... The fact that you stressed mobility in hopes of finishing the war quickly is backfiring on you."

Even thaumaturgy attacks had little meaning, since the endowed thaumaturgy applied to the fortress walls rendered them useless. With that, Shardina was left with no choice but to resort to a basic siege battle.

However, siege engines were, for the most part, quite heavy and difficult to transport. And Shardina placed emphasis on speed during this campaign, which meant she didn't account for siege weapons. Still, she did prepare some siege engines — but very few. And the majority of them were reduced to ash when Joshua Belares ambushed that supply convoy.

That man ruins everything for me. Even this...

Of all the siege engines she'd been able to prepare, only one in ten actually arrived in the Ushas Basin, and most of those had been destroyed over the month of fighting. As substitutes, Shardina had ordered that lumber be acquired from the nearby woods to build impromptu siege weapons, but they were far inferior to the siege engines built by the imperial capital's craftsmen, especially when it came to defense and durability.

Covering their siege weapons with wet clothes did little to block the fire arrows and boiling oil raining down the walls.

"You claim to have Xarooda's nobles under your thumb, but their actions and movements are far too slow. They've likely realized we're struggling to win, and adopted a wait-and-see approach."

The most surefire way of winning a siege battle is by having an insider help you. In other words, by using a traitor to help topple the fortress from within. But the rats in Shardina's employ were proving problematic. Despite being their last hope, the nobles were moving far too slowly to be effective. They were within the Ushas fortress as part of Xarooda's army, too. They'd made up all sorts of excuses so far to avoid Julianus I's appeals, but suddenly changed their mind.

"Are you saying they're trying to side with both us and Xarooda?" Shardina asked.

"That's what I would do if I were them," Sudou said, an obscene smile on his lips. "They have neither loyalty nor faith. All they have is greed, like pigs. That said, it's that nature of theirs that made them take our offer to begin with, and that's what drove General Belares to his death."

Their cooperative attitude from a year ago felt like a lie now. But such was the danger of a traitor. Only a fool would expect loyalty out of people who would betray their own country.

They likely started doubting the empire's strength upon seeing that the war is dragging on... Dammit, that's why I tried to end this war quickly... Shardina bit her thumbnail in annoyance despite herself.

“I see... So what are you saying I should do now, Sudou?”

“The best course of action is to retain the territories we’ve managed to snatch away, and have our soldiers fall back to our country. We don’t know what the north is up to, and our line of supply is at its limit.”

Sudou then spread out a map on the table.

“Thanks to General Belares’s son and his ransacking of our supply lines, we’re failing to bring sufficient supplies to this battleground. And since Xarooda burned down their fields as they retreated, we’re failing to procure what we need locally as well. That’s not to say our rations are depleted, of course, but at this rate, it’s only a matter of time...”

“So that’s why they brought the frontlines east of the Ushas Basin...” Shardina muttered.

“It’s safe to assume, yes. They won’t shy away from any method if it means pushing us out.” Sudou shrugged.

Scorched earth tactics. A strategy used throughout history. By destroying the land’s fields before they fell into enemy hands, it would become extremely hard for the enemy army to procure supplies locally, thus making it exceedingly difficult to maintain their ranks.

One famous example of this tactic was from Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s invasion of the Korean Peninsula; the Joseon Dynasty applied scorched earth tactics to weaken the Japanese army’s ability to gain supplies. It also saw use when the German army invaded the Soviet Union during World War II, and when the Achaemenid Empire in Persia invaded the Scythians.

It was an exceedingly effective tactic that had proven successful time and time again, especially in situations where a large army launched an invasion into a mountainous or snowy region, where securing a supply line was difficult already.

But with its effectiveness came its share of downsides. The most glaring one being that, once the war ended, restoring the ruined areas proved considerably harder. Originally, scorched earth tactics didn’t destroy only military facilities. Villages and farmland were put to the torch, water sources would be poisoned,

forests would be burned. Extensive damage would be inflicted on the area's infrastructure and environment.

In other words, Xarooda had cut into its own living flesh with this move. And the best ways of defeating this tactic was by ending the war so swiftly that supply lines were no longer an issue, or by carrying a large amount of supplies from the homeland to begin with.

But now, since neither of those options worked, they would need to withdraw their soldiers and regroup. That was established logic in a war. Shardina, however, shook her head in denial.

"No... Sudou, do you seriously think we can pull back, this late into the war?"

Rationally speaking, she knew Sudou was right. But she couldn't withdraw her army now, and Sudou knew that as well as she did.

"Yes, honestly speaking, it is a difficult decision to make. If nothing else, it's bound to make your standing that much worse, Your Highness. And our positions would not be much better..."

The war expenditures Shardina had sunk into this campaign amounted to more than a third of O'ltormea's military budget — the budget of a large military power that ruled over the center of the western continent. It was a larger sum than some small countries' entire national budget. And even a large country like O'ltormea couldn't raise that much money easily.

But money wasn't the problem here per se. Given O'ltormea's national power, they could cover that sum within two to three years. The problem was whether they'd be able to regain that lost sum.

Wars break out, in nearly all cases, for financial reasons. Many times, matters of justice or other greater causes are held up as the banner, such as national defense, or in the name of freeing the commoners from oppression. Sometimes, even God is named as a justification for going to war. But the real cause for wars is almost always economics.

Poverty and hunger spur people to steal from others; doing so is natural instinct. Even animals fight over territory, after all. And occupying territory meant acquiring the resources and tax that another's land offers. Put another

way, no one would be foolish enough to steal a wasteland that produced nothing.

In that regard, if Shardina were to pull her men out of Xarooda now, all the efforts and sacrifices she'd made so far would be in vain. The money spent wasn't the real issue, but the fact that it earned her nothing in return to justify its spending was. Shardina's reputation and standing would be thoroughly tainted.

"I think Sudou is right. We must pull back our men and negotiate with Xarooda... However..." Saitou said and then trailed off.

If things turned favorable for O'ltormea, perhaps negotiating with Xarooda wouldn't be a bad choice. Destroying the country altogether would be ideal, but Emperor Lionel told them that making them a dependent vassal state was an acceptable alternative as well.

However, given the situation, neither of those was an option.

"If nothing else, if we don't take the Ushas Basin, we will completely fail to recoup the funds we've spent on this war... But the way things are going, that'll be impossible."

"I know that... That's why taking the fortress is our current priority, right?"

Silence settled over the tent. Shardina eyed Sudou and Saitou intently as they held their tongues. Starting negotiations with Xarooda before the Ushas fort fell would earn them nothing. Xarooda would not easily relinquish the land that was very much their source of food. But O'ltormea wasn't interested in any of their other lands, either. In other words, if they didn't have the basin, it wouldn't be enough to balance out the money they sank into this campaign.

"Then the conclusion is clear, I think. We'll have to keep pressing the offensive," Sudou concluded.

"Mr. Sudou!" Saitou exclaimed.

What he was suggesting was reckless. As far as Saitou knew, moving their army for a political reason wouldn't end well. And Sudou understood this perfectly. But he accepted Saitou's criticism without batting an eyelash.

“If we cannot retreat, our only choice is to keep moving forward... After all, we do have the crown prince’s faction to consider, Mr. Saitou.”

At those words, Saitou fell silent again. Shardina was greatly trusted by the Emperor, but there were those who begrudged her for it. Her two brothers were striking examples of this. They believed that while they were off fighting wildly on the frontiers, Shardina was trying to curry favor with their father, the emperor.

They were especially indignant now, when Emperor Lionel had pulled elite troops from across the Empire out of annoyance at the invasion of Xarooda going slowly. Several units were taken from the northern and western borders, where her brothers were stationed.

They understood, of course, that this was necessary. But human emotion didn’t always conform to logic. It is said that the nail that sticks out is the first to be hammered down. If this expedition were to end with unfavorable results, Shardina would be easy prey for the monsters plotting in the emperor’s court. Her status as a royal would do little to stop it. She would not be executed, but she would still pay dearly for her failures.

“We’ll go on a decisive charge tomorrow... We’ll use the plan you came up with earlier, Sudou. Tell Sir Rolfe to leave Fort Noltia and come here.”

The glint had returned to Shardina’s eyes. By reconfirming her current position, she had steeled her resolve for what was to come.

“A wave attack using all our forces... If that fails, we are very much finished.” Sudou gave an amused smirk at Shardina’s words.

The moment she recalled Rolfe from his duty of protecting Fort Noltia, Shardina admitted her situation was desperate. In the unlikely event of a defeat, the bridgehead they painstakingly formed with Fort Noltia would be snatched away from their grasp.

The Revolving Wheel Formation. Sudou mentioned it before... With that, it could be possible. And we haven’t many other options left... But why is he so fixated on continuing the war...?

To members of the Organization like Sudou and Saitou, Shardina was nothing

more than a temporary mistress. Saitou's own oath of loyalty to her was just one way the organization was trying to leech off the lion that was the O'ltormea Empire like a parasite.

From that perspective, Shardina's influence diminishing was by no means a favorable development for the Organization. But if the war were to linger much longer, they stood to lose absolutely everything. Sudou would not have wanted to see Shardina — whose temperament he knew all too well — completely lose all her power, either.

Did the Organization order him to do something? But...

The animal instincts that he'd polished ever since reaching this world were raising alarm bells in Saitou's mind. But the truth remained that, at this point in time, they had no better alternative.

"Saitou, I'll have you take to the front tomorrow," Shardina said, directing a sharp gaze at her silent subordinate.

"Yes, Your Highness..."

Saitou could only nod, overwhelmed by the intensity in her eyes, even as a creeping sense of unease and dread at Sudou's mysterious attitude weighed down his heart...

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The next morning, just as a tinge of orange was beginning to overtake the early morning sky, Helena stood atop a turret set along the walls. She looked ahead at the O'ltormean encampment in the distance, the cold air blowing in from the mountains and toying with her white hair.

The movements in their camp are more vigorous than usual... They probably want to finish it today or tomorrow. They must be running out of patience.

As the instincts she'd gained as a seasoned commander on the battlefield keenly picked up on the change in the atmosphere, Helena allowed the chakras in her body to accelerate.

I see... They want to charge us.

By augmenting her body with martial thaumaturgy, she increased her

eyesight beyond its normal limits, allowing her to keenly see the enemy encampment several kilometers away.

So they're finally going to throw caution to the winds and charge us, Helena whispered, glaring at the white smoke wafting up into the air.

There were only a few reasons why smoke would rise from a battlefield. Judging by the time, they were likely preparing food.

"Good morning, Lady Helena. It seems the enemy is finally prepared to throw everything they have at us." A fair, chime-like voice spoke from behind Helena.

Ecclesia appeared on the turret, accompanied by a host of knights. Her sleek, black hair was combed thoroughly despite the early hour, dancing in the wind as she stood there. Helena also felt a faint aroma tickle her nostrils — perhaps Ecclesia had used some kind of scented oil?

Looking at her refined demeanor and appearance, one wouldn't doubt she was the daughter of a renowned noble. However, her body wasn't cloaked in a dress of silk, but rather heavy iron armor etched with countless scratches and marks. It stood as silent proof of the many battles she'd fought over her lifetime. This was undeniable proof that Ecclesia was by no means a beautified doll of a woman.

