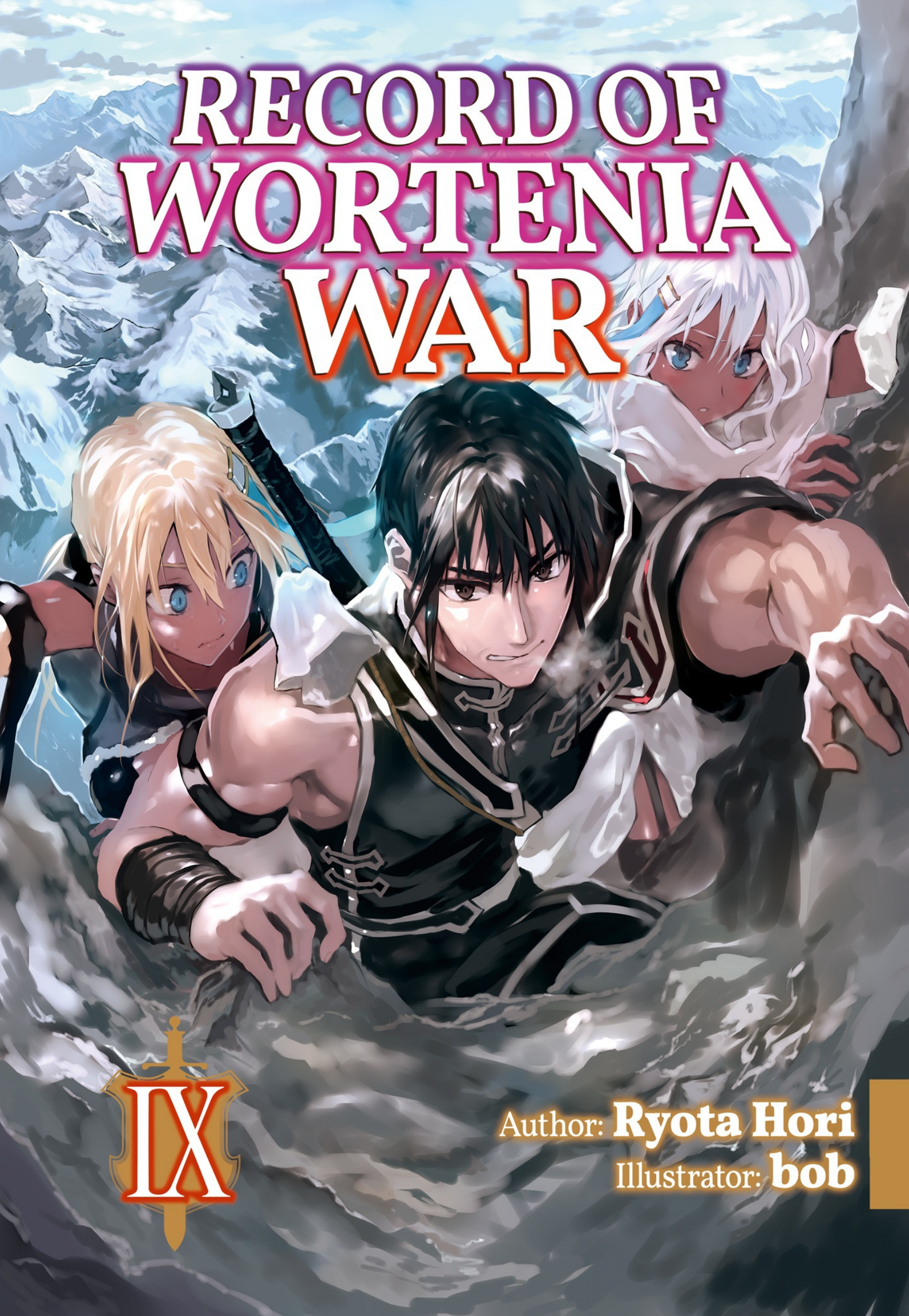