"Good morning, Ecclesia. Yes, so it seems," Helena said, gazing at the rising smoke without turning to look at the other woman.

"Everything seems to be transpiring as Lord Mikoshiba had predicted," Ecclesia said, standing at Helena's side and shielding her eyes with a raised hand as she looked forward.

Normally, the Ushas Basin was an ideal place for O'ltormea to wage a protracted war on them, but O'ltormea lacked the arms and supplies necessary to pursue that strategy. A month of fighting had taught them all too well just how sturdy this fortress was. But despite that, Shardina decided not to have her army retreat, and that meant there was only one answer to the question of what she was planning.

"They're making a big breakfast to ensure their soldiers are well-fed... They probably won't have a chance to pull back, even after sunset."

O’ltormea’s side didn’t have the defensive facilities Helena’s side had, and once the fighting began, the besieging forces wouldn’t be able to pull the soldiers back and give them time to eat and rest. Of course, they likely had some portable rations that could be eaten without being cooked, but that was just simple things like nuts, dried fruits, and salted jerky.

Still, it was greatly preferable to fighting without eating anything all day long. But it wouldn’t do much to drum up the vigor to do battle. And given the climate of the Ushas Basin, the air became quite cold as the sun set.

And so, they needed to make sure they filled their stomachs now, before the fighting began in earnest. Their commander’s intention was evident from the amount of smoke rising from their encampment.

“I see... They’re willing to fight into the night if need be.” Ecclesia’s well-formed lips curled up into a smile.

Fighting at night required a great deal of preparation. Any commander would naturally hope to make as many preparations as possible ahead of time. But any amount of preparation would be rendered useless if the enemy caught wind of it, as they could prepare any number of countermeasures if they knew what the other side was planning.

“To be exact, they want to keep attacking us through the night,” Helena said. “Given the size of their army, they’ll likely split their forces into three or four units and attack us in waves.”

“Yes, I agree with that estimate. They’ll want to take advantage of their superior numbers and attack nonstop, so as to deplete our soldiers’ morale.” Ecclesia pressed a finger against her chin and nodded.

Seeing the cooking smoke let them surmise a great deal. The enemy army’s state of provisions, their morale, the enemy commander’s plans... Of course, not many could gleam that much from just a bit of rising smoke. The ability to gather that kind of information from the environment was what set a general apart from a mere soldier.

And the two women standing there were, without room for doubt, generals.

“How do we deal with this, then?” Ecclesia asked.

It was phrased as a question, but there was a great deal of confidence to her words. There were limited ways out in this situation, and having read the situation as deeply as they did, Ecclesia's side had only one path left to take.

"Well, don't you think we're all quite bored of being holed up in this fortress?" Helena said with a forced smile, seeing Ecclesia's eyes light up like diamonds.

She was like a child, waiting for her mother to grant her permission to pounce on the candy before her eyes.

"Yes! Truth be told, I hate being on the defensive, both when it comes to romance and war."

There could be no doubt that Ecclesia was a general skilled in both defense and offense, but like all people, she had her preferences. And much like her title 'The Whirlwind' might have implied, she was most in her element with tactics that involved trampling and crushing the enemy. Ecclesia Marinelle's greatest weapon was her tendency to employ overwhelming speed to strike decisively.

"Then this is a perfect chance... The other formation has the gift he brought us, right?" Helena said, her tone heavy with implication.

This was a conversation between two generals, and Ecclesia quickly picked up on what Helena was hinting at. Part of the reinforcements Ecclesia led included a unit under her direct command. Since they'd been holed up in the fortress so far, the unit hadn't been granted a chance to show its true value. But going on the offensive would give them an outlet for the frustration they'd built up, by letting them bare their fearsome fangs against O'ltormea's soldiers.

"Yes, indeed... Then I'll take you up on that offer, Lady Helena. It's time we finally get a chance to run wild. It seems that no matter what, I'm simply no good with defensive tactics..."

Ecclesia admitted she wasn't fond of passively defending. Helena, however, shook her head. Over the last few months they'd spent together, she had learned to acknowledge Ecclesia's eye for tactics and strategy. The same could be said of Ecclesia's appreciation for Helena as well.

"Oh... And I'll get in contact with Grahalt..." Helena said to Ecclesia as the

latter headed down the staircase with skip-like steps.

“I don’t mind that, but... Will the message even reach him in time, all things considered?” Ecclesia tilted her neck.

“It’ll be fine,” Helena told her with a wry smile. “He’s one of the most prominent men in this country. I think he’ll keep up with you just fine.”

It was perhaps hard to praise him as much, since he always had to measure up to General Belares’s achievements, but Helena held Grahalt’s abilities and loyalty toward Xarooda in high regard. Some people were capable but disloyal, while others were faithful but incompetent. Compared to them, Grahalt was a talented man who maintained a high standard, even if he had his own faults.

That much was clear from the fact that Grahalt was put in charge of commanding the fortresses in the mountains.

“Very well. I’ll let you handle this, Lady Helena... Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Realizing Helena’s feelings on the matter, Ecclesia bowed elegantly before her and turned her back to leave. A valiant, savage smile spread over her lips, like that of a female wolf who had her eyes fixed on helpless prey, licking her lips expectantly...

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“Hey, hurry it up! The captain’s gonna end up shouting at us!”

“Tell me about it. And that’s after we got kicked out of bed this morning... I can’t keep this up for much longer...”

The soldiers lined up in front of the large pots grumbled in displeasure. Mealtimes were no different from when they were fighting, and despite the large amount of soup bubbling in the pots before them, it was only just barely enough to fill everyone’s stomachs. If they didn’t hurry to get their serving, they’d only have the residue at the bottom of the pot left.

The quality and amount of food soldiers got translated directly to their chances of survival on the battlefield, even for the lowliest rank-and-file soldiers who fought on the frontlines. On top of that, the top brass ordered everyone to wake up earlier than normal that morning.

They were in the middle of a war, of course, so only a few fools muttered complaints about waking up early or that they were still sleepy, but everyone was quite annoyed by it nonetheless.

The feelings of disgruntlement were growing especially severe as of late. A year had passed since they left their country for this campaign, and the soldiers were growing homesick. Worse yet, the war with Xarooda had been in a stalemate for a long while. Normally the soldiers would be able to bear this, but they were gradually running out of patience.

“Stop yapping already. If you’ve got complaints, take them up with your commanders!” a burly, middle-aged cook called out angrily, glaring at the soldiers as he beat on his pot with a ladle.

He wore a white apron and shirt, the common uniform for cooks in this army. His wide chest and thick arms set him apart from the rest, however. He had a bald head, and overall he looked quite scary. One look made it clear he actually did hold a weapon and fight on the battlefield once upon a time.

His anger completely silenced the soldiers’ grumbling.

“I swear, it’s not like they’re not giving us absurd orders without considering what we can do, either...” The cook muttered to himself so as to not be heard by the soldiers, and then glared at a soldier who seemed to be begging with his eyes for a bigger serving. “Go on, next! Hurry up and eat or we’ll kick you in the ass!”

Rationing food was a reason for great concern on the battlefield. If soldiers get the slightest suspicion that other soldiers might be getting more than them, they’d grow angry at the cook in a second. Any sign of weakness would be met with threats and demands for preferential treatment. And any cook who yields to that pressure isn’t worthy of his job. Being feared by the soldiers was a fine alternative to that.

“Good grief... Every single soldier has to moan and groan... That’s why they never get promoted...” the cook spat out, furrowing his brows dubiously as he looked at the line of soldiers.

He suddenly felt the ground rumbling ever so slightly beneath his heels. At first it was a slight, barely noticeable tremor, but the vibrations seemed to be

growing stronger.

An earthquake...?

The nearby soldiers seemed to have noticed as well, as they all stopped eating and were looking around.

“Is that an earthquake? No... That sounds like galloping!”

At that moment, the men immediately realized what was happening.

“Enemy attack! The enemy’s coming!”

“What are the scouts doing?!”

“What are you lagging behind for?! Now’s no time for breakfast!”

The shouts of a few perceptive soldiers echoed through the formation. The next moment, a shower of arrows rained down from the sky.



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Ecclesia bolted out of Fort Ushas like an arrow cutting through the wind, spurring her horse — which was strengthened by endowed thaumaturgy — forward. It was a speed that did justice to her moniker as ‘The Tempest.’

Five thousand cavaliers led by Ecclesia sped across the earth with the force of a gale. Before long, the tents of the O’ltormean camp were in their line of sight, some three to four hundred meters away. Normally, this would place the cavaliers well within the effective range of enemy archers, but Ecclesia unflinchingly gave her orders.

“Prepare the second volley! No need to conserve arrows — we have plenty! Teach these O’ltormean dogs what ‘death from above’ really means!” Ecclesia called out.

At her vigorous encouragement, the cavaliers drew their bows a second time.

“Fiiiire!” Ecclesia swung her sword down in the direction of the O’ltormean encampment.

Countless arrows whistled as they flew across the still-unlit sky of the Ushas Basin. The cavaliers were armed with unique curved small bows, similar in design to Turkish bows or the short bows used by some nomadic tribes. This was a rather unusual choice, since longbows were typically employed in this world. Or, at the very least, on the western continent.

And while these shortbows were convenient for use on horseback, they of course had their share of flaws. They enabled a high rate of fire and were easy to use while riding, but in exchange, the distance their arrows could travel and the piercing power they packed was significantly inferior to that of a longbow.

But to begin with, bows were seldom used for a reason that’s quite specific to this world. The greatest weapon employed in war on this Earth is the human body, reinforced by martial thaumaturgy. That was the established logic of combat here. On top of that, absorbing the opponent’s prana was exceedingly inefficient when they’re slain from a distance. As such, bows and other long-distance weapons were shunned as methods of offense, and they were only used when besieging a castle or a fortress.

This type of bow was developed by Myest over many months. A great amount of funding was poured into repeatedly reworking it, making it ever lighter and more efficient. It was a cutting-edge weapon by this world's standards. Exploiting its connections formed through intercontinental trade, Myest adapted techniques used on the central continent to independently develop what was very much a merger of technologies.

Unlike a standard bow, which used general wood for its ingredients, these were composite bows that used thin metal plates as a base, reinforced with the bones and fur of different animals. Their strings boasted such tensile strength that a normal person wouldn't be able to draw back this bow.

It matched a crossbow in terms of string tension. A normal person would need to hold this bow against their legs and use their entire body's muscles to draw it, or, alternatively, use a pulley. If nothing else, it wouldn't be easy to use such a bow with the same ease one handled a standard bow, especially not when shooting on horseback.

But knights with their physical prowess augmented by martial thaumaturgy could operate these bows without any strain. Of course, firing from the back of a galloping horse wouldn't allow for the same accuracy one would have when standing on flat ground. But this situation didn't require that they shoot accurately. Their arrows just needed to reach the vast O'ltormean camp. That alone would be enough to rattle the enemy soldiers.

"Looks like the enemy's panicking..." Ecclesia's lieutenant muttered.

"Of course they are," Ecclesia replied with a smirk. "They never imagined we'd strike the first blow here. I suppose in that regard, staying cooped up in those walls for as long as we did paid off."

It was like the smile of a beast cornering its prey. While her usual demeanor was that of an astute noblewoman, Ecclesia's true nature was that of a savage predator — not unlike Ryoma. And if she didn't have such a nature, she wouldn't have climbed up to the rank of general.

"True enough..."

If one were to compare this to boxing, it would be like a competitor sticking to defense for the entirety of the match, only to deliver a crippling counter once

their opponent loses patience and tries to go for a powerful, finishing blow.

“I’m sure you know, but we don’t have to force ourselves to go too far. The next step is already prepared,” Ecclesia said, directing a meaningful gaze to her lieutenant, who nodded deeply.

This lieutenant was a seasoned knight who had served Ecclesia since her first battle. He didn’t need any instructions to know what to do next.

“Have no fear, Lady Ecclesia. We’ll know when to retreat.”

This surprise attack was only meant to hemorrhage the enemy’s army somewhat. It was but one of several layers of a trap that had been laid out to ensnare the O’ltormeans and snuff out their invasion in one crippling blow. And this attack was simply meant to stall the invaders until the trap was ready to be sprung...

“You’re half-hearted and inexperienced, imperial princess...” Ecclesia whispered as she gazed at her aide’s back. “Build up your army as large as you want. It still won’t help you beat me or Lady Helena... Or that man.”

Shardina Eisenheit was a skilled commander, for certain. One could count the number of commanders who stood in the same league as her on one hand. But she had two major flaws.

The first was that she lacked experience in leading large armies. Fundamentally speaking, her strategy of winning with overwhelming numbers was by no means a mistaken one. But that idea wasn’t always the optimal play. The bigger the army, the slower it was to mobilize, and the amount of supplies it consumed grew exponentially larger.

Mobilizing such a large army effectively requires a great deal of either experience or talent. And sadly, Shardina did not seem to appreciate this enough.

Her second flaw was her lack of experience battling generals of a similar caliber to hers. Consequently, Shardina always made the most valid, orthodox choices in terms of tactics and strategy. And on face value, her decisions were by no means mistaken. She had never been defeated in battle, after all.

But that was just because so far, she had only fought foes that were inferior

to her. And for that reason, Ecclesia didn't fear Shardina's O'ltormean army. Setting up a trap for an opponent that would always pick the most surefire, viable way to win was exceedingly easy.

"The curtain rises on our counterattack... Behold the might of the Myestian army, and burn it into your very eyes!"

The idea of an alliance between the three kingdoms of the east and the Kingdom of Helnesgoula to form the Four Kingdom Union certainly sounded good on paper. But when all was said and done, it was an alliance brokered during a time of war. Should a country show weakness or an opportunity present itself... Any of these countries could stab the others in the back.

From that perspective, this war with O'ltormea was an important chance for each country to show off its strength to the other three and make it clear that they were not to be trifled with. And realizing the war was approaching its endgame, Ecclesia played the ace she'd prepared, in order to make a show of Myest's strength...

"Once the enemy falls for it... We retreat!"

Seeing the interior of the enemy formation writhe, Ecclesia Marinelle's shapely features twisted into a smile.

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"I come bearing a message!" a wounded runner burst into Shardina's tent and called out. "The enemy dispatched a force of roughly five thousand to attack us! It seems we've taken several hundreds of losses from their volley!"

The moment that message reached Shardina's ears, her bowl of soup slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. It was so unexpected that her thoughts blanked out for a long moment. Saitou and Celia, who were eating at the same table as her, also reacted with stunned silence. But Shardina soon grasped the situation and raised her voice.

"A surprise attack? What are the scouts doing?!" She glared at the runner with an enraged expression. "I gave clear orders to keep careful watch on any movements from the enemy fortress!"

"M-My apologies, Your Highness!" the runner stammered, quickly giving his

report. “The enemy moved far too quickly, and the scouts’ report simply wasn’t relayed in time!”

The runner had done the best he could given the situation. Ecclesia’s knights simply moved too quickly. Still, the fact remained he failed in his task. He bowed before Shardina, gasping out in pain and revealing an arrow lodged in his shoulder. Shardina clicked her tongue upon seeing this.

“Enough. Send a message to the other units and tell them to prepare for a counterattack at once!”

Despite having ordered caution ahead of time, they were still subject to a surprise attack, and what they needed to do now was prepare for a swift counterattack.

How could this happen...? Just as we’re about to go in for the kill, they do this and take the wind out of our sails...

Shardina was wary of a counterattack from the Xaroodian side, of course, but some part of her was confident that the initiative was entirely in her hands. And Ecclesia took advantage of that weakness in Shardina’s heart.

This is bad... At this rate, the flow of the battle will turn in their favor in one swoop...

Battles had a flow to them, and it was the scramble over who had control over it that decided who wins and who loses.

“Your Highness, wait! We should proceed carefully...” Saitou cut into Shardina’s words, just as she was about to order the counterattack.

“Saitou, you think we have the leisure for that right now?” Shardina said, rising from her chair as if to say there’s no room for argument. “We have superior numbers, and they left their fortress. If now’s not the time to go for the offensive, when is the right time?!”

“But Your Highness, the Xaroodian army has stayed on the defensive for so long. They might be planning something if they decided to go on the offensive now...” Celia tried to stop her.

“That’s right, we should regain our bearings for now!” Saitou said, backing up

Celia’s warning.

True, a raid by a mere two knight orders is unlikely to do any major damage. Even if their initial strike was strong, they wouldn’t be able to follow up on it. Their inferior numbers would eventually lead to them being driven to a corner.

If that was the case, what was Xarooda’s angle in this? Realizing this discrepancy, Shardina took a deep breath.

Relax... Good, stay calm... Now, what could they be trying to achieve with this?

A shower of arrows drawing an arc from above and raining down on them. While it did shave off some of O’ltormea’s numbers, it was by no means a decisive blow. For a preemptive strike, their fusillade did cause Shardina’s side to take surprisingly great losses, but once things shift to a full-blown battle, those numbers will be effectively insignificant. Especially since the knights, who were the central force in the battle, wore heavy iron armor. Arrows would at best inflict light injuries on them.

So they’re just trying to annoy us...? No, that can’t be it...

True, the attackers spoiled the beginning of the battle for O’ltormea, but the confusion would eventually wear off and their chain of command would regain its bearings. And once that happened, these five thousand knights would be far too few to win in a direct clash.

“Maybe this is some kind of decoy?” Saitou asked.

“Are you saying they’re drawing our attention from the front so they can strike from the side?” Shardina furrowed her well-shaped brows.

She then fell silent, and snuck a glance in Celia’s direction.

“No, I don’t believe so. The ground around our camp is mostly flat, and our visibility is too good.”

“Right... I can’t imagine they’ll switch to such an impatient method...”

“Of course, that’s not to say that it’s impossible, but...”

Xarooda’s policy in the early stages of the siege was consistent. They holed up in their fortress to minimize their losses, and linked up with the forts located

across the surrounding mountains to exploit their locational advantage and hold their defensive position. The chances of them suddenly changing their strategy were unlikely.

So why are they doing this now, after all this...?

Any action had to have meaning behind it, and what decides battles is how fast one can read their opponent's intentions. As Shardina placed a finger on her fair chin and pondered, the voice of a messenger outside the tent answered her doubts.

"I bring a report! Part of our army has broken from the formation. They've gone in pursuit of the Xaroodian cavaliers and are approaching Fort Ushas!"

The moment Shardina heard that report, everything clicked into place in her mind. The image that appeared in her mind's eye made a shiver creep down her spine.

It can't be... Why did they sortie? They were... lured in...? No, is that what they're after?!

That fear turned into conviction when the man standing at the entrance to the tent spoke sarcastically. Standing there with a cloak and hood so as to hide his identity, Sudou spoke with his usual ill-natured smile.

"This is something of a bad development for us, and it could be a fatal one depending on how things develop... Mr. Saitou, you should gather the knights. I've already asked Sir Rolfe to do so, but head over and help him to be on the safe side. That should put Her Highness at ease. We don't want the soldiers to run wild any longer, after all."

"Mr. Sudou, what are you saying...?" Saitou, who hadn't gotten a grasp on the situation yet, tried to walk up to Sudou.

However, Shardina held up a hand to stop him from doing so.

"Saitou, I'm sorry, but go at once. Just follow Rolfe's orders," she said, and then fell silent.

She then took a breath and ordered him with all the force she could muster.

"Understood? Don't let any more of our soldiers sortie!"

Time was of the essence. Shardina trusted in Rolfe's capabilities as a commander, but she needed to be sure. Like Sudou said, if any more of their soldiers were to break formation, the invasion army could take a crippling blow.

Spurred by the strong light in Shardina's eyes, Saitou stopped his questioning and ran out of the tent.

"It seems the enemy's beginning to move in earnest... Helena Steiner and Ecclesia Marinelle, I believe. They seem to have a good grasp on our status. Their reputation as seasoned generals is well-earned, it seems. Depending on how our army moves, things could develop quite badly..."

Sudou spoke with an amused smile on his lips. To him, this was all just a game, and the more difficult it becomes the more satisfying it is.

"Shut your insolent mouth already, Sudou!" Shardina flared up in anger at his sarcastic smile.

Sudou simply shrugged. Shardina glared at him and then sat down on a chair.

"Aaah, God of light, Meneos... Give your protection to Saitou and Rolfe... They must make it in time..." Shardina muttered a prayer, which was something she hardly ever did.

Celia, who stood beside her, still didn't seem to understand the situation.

"Your Highness... What's going on...?" she asked.

Shardina opened her fists, which she'd clenched while praying, and buried her face in her palms. Celia couldn't help but mouth those words in surprise.

All things in creation are linked together by causality. That held true for both Ryoma's world, governed as it was by science, and this world, which was ruled over by mystical powers. Cause always preceded effect.

There's some kind of problem... A major issue that'll influence our army's movements going forward... But what is it...?

There must have been some kind of meaning to Shardina's and Sudou's concerned attitudes. As she watched Shardina's back, still sitting with her face covered, Celia racked her brains for the answer.

I'm here as a military commander. I have to think. What do we know right

now...? Think back to what happened since that runner came in with his report.

The conversations that filled this tent since the report of Xarooda's surprise attack was delivered crossed Celia's mind one more time. It was then that Celia finally realized something.

Wait... What did that runner say? Part of our army sortied...?

And then, what Sudou said came to mind.

Sudou said something. Letting our soldiers run wild any longer could be fatal... Run wild? So they're deploying differently from what Her Highness has planned. They've been lured out of their formation... So the enemy unit that launched that surprise attack was just a decoy... So the unit that sortied is...

Having thought this far, all the pieces fell into place in Celia's mind.

Sudou said that depending on how many units move out, it could influence how things develop... And they sent Saitou and Sir Rolfe to gather the knights and keep them in check.

It all led up to a conclusion that was far too terrifying to put into words.

"This attack was a decoy..." Celia muttered. "And what awaits the units that fell for the bait and went after the enemy unit is..."

Shardina glared at Celia for speaking those words. Her eyes were full of rage and sorrow — proof that Celia had just come to the ruthlessly correct answer.

Shardina and Celia gazed at each other in silence, and at their side, Sudou remained with his constant, indomitable smile. But as they did this, the silence was broken by a knight that hurried into the tent. He must have run in quite the hurry, since he fell to one knee before Shardina before he could even catch his breath.