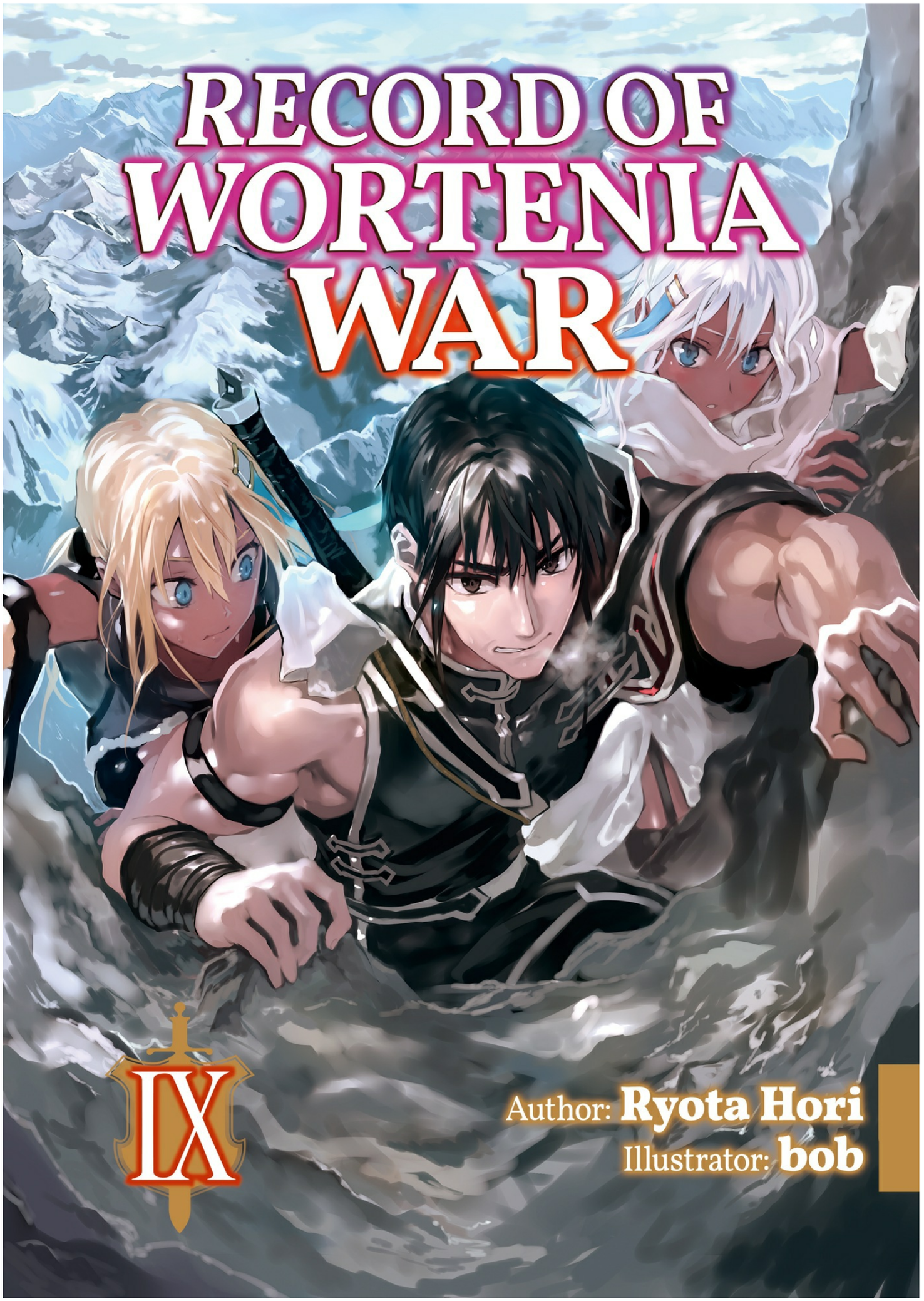