"I come bearing a message! Sir Saitou and Sir Rolfe have successfully gathered their respective units!"

The report made Celia sigh with relief. Rolfe was originally placed in charge of defending their fortress in the rear, but the fact that he was now here in the Ushas Basin was a small mercy for them now. Shardina's decision to pluck manpower from their defensive positions to secure their victory in this all-out

offensive had benefited them in an unexpected way.

Only a dignified, accomplished man like Rolfe could curb the soldiers' panic. Saitou was by no means a bad commander either, but this situation was likely too complicated for him. Celia smiled in relief. Shardina, however, remained as grave as she was before.

"How many troops broke formation without permission?"

"Yes, Your Highness!" the runner said. "As far as we've confirmed, roughly eight thousand men centered around three knight orders — the third, fifth, and eighth orders from the eastern front."

Shardina clicked her tongue in frustration. If this attack was meant to lure O'ltormea's soldiers into a trap, their chances of returning alive were slim.

Eight thousand... That's more than I expected. They aimed for the reinforcements we collected from the eastern front... They know my command over them is weak...

Most of the units that charged forward without Shardina's permission were ones called in as emergency reinforcements. The O'ltormea Empire had vast territories, but it was having an adverse effect on this war. While all the units gathered in this camp were part of the O'ltormean military, these units were different from those that had operated under her command for years, and admittedly, Shardina hadn't put them to good use.

"Sir Rolfe is requesting permission to deploy in order to assist them, Your Highness," the runner said.

Shardina fell silent. If she chose to do nothing, the eight thousand soldiers that were lured away would likely die. But is marching into what might very well be a trap truly wise...?

"I do believe the correct decision is to cut our losses," Sudou said as Shardina remained speechless.

Even in the face of this crisis, Sudou remained as relaxed and cheery as ever.

"Cut our losses?" Celia cocked her head, not quite understanding what Sudou meant.

The turn of expression struck her as unfamiliar. If nothing else, she had never heard it before.

“Yes, cut our losses. Trying to save them now would just be widening the wound, and only serve to push us into a situation we truly cannot recover from. Put more simply, by tolerating certain losses to a certain degree, we prevent the damage from spreading further.”

‘Cut your losses’ was a term from the world of stock trading, which simply meant defining one’s losses. For example, suppose a rising stock starts losing value soon after one buys it. Of course, stock prices fluctuate daily, so one could choose to hold on to such a stock if one believes its value will increase.

But the stock could just as easily keep falling. A one hundred yen stock could cost ninety yen on the following day. In which case, one loses ten yen in the process. Should said person believe that the value would go back to one hundred yen in a few days, they might elect not to sell the stock. But if they sense the stock would only continue to drop in value, they can define their loss as just ten yen and discard the stock.

That was cutting one’s losses. Doing this minimizes losses. So when Sudou said they should cut their losses, he effectively meant...

“Are you saying we shouldn’t send out forces to save them?” Shardina glared at Sudou hatefully, and Celia swallowed nervously.

This was, in a way, a betrayal of the soldiers’ trust.

“Of course, should you insist on it, Your Highness, I will send out a rescue force to assist them...” Sudou said, a detestable smile on his lips. “But at the risk of coming across as rude, I should note that if we do send out a rescue force, we should prepare ourselves for the situation to worsen. Sending out reinforcements now would simply result in them being wiped out one by one.”

Sudou’s expression seemed to spell out a single message: ‘The decision is yours. Now decide.’

“And you give me this advice knowing full well what will happen if I *do* take it?” Shardina asked, directing a hateful gaze at the man.

This was an emotion she had never before directed at Sudou.

Akitake Sudou... Confidant of the now deceased Gaius Valkland...

As utterly irritating as Sudou was, she had to acknowledge his strength as a warrior and ingenuity when it came to tactics. Indeed, he simply said what needed to be said at this given moment, and Shardina understood this.

But it is said that good advice is the kind that hurts the most to hear.

“Of course. Not sending out a rescue force and leaving them to die will greatly diminish our army’s morale. But the problem is that whichever choice we make, we will take some losses. In which case, we ought to pick the path where we lose the least... If we cannot pick the best possible scenario, we must pick the second best one.”

Sudou’s analysis was correct. Leaving their troops to die after recognizing they were marching into a trap would certainly damage their troops’ morale.

“So you’re telling me to choose between my soldiers’ morale and maintaining our numbers...” Shardina once again bit into her thumb’s nail unintentionally.

If I don’t send out the rescue force, the soldiers will become disgruntled with my command... At worst, they might even rebel against me... But sending out a rescue force when there’s a high chance of a trap will just make us take more damage from this situation... And if that happens, the soldiers will start having doubts about my command anyway...

Either choice would cost the O’ltormea Empire greatly, and would go on to stall the invasion of Xarooda still more. Shardina couldn’t tell which choice she should make, and in all likelihood, there wasn’t a correct answer in this situation.

This was what was called a catch-22 in Ryoma’s world. However, Shardina couldn’t afford not to make a choice in this situation. And true to Sudou’s words, everything was riding on Shardina’s shoulders. Such was the responsibility of one leading an army.

“Fine...” She eventually made her choice bitterly.

After a long silence, Shardina eventually parted her lips. But the words she intended to say next would never reach the ears of the people in this tent.

“I come bearing terrible news! I must have an audience with Princess Shardina at once!”

Because a new runner burst through the entrance, drowning them out forever...

†

The sun sets, and a curtain of darkness settles over the area. Helena is seated in the room allotted to her in Fort Ushas, sipping from the goblet in her hands as she gazes out into the darkness outside her window. The strong liquor slithers down her throat and makes a feeling of warmth blossom through her insides.

Helena wasn’t usually one for alcohol, but at times, being on the battlefield gave her the urge to drink in excess. Especially after battles... Normally, she would think back to her now deceased comrades in times of old.

But right now, a single woman was occupying Helena’s mind. A young maiden, clad in brilliant armor. Her face was whited out, as if a fog was hanging over it, obscuring it from sight. The sworn confidante of Lionel Eisenheit, O’ltormea’s emperor: his beloved daughter.

“I’ll admit I was surprised... I was sure she would send out a rescue force. She’s colder than I thought. Perhaps I took her lightly...?”

Heaving a small sigh, Helena turned her gaze to Ecclesia, who was sitting opposite her. Helena tipped the bottle into Ecclesia’s goblet.

“Personally, I think her judgment was stellar,” Ecclesia said with a composed smile. “She was able to realize we’d sprung a trap. Well, I suppose that level of judgment is what I’d expect out of an army’s commander...”

In practice, Shardina’s decision not to rescue the lured forces was a correct one. However, all it meant was that she avoided the worst scenario possible.

“I suppose,” Helena regarded Ecclesia’s words with a small nod and took another sip.

“But this raises the question of how she will regain her men’s trust,” Ecclesia said.

“Who knows? People’s hearts can be quite complicated... And so, it depends on how well she can understand that.”

Helena admitted that, had she been in Shardina’s position, she wouldn’t be able to come up with a perfect solution either.

The soldiers will likely feel that they’re being treated as disposable pawns...

Helena thought back to a book from Rearth she’d once read. It was an old book detailing the warring states period of a certain country, and contained within it was a certain proverb.

Make a costly sacrifice in the course of justice.

China’s *Annals of the Three Kingdoms* told of Ma Su, a wise strategist from the country of Shu Han. He was a promising youth who’d been acknowledged by the genius general Zhuge Liang. But one time, Ma Su ignored Zhuge Liang’s orders and suffered a grave defeat in battle.

True to military discipline, Zhuge Liang mercilessly sentenced Ma Su to death. The other generals, knowing full well of how much Zhuge Liang cherished Ma Su, unanimously asked that Ma Su be pardoned for his failure, but Zhuge Liang did not budge from his decision, and abided by the laws of the military. And so, with tears streaming down his cheeks, Zhuge Liang severed Ma Su’s head.

This story’s lesson is that no matter how close or talented a person might be, one must never bend the law when it comes to punishing them. But this was, of course, the reasoning of a general. Upon hearing this story, Helena also gleaned a different lesson from it.

What matters is performance... The way others see you.

Soldiers cherished their own lives. Even a commander’s finest troops might not be ideal. In the context of that story, whether Zhuge Liang cries or laughs, it doesn’t matter to Ma Su, whose head is to be severed.

The tears Zhuge Liang shed weren’t for Ma Su, to begin with. The point was to make the other generals see that he had shed tears, and in so doing, retain their trust and faith. Zhuge Liang understood that no matter how strict military regulations may be, severing Ma Su’s head without a hint of emotion would tarnish his popularity.

This case was similar to Zhuge Liang's. The Igasaki clan's spies who were mingled among the O'ltormean army had told them that Shardina had realized the trap Helena and Ecclesia had set up and ordered her army not to deploy. And as a general in charge of a whole army, Shardina's choice was correct.

But doing so meant abandoning the eight thousand O'ltormean troops lured out by seeing Ecclesia's cavalry retreat to Fort Ushas. Grahalt's troops then descended on the O'ltormeans from the mountains, striking at their defenseless flanks. This resulted in massive losses among the lured troops. While the numbers were not yet fully accounted for, an estimated nine-tenths of the lured troops were wiped out.

This left Shardina with a very critical problem — the hearts of the several hundred soldiers that survived the trap. Shardina must have regretted the fact that any of them survived at all, since the survivors likely resented the fact Shardina didn't dispatch any reinforcements to help them. Even if she were to hide behind the excuse of them breaking orders, the overall trust in her command would be greatly diminished.

And that disgruntlement was bound to spread to the other units waiting under her command. The anxiety that they were but disposable pawns to their commander would weigh down on all her soldiers...

Stating her reasoning wouldn't be enough to prevent this, but the real question was whether Shardina Eisenheit was aware of this.

"I'd assume a youngling like her wouldn't know that much," Helena concluded. "She may be experienced with wars, but she'd only ever won with the might of O'ltormea's national power behind her. She doesn't have the experience to tip the scales back in O'ltormea's favor once it has lost the advantage."

"I agree. She might be fearsome in the future, but right now she's an infant." Ecclesia nodded with a smile on her lips like that of the strong watching the weak flounder at their feet.

As talented and intelligent as she was, from Helena's and Ecclesia's perspective, Shardina was still a baby bird. Even if she might be a phoenix chick who will one day grow mighty and powerful, she was still only a chick for now.

Her lack of experience on the field was overwhelming, especially when it came to fighting from a position of inferiority and walking away from it alive. Talented though she might be, that lack of experience in cheating death while in the throes of bloody combat meant her ability to function as a general was lacking.

To Helena and Ecclesia, all Shardina was capable of doing was simply smashing armies together, like a child might bash toys against each other. They could see right through her all too easily. Of course, the fact that she could claim the life of Xarooda's Guardian Deity despite that inexperience was proof of her outstanding leadership skills.

"Still, we can't be confident we've won yet," Ecclesia said. "They have that man, Rolfe, on their side, and Celia Valkland, the newly appointed court thaumaturgist. And the vice captain of the Succubus Knights and Shardina's lieutenant, Hideaki Saitou. They're all quite capable..."

"The Shield of the Emperor..." Helena nodded gravely.