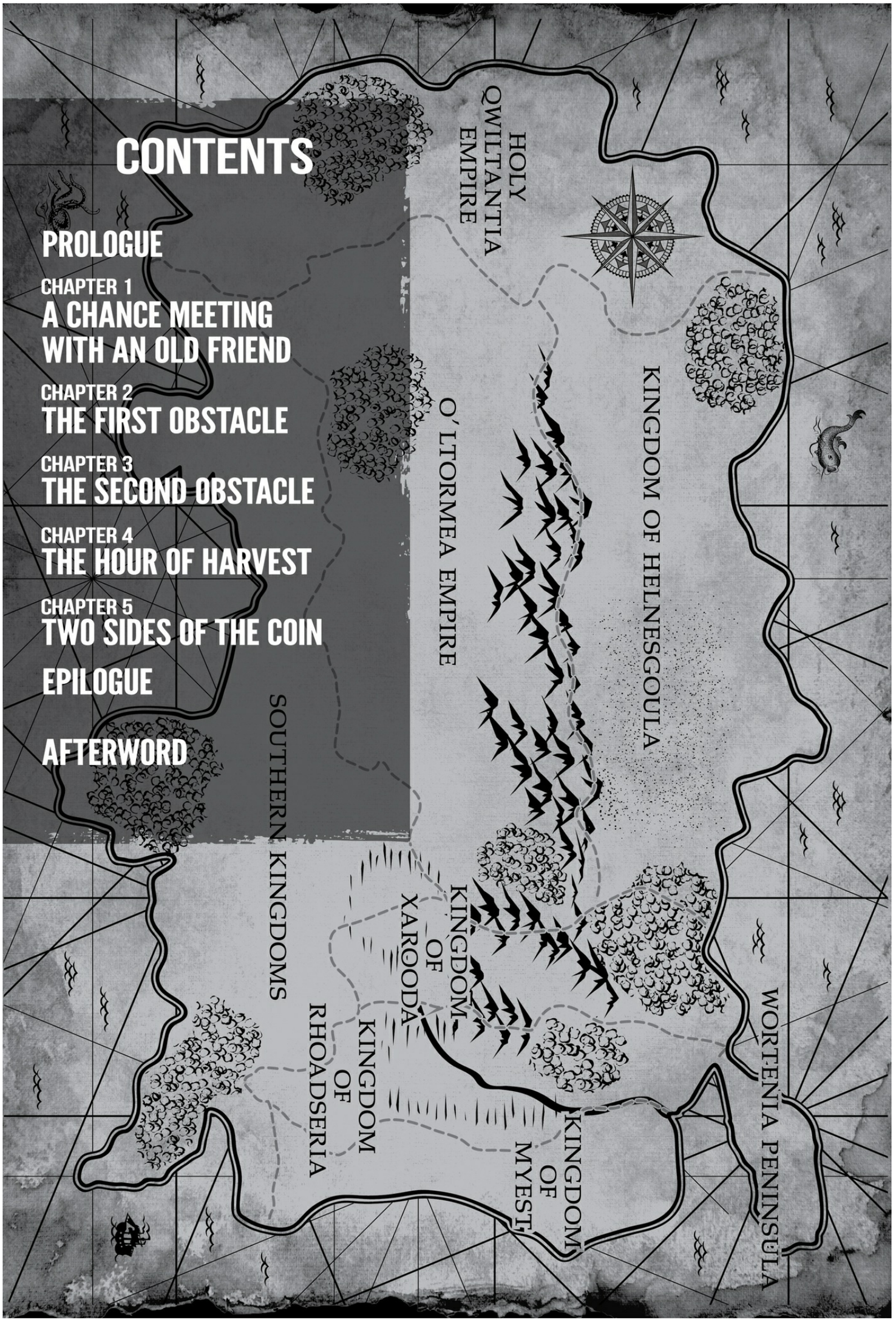