Rolfe Estherkent has been the Emperor Lionel Eisenheit's closest aide ever since O'ltormea was but a small kingdom in the heart of the western continent. His skill far exceeded that of an ordinary commander.

In a battle that took place on the Notis Plains 30 years ago, Helena and the deceased General Belares pushed back O'ltormea's invasion and became national heroes. But when O'ltormea's military started retreating and was subject to a valiant pursuit by Helena's and General Belares's army, one commander escaped their clutches.

Since O'ltormea was forced to retreat, this wasn't well-known among the people. But Helena, who had directly fought against the man, would never forget Rolfe Estherkent. His tremendous skill with defensive battles and retreats made him indeed worthy of the title Shield of the Emperor.

The Igasaki spies reported that his skill in calming down and suppressing the soldiers' desire to pursue their raiders was indeed masterful. Had it not been for him, Ecclesia would have likely lured thousands more from O'ltormea's ranks into the trap. And Saitou also helped quell the soldiers' rampage. Neither of them was to be looked down upon.

“The rest depends on her aides’ skill, I suppose...” Ecclesia said pensively.

“Yes,” Helena nodded. “And then there’s the matter of that hooded man helping Shardina. We don’t know who he is, either... We can’t afford to be careless now.”

They had a good grasp of Shardina’s abilities, but the rest hinged on how much her aides could achieve. This defeat could actually serve to make Shardina grow, helping her develop into a truly monstrous commander.

But either way, this war wasn’t over yet.

“Well, racking our brains over this now won’t yield us any results. For now, let us rejoice over our victory today,” Helena said, lifting up her goblet.

“Yes, Grahalt did better than I expected. I think we’ve cut down six to seven thousand of the enemy today...” Ecclesia lifted her own goblet up to match Helena.

But contrary to her words, her expression was dissatisfied. Her surprise attack struck at O’ltormea’s camp and lured out the soldiers, after which Grahalt then proceeded to launch a second surprise attack from the flank and decimate their forces. The core of the tactic was the double-layered surprise attacks.

And while the ploy had been a success, Ecclesia still felt like it hadn’t done enough.

“For how much time and effort we put into this plan, I can’t help but feel like we’ve achieved too little. Nothing to be done about it now, however. We should be satisfied with this... For now, at least.”

Helena regarded her words with a strained smile. They did spend a great deal of time and sacrifices to pull off this trap. The reason Ecclesia and Helena remained holed up in the fortress after the reinforcements arrived was for this day — this moment.

So the question remained. Did six to seven thousand troops truly measure up to all the preparation and effort they’d put into this trap? Helena was hard pressed to decide, one way or another.

“We’ve done more than well enough at stalling them, and we never planned

to decide the war here, anyway. We should probably be satisfied with this," Helena eventually concluded with a shrug of her shoulders.

"So you say, but with this we have no more cards up our sleeve..." Ecclesia shook her head. "We've used up our cavalry archers, after all. The only thing we can do now is hide in this fortress and focus on defense."

Even so, there wasn't even the shadow of anxiety on her expression. Because she believed in a single man, who was now gouged deep into O'ltormean territory like a wedge.

A vigorous knock came from the door to Helena's room, as if the goddess of fate herself had been calling for them...

"I come bearing ill tidings, Lady Helena!" a knight called out from behind the door. "The O'ltormean army is moving about in a flurry!"

Helena and Ecclesia nodded at one another.

"I believe it is beginning, Lady Ecclesia."

"Yes, so it seems..."

Ecclesia didn't need to ask what Helena had meant. That day's battle had struck a painful blow not only to O'ltormea's numbers, but also their soldiers' morale. It was unimaginable they would mount a night assault under those conditions. In which case, this could only mean one thing.

They had believed in him. If they hadn't, Helena wouldn't have simply remained on the defensive in Fort Ushas. But even still, she hadn't been able to help but harbor a hint of anxiety in the depths of her heart.

"You really did it, Ryoma..." Helena muttered his name with an exclamation of surprise and admiration.

The war between Xarooda and O'ltormea, which had begun over a year ago with the battle for the Notis Plains, was finally approaching its conclusion. Thanks to the power of that one man...

Chapter 5: The Church of Meneos

The southern region of the western continent was dotted with several small kingdoms that were in a constant state of warfare. It was the most closely contested region of the continent, and there was always fighting taking place at one point or another.

At the western tip of that region, bordering one of the greatest nations of the continent, the Holy Empire of Qwiltantia, was a city. Its name was the Holy Capital, Menestia. A city of stonework that stood at the center of vast plains.

It was said that Menestia was built in ancient times by the holy men instructed by the gods, and their many followers. This great city was the largest base of operations for the Church of Meneos.

At the heart of this great city was a massive temple. But in truth, it was not so much a temple as it was a castle. One wouldn't expect to find clergymen working in the service of God living in such a lofty structure.

Of course, one who made such a statement would bring upon themselves the ire of the Church of Meneos's zealous believers, who would brand it as an insult to the faith. But the city was covered by three layers of walls and a moat that drew on a branch of the nearby Uranoa River to stave off invaders.

The temple at Menestia's center looked like a place of worship in appearance, but it was also protected by its own moat and the road leading up to it was closely guarded by fully-armed, elite soldiers. So despite appearances, one would be hard-pressed to call this a mere place of worship.

Sitting in his room in the temple was one Rodney Mackenna, slumped over with his cheek against the desk as he looked at the clouds through the open window. The gentle sunlight enveloped his body, inducing a tempting sleepiness in his mind.

I haven't gotten a good night's sleep lately, have I...?

With that thought in mind, Rodney suppressed a yawn. Ever since they'd

returned from their garrison in Beldzevia a few days ago, things had been so anxious he hadn't been able to sleep well... Though, while he called it a few days ago, it had in fact been several months since they'd returned. By now, he'd have long finished his reports and gotten used to his life in the capital again.

But the question of how to handle the burden he'd picked up on his way back to the capital was the source of his anxieties. His work had piled up, and he couldn't afford to slack off. But his eyelids grew heavier by the second, and before long, Rodney's consciousness sank into the dark quagmire of slumber.

"I see you live in quite comfortable conditions. You push all your paperwork onto your poor lieutenant and snore the afternoon away, Captain... No wonder Cardinal Barugath has his eye on you."

A sharp, cold glare yanked Rodney's consciousness awake like a splash of icy water. His lieutenant and fraternal half-sister, Menea Norberg, regarded him with a gaze as sharp as a pair of daggers, to which Rodney shrugged despite himself. Menea typically simply referred to him as 'Captain.' Her demeanor was no different from their mission a few days ago, when they led their unit on punitive duty.

The other members called him leader, while Menea called him Captain. But that was only when other people were around. When they were by themselves, they typically called each other by their first names. Assuming, of course...that Menea wasn't in a foul mood.

Menea had known Rodney for a long time. When their father passed away suddenly, Rodney was 12 years of age and a prestigious noble of the Kingdom of Tarja. When he inherited the headship and the count title of House Mackenna, Menea was introduced to him as his half-sister from another mother.

They'd been working together for some ten-odd years since, and having spent so long together, they could recognize each other's state of mind just by their tone of voice. And right now, Rodney could tell Menea's heart was seething with anger. The veritable mountain of paperwork he'd entrusted her with seemed to have left her in quite the bad mood. Or maybe she was just annoyed at him dozing off.

Whichever it was, Rodney knew to keep his head down and keep quiet as he waited for the storm to pass him by.

“Wipe yourself off with this. You’re drooling.” With resentful eyes, Menea took a silk handkerchief out of her pocket and reached it out to him.

Apparently, the sunlight was so pleasant Rodney fell asleep in mid-yawn, and his mouth was left hanging open.

“Ooh. Sorry, thanks...” Rodney said as he hurriedly wiped off his mouth and chin.

Menea was two years younger than Rodney, but anyone looking at them now would assume she was the older sibling.

“I swear, Captain, you’re a grown man, not a child... And I’m certainly not your mother.” Nemea grumbled and heaved a large sigh.

Rodney was admittedly a spoiled noble child, and even upon reaching adulthood his ability to live independently was essentially non-existent. When he lived in Tarja, he’d never needed to go out to buy his own things, nor did he even recall how much money he had in his wallet. He was so detached from the common life that he’d once handed his wallet to a beggar, who was soon after promptly arrested by the guards for presumed theft.

Incidentally, it was only because Nemea asked Rodney where his wallet was that the beggar was spared from incarceration. She hurriedly looked around for him and somehow managed to explain things away. At worst, the poor beggar could have been executed for grand larceny. Nemea was relieved to have prevented that bit of needless bloodshed, to say the least.

Rodney acted out of the kindness of his heart, that much was for certain, but the sum he’d handed the beggar was much too large. To a stupendous extent. The beggar was likely shocked when he opened the wallet and found several dozen gold coins — when a single gold was enough for a commoner to live comfortably on for an entire year.

The sum in his hands was enough to live on for a good 20 years. If he went to one of the frontier regions, he could easily buy a house and a farm with this money. Running into such money was a turning point that could redeem his

entire life.

Of course, the beggar had rejoiced so much from the discovery that his behavior had struck everyone around as suspicious. And it wasn't long before the guards came to question him. Had it only been a few silvers perhaps his story would have seemed more credible, but he had a wallet full of golds. They didn't believe his story about how a noble had handed him the wallet.

No noble — no matter how generous — would have any reason to grant this much money to a random beggar. It was like handing over a suitcase filled with dollar bills to a random stranger on the street.

This all went to show how detached Rodney's upbringing had been. And indeed, if Menea wasn't there to look out for him, it was doubtful he'd have reached the rank of knight captain, or even made it to Menestia alive after fleeing Tarja's capital.

Then again, if he wasn't so naively kind, he wouldn't do anything as whimsical and strange as saving an otherworlder he happened to run into in the woods.

"You must really be tired. Does that girl really bother you that much?" Menea asked.

There could be no other reason Rodney would be this tired right now. As she watched Rodney rub his eyes tiredly, Menea let out a deep, exasperated sigh. Of course, it wasn't that Menea disliked Asuka Kiryuu. After all, Menea's own mother was an otherworlder from America, plus she always found Asuka's tales of the Land of the Rising Sun fascinating. And the more she got to know this girl, the more Menea came to realize Asuka wasn't suited for this world.

Had Rodney not found her in the forest when he did, she'd likely have been picked up by some slave merchant and sold off by now. And once she'd become a slave, there'd be no more salvation available to her. She'd be someone else's plaything until the day she died, or until she drew the curtain on her life of her own accord.

Menea had seen people who had stumbled into this world from Rearth meet such fates more than once. That was why Menea never blamed or judged Rodney for saving Asuka's life. If anything, she took pride in her paternal half-brother's kindness. But she couldn't help but ask herself why he had to be so

preoccupied with her.

I don't want to consider it, but...

The most likely possibility was that Rodney had become smitten with Asuka. Menea admitted that Asuka was an attractive young woman, and Rodney was a 26 year old man. Asuka was apparently going to turn either 17 or 18 this year, so the difference in their ages wasn't inappropriately vast.

Of course, had they been in Japan, the Juvenile Protection Ordinance might have frowned upon such a couple, but those were Rearth's standards. In this world, a couple with that kind of age difference was seen as perfectly valid. Not just nobles, but even commoners would marry at those ages.