RECORD OF
WORTENIA
WAR
IX
Author: Ryota Hori
Illustrator: bob


RECORD OF
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WAR
IX
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Illustrator: bob


RECORD OF
WORTENIA
WAR
“So? How did it go?”
As soon as he entered the tent Ryoma spoke to Sakuya, who awaited him on one knee.


“Begin.”
The two men standing at the vanguard of the group exchanged gazes and nodded. They then charged forward, swinging their blackjacks through the air.
Guess I should try to shake them up a little and see what they do...
Who is he...?


“Sara, how are things going on your side?”



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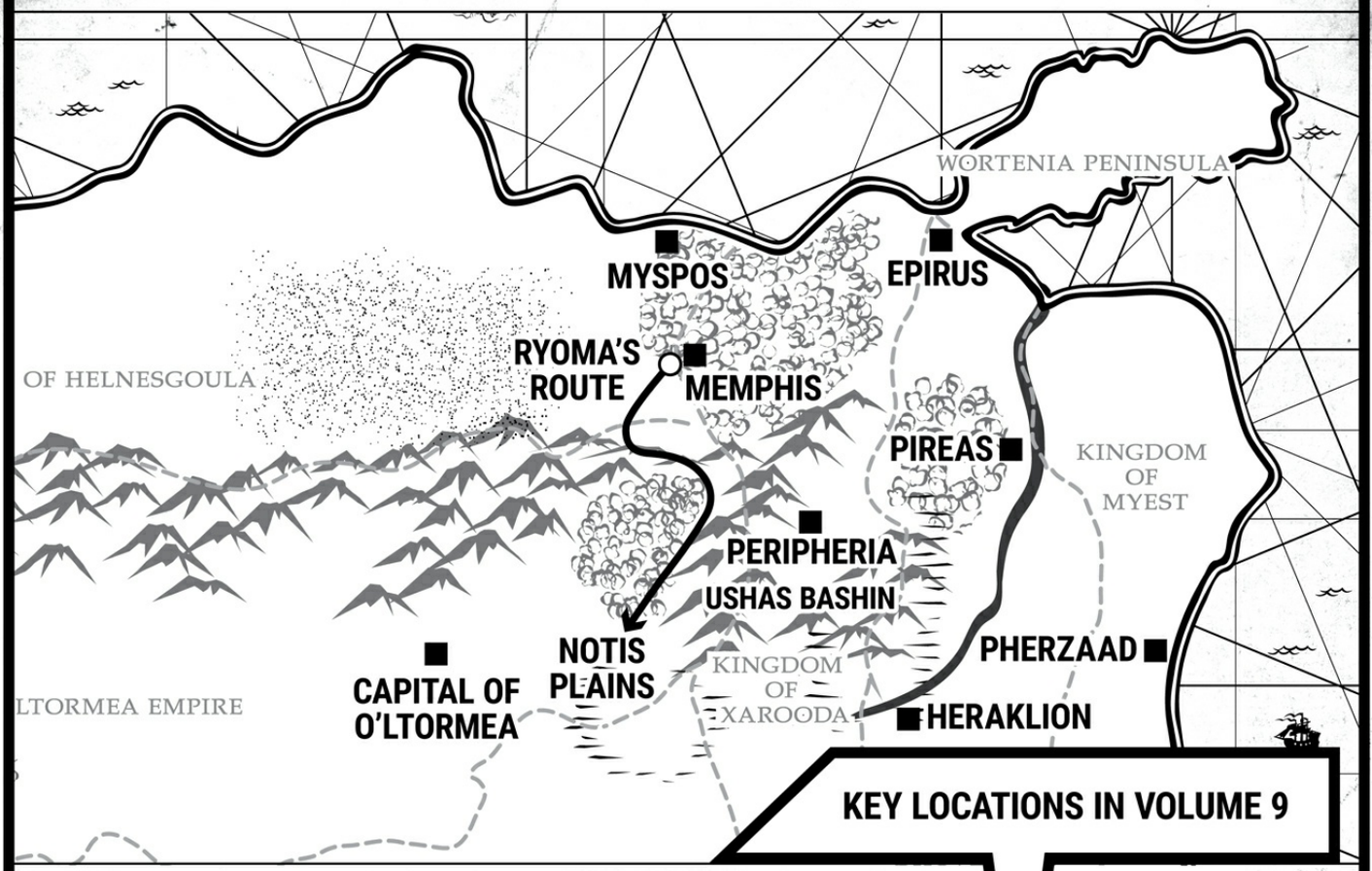
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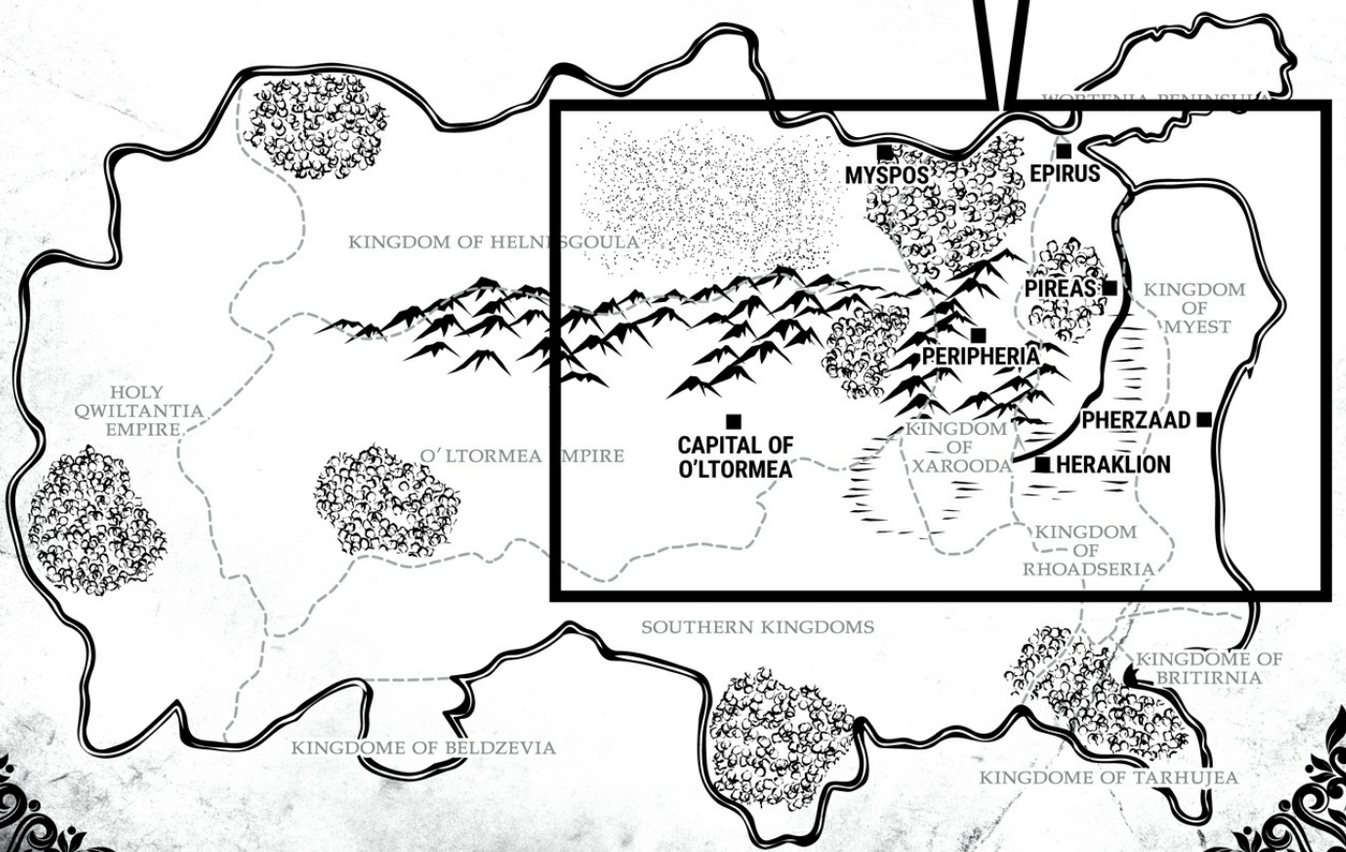
AFTERWORD

WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》



KEY LOCATIONS IN VOLUME 9

MAP OF THE WESTERN CONTINENT



Prologue

The curtain of night hung heavily over the city of Lentencia. The time was a few minutes after 10 PM. A bit too late to be considered evening, but too early to be considered late night by Japan's standards. But this world lacked the light of electricity, and by its standards, this was very much nighttime.