And knowing Rodney as well as she did, Nemea knew Asuka's appearance was to his liking.

But... Does that really make sense?

Rodney Mackenna was quite the late-bloomer when it came to matters of romance. Or perhaps calling him a romantic dreamer would be more apt. But even so, since Rodney was heir to a count's house, his relatives had brought in many arranged marriage proposals for him to consider. All of which he'd refused... Which was exceedingly unusual in aristocratic society.

For the nobility, marriage was a means of holding onto one's house and title. And it was a means of tightening the bonds between different noble families. Romantic affection had little sway in the matter.

Of course, it was perfectly probable and even advisable for a married couple to learn to love and cherish one another. But the unfortunate fact of the matter was that nobles lacked the privilege to freely marry whomever they love. And so, a noble in love faced the choice of either forcing their will and discarding their house and title, or simply believing in their heart that they would be reunited with their beloved in the next life.

Menea's suspicions, however, proved false.

"Yeah, I just can't help but think about it..." Rodney muttered evasively.

This made Menea's expression change. She couldn't serve as his personal aide

if she was too blunt, or couldn’t sense the severity behind his words.

“You mean... That katana?” Menea asked.

“Yeah,” Rodney nodded deeply. “There’s no mistaking this, it’s a thaumaturgy sword... Unfortunately.”



Nemea couldn’t help but swallow nervously at his words. She had a sneaking suspicion this could be the case, and apparently her intuition didn’t fail her. But Menea had to ask Rodney a second time.

After all, it simply couldn’t be true.

“You’re sure of it?”

“Yeah, positive. One of my off-duty evenings, I had Asuka lend it to me for the night... and ended up staying up until morning, looking into it.”

Upon hearing his explanation, Menea got the sinking feeling that they’d become involved in something that was much bigger than they first assumed.

Asuka’s katana is a thaumaturgy sword... I can’t believe it...

The existence of a thaumaturgy sword wasn’t all that unusual in and of itself. True, the sword was a fearsome weapon. It had slashed through a three-eyed tiger — with a massive body weighing 500 kilograms and a face that was as hard as iron — with a single slash and without suffering so much as a dent.

It was clear that the sword had a seal of preservation carved into it, as thaumaturgic weapons commonly did. On top of that, the change that had overcome Asuka upon wielding it was stark evidence.

In that case, reaching the conclusion that said katana — Ouka — was a thaumaturgy sword wasn’t difficult. But the fact that this dangerous weapon was in the hands of a girl who had just been summoned from Rearth changed everything. How could Asuka, who had been summoned from a world without any thaumaturgy, have gotten her hands on such a weapon? Especially given the caliber of its power, which put it on par with the most prized and rare weapons of this world — a demon sword...

“But if that’s the case...”

“Yeah, you’re probably on the right track there, Nemea...”

Asuka already told them of what had happened when she came to this world. She was called to this world with two other men — Tachibana and Kusuda. Moments before the seal of enslavement could be applied to her, her grandfather Kouichirou Mikoshiba burst into the scene and saved her. With that

story in mind, there was only one plausible conclusion.

“So it really is true...”

“Yes, if what Asuka told us is true, this Kouichirou Mikoshiba person had already been to this world once before and somehow used thaumaturgy to return to Rearth. And when Asuka was summoned, he came back here... It’s honestly hard to believe...”

This story was impossible given the logic of this world. In this world’s thousands of years of recorded history, there wasn’t a single example of someone successfully returning to Rearth after coming to this world.

“Did you tell Asuka?”

“No... I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I don’t need to explain why, right?” Rodney said bitterly and sighed.

Menea realized why he wasn’t getting any sleep.

So that’s what happened... He can’t tell anyone else about this... However unwillingly, Rodney’s ended up carrying an absurd burden on his back...

Something that couldn’t possibly be real had happened. If Ouka truly was a thaumaturgy sword, Kouichirou Mikoshiba must have visited this world before. But if there was a chance that had happened, it could only be traced back to one thing.

“The organization...?” Menea asked.

Rodney nodded wordlessly. Countless countries vied for dominion over the western continent. But only a precious few people knew that unlike those countries, who had fought openly, two groups fought for control of the continent from behind the scenes.

One of them was the group Rodney was associated with — the Church of Meneos. This religious institution was involved with countless activities among the many churches that dotted the continent. Its power and influence extended beyond the scope of any single country, and some of its actions did make it seem like the de-facto ruler of the continent.

Their objective was to curb the escalating hostility between the different

countries and maintain order. Or, at least, such was their professed goal. The truth of the matter was very different. Summoning people from Rearth and enslaving them was but the most basic of their methods. Abduction, assassination, and subversive activities were typical parts of their modus operandi.

The sad truth of the matter was that even if they were intent on keeping the peace, platitudes and good will would get them nowhere. But even so, once one's methods go too far, their actions become crimes. And in that regard, they weren't a religious organization so much as a secret society.

But even the Church of Meneos had a rival to contend against. Or rather, rumor had it that such a rival existed. That group was merely called 'the organization.' The Church of Meneos had heard of its existence several decades ago, and ever since, they'd devoted much of their abundant manpower and funds toward looking into it.

Still, no matter how much they investigated this mysterious group, they found nothing about the identity of its operatives, to say nothing of its leader. They had no idea where its base might have even been. Some of the church's leaders doubted its existence altogether.

We might be terrified of an illusion...

But Rodney and Menea knew it existed, and knew just how vast its power and influence was... Because it was that organization that drove Rodney and Menea to cast aside their country.

The organization fundamentally acted behind the scenes, cloaking its existence from sight. They hardly ever acted out in the open. But their strength was so vast that a single country's knight orders were no match for them.

Rodney knew this because they had shown themselves to be able to fight equally against the Temple Knights, the greatest military force the Church of Meneos possesses.

It happened 10 years ago. With their invasion halted by an alliance formed between Helena Steiner and Arios Belares, the Empire of O'ltormea's burning expansionism remained unsated, and they turned their spears on the southern kingdoms.

Sensing their movements were a potential threat, the Church of Meneos cooperated with the Holy Empire of Qwiltantia and sent an expedition to assist the southern kingdoms in forming a front against O'ltormea.

That would go on to be called the Battle of Indigoa — a skirmish that rivaled the first battle of Notis in its ferocity. It was there that the Church of Meneos encountered a certain unit at whose hands they suffered a bitter defeat — an encounter that made them acknowledge, without a doubt, that the organization existed.

Five thousand regular knights were deployed for that expedition, along with another 5000 Temple Knights. That made up a fifth of the total forces the Church of Meneos possessed. On face value, the sheer numbers of this army meant it was a force to be reckoned with.

After all, the Temple Knights were much more skilled and proficient than the small countries' knights. By the guild's standards, the strength of their average knights was at about four, and the knights forming the core of the knight orders were level five and above.

When translated to the standards of a knight order, that meant their ranking was extremely high. Meanwhile, a regular O'ltormean imperial guard knight was a mere level three. This alone said all there was to say about how much stronger the Temple Knights typically were.

But even this order of elites was utterly decimated.

Worse yet, the captain of the Temple Knights was killed by the enemy. That captain's level was level six — a level achievable only by those capable of activating the sixth chakra located between one's brows — the Ajna chakra. Very few people can achieve this feat, and that captain's strength was a match for a thousand.

As such, the news of such a transcendent warrior falling in battle all too easily was a great shock for the leaders of the Church of Meneos. Mainly because they knew nothing about the enemy unit's official affiliation, to say nothing of the identity of the man who slew the captain.

The official records said they were a mixed unit gathered together by the guild, but the Church of Meneos knew better than to swallow that story. If that

were true, it meant that a person who was essentially one of the strongest people alive was walking among the adventurers and mercenaries of the guild. And that, in and of itself, wasn't information the Church of Meneos could tolerate as they sought the stability of the content.

It was then that the church admitted the existence of the organization that was, until then, merely a rumor. And ever since, they'd employed all the power they had throughout the continent to gather information on them. But even so, the organization still remained as shadowy and unknown as ever. Where were they situated, the size of their group, what were their objectives... it was all enveloped in darkness.

It was clear that this organization possessed vast influence.

I don't know if this Kouichirou Mikoshiba is a member of the organization or somehow related to them, but... If he is, it's the worst possible thing that could happen.

After all, as far as Menea knew, the Church of Meneos had never put any effort into developing a technique to return otherworlders to Rearth. Even a single summon cost a small fortune in terms of the catalysts needed to facilitate the ritual. If anyone were keen on returning an otherworlder home, it would cost at least the same sum in expenses.

Furthermore, Rearth God's name wasn't known in this world, so any attempt to return an otherworlder home would be pointless unless one discovered that god's name. That in and of itself would be a project on a national scale, requiring a great deal of materials and manpower. The endeavor would require funding rivaling that of a country's military budget.

But if anyone was gracious enough to want to return an otherworlder home, they wouldn't be summoning them to begin with. That was true for any nation in this world, not just on the western continent.

In which case, there were two possibilities to explain Kouichirou Mikoshiba's mystery. The first was that he somehow stumbled onto an interstice between worlds, and by a stroke of unrivaled luck returned to Rearth with two thaumaturgy swords in hand. The other was that this organization had somehow developed a method of returning otherworlders to Rearth.

Both options were absurd, but the latter felt much more realistic than him being lucky enough to achieve the impossible. And the most problematic part was that if the Church of Meneos's people were to learn of it, they would come to the same conclusion.

No matter what, we can't let this matter leak out...

The church treated the matter of the organization with extreme caution. If it was discovered that Asuka might hold any kind of information regarding the organization, they would care little for her wellbeing or survival. She'd be subjected to relentless, merciless questioning. And at the end of that, she would likely die from the torture.

No... Given her fair appearance and status as an otherworlder, the members of the church might even make her their plaything. It was said that children born to otherworlders tended to inherit their parents' traits easily. Indeed, many of the Temple Knights had otherworlder blood running through their veins, lending credence to that theory.

Death by torture or being someone's plaything. Neither of those were options that Menea — who saw herself as something of a sister to Asuka — wanted to see in that girl's future.

"So... What do you intend to do?" she asked.

Rodney shrugged.

"That's the problem right there... Nothing comes to mind. Do you have any ideas?"

Menea shook her head. She couldn't come up with any ideas either. Even without the matter of the organization, leaving Asuka here in the holy capital was still too dangerous. Her appearance alone drew unneeded attention to her, and even without that, defending her from the animals prowling all around them was the most Menea could manage.

Recently, even leading captains in the Temple Knights had been making passes at her. Thankfully, Rodney had his position as a leader of ten of the Church of Meneos's ordinary knights orders, as well as his connections from Tarja. He was also acquainted with several cardinals and even the archbishop.

Said knights couldn't do anything too forceful.

Even so, Rodney's adherence to the doctrine and life of honorable poverty meant many people saw him as a nuisance, and at worst, he himself could be hurt from any disputes that break out. The memory of how Rodney was dispatched on a long-term mission with a small force of soldiers as punishment for punching an obnoxious cardinal was still fresh in Menea's memory. Had those close to him not pulled some strings, Rodney would have squandered away the rest of his life in the backwater lands of Beldzevia.

But even so, doing what they'd originally planned and sending Asuka out into the world with a bit of money was a dubious choice to make. There wasn't much of a problem in terms of her abilities, even though she was barely keeping up with the Temple Knights' training. She likely had some latent potential, and given a few more months she could grow skilled enough to serve as a soldier.

That was all she had, though. She might have had the power, but she lacked the heart to use it, and that changed everything. The capacity to kill another without regard for appearances. Or perhaps one could simply call it resolve. Whatever one might call it, she lacked that kind of strength. No matter how refined one's technique might be or how sharp a weapon one might possess, they were useless if they weren't put into use.

I've heard Japan is a peaceful country, but...

Her mother told her of that country when she was a child, and at the time, she thought such a dreamland couldn't truly exist. But from what she'd seen and heard from Asuka, her mother's descriptions were apparently close to the truth.

She recalled Asuka's aghast reaction at the prospect of having to strangle a rooster dead. Such a girl had no place on a battlefield where she would need to fight other people. It had little to do with how strong or weak she was — Asuka would never even enter that arena to begin with.

But this wasn't an issue one could solve by simply speaking to her. It boiled down to her way of life — to her core beliefs. After Menea showed her the dark side of this holy capital — as a way of teaching her the realities of this world — Asuka seemed to have understood things somewhat. But honestly speaking, she

didn’t have nearly enough resolve to stand on her own in this world even after that.

“By the way, what about Tachibana? I’ve heard you went drinking with him.” Menea mentioned the otherworlder they took under their protection alongside Asuka.

As heartless as it might have seemed, Tachibana was a middle-aged man. Menea was too occupied with looking after Asuka — a woman, like her — to care much for him. Of course, she knew that ever since the injury to his head recovered, Tachibana had worked as Rodney’s attendant.

Menea was Rodney’s lieutenant, so she spoke to Tachibana fairly often. But that was purely on the basis of their duties — they weren’t close enough for her to know how that man felt.

“Tachibana... is fine, I believe. I’m sure he has a lot on his mind, but apparently he’s made his peace with the fact he’s going to have to live on in this world. He does his job well enough, too. So well, actually, that I wouldn’t mind taking him up as my official attendant. Assuming he’s not opposed to it.”

Menea couldn’t help but look at Rodney with round eyes at this appraisal. True, the man handled paperwork quickly, but she didn’t think Rodney would approve of him this much. But upon second thought, she couldn’t find any faults with Tachibana’s work. She herself felt that the strain of work on her had been reduced somewhat.

“And if he is to be your official attendant, he could eventually take up a posting as a knight... I see... Well, apparently he’s been accustomed to rough work even before coming here...”

The other day, the knights held drills for practicing unarmed combat. Thinking back to one of the matches there, Menea nodded slowly. At first he was a bit awkward, but by the end of the match, Tachibana showed great skill in arm locks that used the principle of leverage, effortlessly disarming a knight twice his size. The other knights seem to have acknowledged his skills since.

On top of that, he’d served as a police officer for years, so despite appearances he was quite adept at handling paperwork, too. In that regard, he was quite the good catch for Rodney. Being the leader of knight orders meant

he could designate one of the knights as his personal attendant without much trouble.

Of course, Rodney wasn't going to order Tachibana to work under him to pay off his debt of gratitude. But he couldn't deny feeling that letting all that talent go to waste would be tragic.

That might be for the best, given what's to come...

Menea didn't have any objections in particular to Tachibana being made an official attendant of Rodney's. If nothing else, she knew he would need reliable subordinates if he was to achieve his objective of reforming the Church of Meneos in accord with its original creeds as a religious group. But she couldn't help but doubt if becoming involved in this affair would do Tachibana any good.

After all, their initial intent was to give him some money and send him away from Menestia together with Asuka. So would involving him in their problems just because he turned out to be surprisingly capable be the right thing to do...?

However, Rodney and Menea's exchange was drawn to a sudden stop there.

"Excuse me!" a voice called out, followed by a vigorous knocking on the door.

Without waiting for Rodney's reply, the very same person they were discussing — Tachibana — walked into the room. Menea cocked an eyebrow at Tachibana's rude entrance, but she knew better than to point that out now.

"What's wrong, Tachibana? Your face is all red," Rodney said.

He'd probably run over in a hurry, because his face was flushed red and he was clearly out of breath.

"Well, I don't know what happened, but drink this." Rodney said, pouring some water into a cup from a pitcher resting on his table, and then handed it over to Tachibana.

"Aah, thank you, sir..." Tachibana said and gulped down the water.

"So what happened?" Menea asked, tilting her head questioningly.

She couldn't say she knew him for that long, but even still, it was the first time she saw Tachibana so flustered.

“Look at this!” Tachibana said, presenting a few documents to Rodney.

“Mm, what is this?” Rodney asked, peering into the document.

It was a report brought in from the information network the Church of Meneos had spread out across the continent. Someone from the intelligence bureau likely had it delivered to him, unsealed and all. Calling it a failure in information security would be an understatement, but clerks had a way of being extremely careless when it came to shifting information within the group.

“Mm... What about it, Tachibana?” Rodney asked with a hint of apprehension.

He’d skimmed through it, but the information looked standard enough. The southern kingdoms were, as always, involved in some border dispute or another. The Empire of O’ltormea was invading its neighboring countries, but this wasn’t news.

The only part that seemed mildly interesting was the situation report regarding the O’ltormea-Xarooda front, which had been in a state of deadlock for a year now. But that battlefield was on the other side of the continent. Rodney didn’t understand what made Tachibana panic so much.

“Not that, read this part here!” Tachibana snatched the document out of Tachibana’s hands and pointed at a particular line.

“What are you...” Rodney muttered, but upon reading the line Tachibana specified, he felt a jolt run down his spine.

The name of the man written there nearly made Rodney fall out of his seat.

“It can’t... How is this possible...?” he murmured in surprise.

Seeing his surprise, Menea read the section Tachibana pointed out.

A decisive battle in the O’ltormea-Xarooda war... Wait, no, that’s not the right part... Reinforcements from Rhoadseria include General Helena Steiner and a mysterious man, Ryoma Mikoshiba... Myest’s reinforcements led by Ecclesia Marinelle...

The information felt meaningless. While they might have been on the same continent, the details of that war felt like events taking place in another world altogether. But after reading it one more time, one of the names felt off.

Wait, Ryoma Mikoshiba? Mikoshiba... Mikoshiba!

That was a name that should not have been on this document. But the Church of Meneos's intelligence network was unrivaled in its field and far stronger than any individual country's, so the probability of them making a mistaken report was highly unlikely.

Can this kind of coincidence really be possible...?

At that moment, Menea felt some kind of great will writhing in the darkness.



Epilogue

The Holy Qwiltantia Empire reigned over the western continent's western regions. Located in its southern territory, near the border with the southern kingdoms, was the port city of Lentencia — the flourishing heart of commerce and trade in southern Qwiltantia.

Just as the sun was beginning to rise above the horizon, a single man appeared in this city. He was clad in a cloak and hood that hid his face. It wasn't clear at a glance if he was a mercenary, an adventurer, or some kind of traveler. His appearance didn't indicate much, but he wasn't particularly suspicious either. If anything, his presence felt oddly faint.

The man quickly passed through the gate's guards, and headed immediately into Lentencia's pleasure district.

"Hmm... Is this the place?"

Confirming the sign, which had the words 'The Echo Hall, Purveyor to the Guild' on it, he headed into the tavern.

"Oh, you're here early, mister." A younger man who was working the bar noticed the man enter. "Drinking this early in the day?"

"Mm. A drink and something to eat," the man said, lifting the hood from over his eyes.

"Oh... Still adventuring at your age? That's rough," the worker said, shrugging upon seeing the man's face.

Despite how trifling the comment was, the man seemed to have taken offense to it.

"You can spare me the bullshit..." The man glared at him. "Now, where's my food and drink? Something to fill my stomach would be appreciated."

"Ah, sorry..." the worker said respectfully. "Well, just sit wherever. All the girls are out until the evening, though. You don't mind?"

The worker started speaking apologetically. His instincts were blaring out alarm bells regarding this man. The public order in this pleasure district was rather bad, and so the fact he worked here meant he had to have been quite strong by necessity. After all, there was no phone to call the police in this world, and this worker was experienced enough with kicking out drunk adventurers and mercenaries.

But against this man, even five people on this worker's level would stand no chance.

Scoffing at the worker's sudden toadying, the man looked away as if having lost his interest.

"I don't need to tell you my order, right? Then hurry up... And get me two glasses and a pitcher of water."

With that said, the man took a seat on the furthest table from the door. It was, in fact, not a convenient spot to carry his order to.

What's his problem...? He doesn't need to sit in the corner like that...

Sitting by the counter would make things that much easier for both of them, but since he'd already taken a seat, the worker couldn't very well ask him to move.

Oh, fine...

Heaving a small sigh so the man wouldn't notice, the worker disappeared into the kitchen. And then minutes later...

"Here you are, mister... Thank you for waiting." The worker carried in a large plate full of what looked like pasta noodles and soup.

"Ooh..." the man exclaimed, the smell of the condiments whetting his appetite.

Judging by the pepper-like spices on the dish, it was likely something akin to a bacon peperoncino.

Mm... It looks good, the man thought to himself.

Normally, peperoncino was made only using spices, peppers and olive oil, and didn't include bacon or any kind of meat, but this was a dish belonging to this

world. Without voicing any complaints, the man took up his fork and started eating.

“And here’s your beer and water,” the worker said, placing the drinks on the table.

He mustered what little courage he had to inquire at the man’s mood. Sneaking a glance at the worker, the man reached for his coin pouch.

“I’ll be staying till nightfall today. How much for the fee?”

“Huh? Till nightfall...?” the worker parroted him in surprise. “You’ll be staying here that long?”

The tavern was open all day and all night. Being in a pleasure district, the place got most of its business during nighttime, and was mostly open as a restaurant for the city’s workers during the day. As such, there was no real reason to turn down the man’s request.

But it was seven in the morning. Staying there until nightfall meant he’d spend a full half-day just sitting there. True, some people drank the night away, but people drinking the *day* away wasn’t very common.

“What? Is that a problem?” the man asked, noting the worker’s surprised attitude.

“N-No, not at all, but...” the worker stammered.

There wasn’t a problem per se. But even if the store was busiest at night, it still had its share of customers during the day, and given the traffic of customers, one person ordering a bit wouldn’t make for much of a profit.

But the man, sensing the worker’s hesitation, took a gold coin out of his pouch and held it out.

“My fee for taking up space. This enough for you?” he asked, flicking the coin.

“Whoa... Mister, are you crazy or something? If you’d come around at night, you could buy some pretty girls.”

Confirming the weight of the gold coin in his hand, the worker eyed the man questioningly. This single gold coin was worth far more than just sitting in the store for a day. It might not have been enough to rent out the most expensive

store in Lentencia for a day, but in a store like this one, he could have all the waitresses it boasted attend to him. Including their special nightly services.

Refusing payment from a customer was an odd thing to be sure, but since they were servicing customers, they had to know where to draw the line.

I thought he might be a bit weird in the head, but... It doesn't look like it...

His appearance was mismatched, but it was still within the bounds of reason. He didn't give off the sense of incoherence a madman did. And besides, the man seemed to have waved him off as if to say the discussion was over, so he was forced to accept the coin.

Oh, well... Guess I'll just take his fee for the food and drink out of this.

Though even with that, there was still a pretty hefty sum left over, but at least it wouldn't torment his conscience that much. Besides, if he was planning on drinking now, he'd end up spending a good amount on snacks anyway.

I'll ask the owner what to do later... Wait, what's that old guy doing?

As he pondered the situation, the worker looked behind him, seeing the man pouring water from a pitcher into a cup. Him drinking while he ate wasn't out of the ordinary, of course, but the man only filled the cup halfway, and then covered it with an empty plate. It looked like the prank of a child who'd been dragged into a boring situation by their parents. The worker had seen it happen in the past.

But the man's expression didn't look like he was trying to pull a prank. Looking at him again, the worker shrugged and went behind the counter, the meaning behind the man's action lost on him...

†

That night, one woman marched through Lentencia's trade district. Her healthy, brown skin and chiseled features would make anyone from Ryoma's world assume she was a woman of Arabian descent. She looked to be in her mid thirties. Her limbs were toned, and her bosoms and buttocks were plump. One could say she had an appearance and age that accentuated her femininity.

Her appearance gave the impression she was a tavern's waitress, or a

prostitute — a woman of the pleasure district. But even as she walked, surrounded by inquisitive gazes, the woman slid into a certain company's entrance with a flowing motion.

"Forgive me for coming in at this time of night," the woman said, bowing her head respectfully to the doorkeeper.

"Aren't you... One of the Echo Hall's waitresses?" he asked.

This doorkeeper frequented the Echo Hall with his friends on his days off, and so he knew her face. He couldn't help but feel it was odd to find her here so late at night, though.

"Yes. Actually, there's a customer in our establishment... I'd like to see Liu Daijin and report something about him." With that said, the woman took a card out of her cleavage and presented it to the doorkeeper.

In this world, one would recognize it as the identification card used in the banks and the guild. The moment he saw it, the doorkeeper's expression changed. Scolding himself for thinking she was just a waitress, he quickly took the card and poured a bit of his prana into it.

"My apologies... I'll go check and announce your arrival. Please wait right here."

After confirming the pattern that appeared on the card, the doorkeeper spoke in a manner that was the very opposite of the suspicion he'd shown her moments ago. The woman didn't take any offense at it, of course. His behavior was merely proof she'd done her duties well.

"Thank you." She bowed her head to the doorkeeper as he disappeared into the building. It only took a few minutes before the doorkeeper came back with a man in tow. He was a middle-aged man of medium build clad in a tailcoat. He had swept-back black hair. The doorkeeper's words that he'd announce her arrival weren't a lie, it seemed.

"Thank you for waiting. I am called Zheng, a butler in service of Liu Daijin. I hear you wish to meet my master. Do come with me..."

Following after him, the woman headed deeper into the company building. They took a staircase underground, where the woman found herself facing a

large wooden door. The room ahead probably used the entire basement floor.

“Master... I’ve brought the guest,” the butler said, knocking on the door a few times.

“Come in,” a man’s voice echoed from behind the door.

“Excuse me, then.” The butler opened the door.

A room full of glittering colors greeted the woman.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Liu Daijin,” the woman said, kneeling down and hanging her head as soon as she noticed the man before her. “I am Ruqaiya Redouane, the Organization’s dispatch in this city.”

Liu was a tall man with a long beard that extended down to the floor.

“We’re both part of the Organization. You’ve no need to insist on ceremony... Rise,” Liu said, prompting her to get up.

“I’m not worthy, sir...”

Ruqaiya was relatively well-known within the Organization for her skills, and one could even count her among the group’s upper echelons. But the old man before her was of a completely different status. He was one of the twelve most distinguished members of the Organization, who had set up the very foundations of the group.

Martial thaumaturgy had greatly curbed his aging, and so one couldn’t quite see it from how he looked, but this man was approaching a hundred years of age. Even if the Organization had placed Ruqaiya in charge of Lentencia, Liu Daijin was above and beyond her in rank.

“I’ve heard you have something to tell me. What is it?” Liu asked, cutting to the heart of the matter.

“Well...” Ruqaiya muttered evasively.

She’d only come here because she couldn’t quite decide what to do by herself, but now the prospect of speaking to an elder member like Liu left her rather timid. Realizing her dread, Liu regarded her with a cheerful smile.

“I see. I suppose I should at least serve you some tea, shouldn’t I...?” he said,

reaching for the tea set on his own.

“Oh, erm, uhh...” Ruqaiya stuttered.

“It’ll be ready in no time. Take a seat right there and wait,” he instructed her.

Ruqaiya obediently did as she was told.

“Now then, this was made in this world, but its taste is quite fine. Do try it.” Liu placed a tea jar over a bowl, adding tea leaves into it and pouring hot water into the bowl.

The water was already being heated up, it seemed. Ten minutes later, he presented the tea bowl to Ruqaiya, who promptly took a sip.

“It’s... delicious.”

It had a floral aroma and a relaxing flavor that seemed to seep through her body.

“Wonderful... Its quality does not compare to the real thing, of course, but I’m glad you liked it,” Liu said, pouring more tea into the bowl.

They spent the time calmly like that for a while longer, after which Liu eventually parted his lips again.

“Well, now that you’ve calmed down a bit, let us speak. What brings you to me?”

Guided by his words, Ruqaiya told him of the mysterious man who appeared in her establishment.

“Ooh... Now that *is* unusual,” Liu said pensively. “Someone who yet knows of the Chawanjin’s password...”

“So it really was the password...”

“Yes. I cannot guess who it might be without seeing them, but from what you told me, it seems safe to assume he’s familiar with the Chawanjin...” Liu said, stroking his beard with narrowed eyes. “Just the fact that he did it in a tavern shows he knows of the Organization’s passwords.”

With this, Ruqaiya realized she was right to come to him. The Chawanjin was the codename of a secret society based in China. Its name meant the ‘Tea bowl

society,’ and true to that name, they relayed information in the form of ciphers using arrangements of tea bowls.

Taking after that tradition, some of the Organization’s operatives employed that form of code in the past. Though that said, the Chawanjin left their codes in tea shops in China and not in taverns. But since tea shops were more unusual and attracted attention in this world, taverns were used instead.

But the fact that the man used the Chawanjin’s signals brought up one major problem.

“How many years has it been since those passwords were last in use?” Liu asked.

“Yes, I believe it’s been 20 or so years since we began using cards as means of identification and stopped using the Chawanjin passwords.”

The Organization had put effort into utilizing or recreating technology from Rearth. They knew that given this world’s technological level, recreating even a single piece of technology would be enough to grant them an overwhelming advantage. One such development was these cards, which displayed a certain mark when filled up with prana.

The cards were made from unique materials, and so it took time to create them. As such, they were only used for transmitting the most important and confidential letters and documents, but they were also often used to identify members of the Organization.

With this kind of technology, the Organization didn’t need its members to use Chawanjin ciphers to identify themselves. Ruqaiya herself only knew of the passwords, but had never actually used them herself. That’s why she came to Liu, one of the Organization’s elder members.

“Hmm... What could this mean...?”

A mysterious man, using a now abolished communication method. Even as a high ranking member of the Organization sent over to watch over Lentencia, Ruqaiya didn’t quite know how to tackle this.

He’s probably some country’s spy who happened to perform some old cipher he’s seen out of interest. Or maybe he was just drunk, and accidentally did it

while fiddling around...

But Liu's interest was quite piqued by the possibility behind this man's identity.

The part about him carrying a Japanese katana was curious indeed... I should see for myself, I think.

"Zheng, could you send over a few skilled members? We should go confirm that man's identity," Liu said, rising from his seat.

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, only two months remain in the year. True to my objective, I've kept up a pace of three volumes per year, which is a relief. But as seems to be the fate for an author writing as a side job, my main job becomes that much busier, making this volume something of a difficult stunt to pull.

My schedule was quite packed, but I believed all I had to do was stick to it and I'd be okay. But it's said one's schedule is never fixed, and sadly enough, things never go quite as planned.

Like, events in smartphone games... And foreign TV shows... I've gotten quite hooked on one show called *Major Crimes* as of late. It's easy to just attribute it to the attractive actors, but the drama and plot are quite surprising for a detective story, so as an author, I have to give it a firm recommendation. I make excuses, saying I rent out new series for writing inspiration, but this show is good enough to even immerse another author, so do check it out if it piques your interest.

The biggest problem is, as always, coming up with the drive to write. The author's ever-present issue of standing before the page with pen in hand, and not being able to write.

But putting my whining aside, allow me to summarize the plot of this book for those readers who start reading from the afterword, as is customary with this series. Volume 8's biggest trait is that I've started zooming in more on the Church of Meneos and the western continent's western regions.

The Church of Meneos in particular is a key term in this story, so it greatly pleases me to have reached this point in the story. I've even managed to finally

circle back to Asuka and her grandfather, Kouichirou. I'd first written about their development in volume 4, but there was sadly something of a lull in their appearances since. Doing this is very much a load off my shoulders.

That said, despite zooming in on Asuka and those around her, this volume only slightly touches on the unfortunate police officer who was caught up in her summoning and her mysterious grandfather, Kouichirou. And Kusuda, the other office who was summoned along with her, hasn't been touched upon since he got lost in the forest. I doubt this pair of unfortunate cops have any fans, but if there are any such people out there, I apologize for neglecting those two. But don't worry, they have their own subplots, so they should appear in the future.

Probably.

Going back to Ryoma's side, this volume's biggest moment for him was his talk with Helnesgoula's queen. As the author, I feel like the protagonist's side should have more action scenes, but the story's structure necessitates that he stay behind the scenes. I'd have loved to draw this volume out with descriptions of the war itself, but my page limit didn't allow it, so I had to end it with the negotiations. But they're critical for future developments, so I couldn't omit it.

But Lione and the others got their time to shine, so the content shouldn't be boring. Also, this volume introduces Grindiana Helnecharles, whom bob drew in a way that perfectly aligned with the image I wanted to give off. I wanted her to be not a beauty, but a cute girl. To that end she needed to be reminiscent of Shardina, but at the same time different from her.

Honestly, I didn't quite know what I was asking for, but bob went along with my absurd demand and got exactly what I wanted. I can't thank bob enough, really. I can't draw at all, so I wouldn't be able to pull off something like that no matter what. If I tried to do it, it'd probably come off as some surrealistic mess full of stick figures...

War record stories always have a lot of characters, which only means more people to illustrate. Drawing so many distinguishable characters must be hell... Though that applies to Yukari Yagi, who draws the manga, just as much.

Speaking of, volume 2 of the manga is scheduled for release parallel to this volume. It's serialized monthly at Comic Fire, so anyone who wants to stay up to

date with the release, do check them out.

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.

Volume 9 is set to come out in the second half of March, and so I hope you will continue to support *Record of Wortenia War* in the future.

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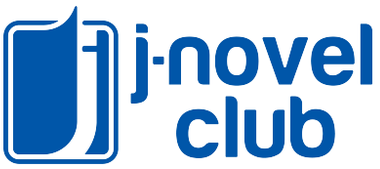
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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 8

by Ryota Hori

Translated by ZackZeal Edited by Nathan Redmond

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