Most people lacked the wealth to keep candles and oil lamps lit at all times. Even for the nobility and royalty classes, the expense of keeping illumination going constantly was hardly anything to scoff at. But of course, since keeping up appearances was part of their lot in life, they still kept them on, though it was certainly financially taxing, even for them.

But even in this world, there were exceptions to this rule. Namely, the pleasure districts of the cities. True to their monikers, "the nightless cities," these districts were lit up all through the night.

That said, this illumination only extended to the main streets and the entrances to the shops. Once one stepped into the alleyways, pitch darkness reigned supreme, and the only light one could find was the twinkling of the stars and the shimmer of moonlight.

As the drunkards entered the alleyways, leaving only inebriated cheers in their wake, a group of more sober people mingled with them. The members of that group were all of different skin tones. Some had the bright skin and golden hair typical of the north, while others were bearded, middle-aged men with dark skin reminiscent of Arabian descent. And following them was an old man with slanted eyes. A man of Asian origins.

Truly, a melting pot of assorted races and ages. They were dressed in unremarkable clothes. They didn't carry weapons, nor were they clad in any armor or the black clothes a ninja might wear when sneaking about. Their clothes were made of cotton and linen, as was customary in this world.

No one paid them any particular attention as they advanced into the alleyway washed over by darkness. Eventually they stopped in front of a residential

building. Before their eyes was a statue of sorts, made up of countless flat stones piled together.

Perhaps calling it a statue was an overstatement. It looked more like something children might put together as a game; an unstable, fragile shape that could crumble if anyone whimsically poked it with the sole of their shoe.

But a limited few could see this shape for what it was, and they knew that this was by no means the result of a child's game.

The group took out their guild cards from their pockets, and held it up before the dragon carving placed against the building's door. In simple terms, it wasn't unlike the security one might see in a large company. A keycard, as it were. Someone in the Organization must have worked in such a company before, and used his experience to replicate that system using endowed thaumaturgy.

The dragon carving's eyes lit up for a brief moment, and then the door clicked, signaling it had been unlocked, and swung open to the outside. The group entered the building, where they saw a man sitting with his back to them.

"They are all here now," someone whispered into Zheng's ear, to which he nodded.

Zheng then turned around. He was a middle-aged, black-haired man. The man's hair was swept back, and he was dressed in a tailcoat without a single wrinkle on it and a bow tie.

He stood with his back straightened out, giving the impression of a strict individual. He conducted himself like the butler or assistant for some noble or influential merchant. Setting aside whom he might serve, he didn't look like the kind of man you might meet in a pleasure district's alley. It was like going out to take out the trash, only to randomly run into a man in a tuxedo.

Of course, it wasn't that one was forbidden from walking around in such an outfit, but there was such a thing as common sense. Certain styles of dress fitted certain situations; it was all down to the occasion. There were no laws on the matter and one wouldn't be punished for choosing not to abide by this reasoning.

But even if the law didn't forbid it, that wasn't to say there were no forces in

place to stop someone from doing it. The gazes of other people had an invisible and yet stark way of stopping one from standing out. And in that regard, this man certainly stuck out like a sore thumb.

Nevertheless, no one mocked Zheng for his appearance. Every single person present here knew just how fearsome he was.

“I thank you for coming on such short notice,” Zheng said. “Liu Daijin has given us urgent orders.”

At those words, all the other men present visibly tensed up, but they nodded at once. Judging by their stiff expressions, Zheng could tell they’d been briefed on the situation to some extent.

Makes sense... The thought crossed Zheng’s mind. *It’s not often that Liu Daijin summons people to his side like this...*

In the five years Zheng had served Liu, there were only a handful of times the old man had given such urgent orders. But whenever such exceptions occurred, it always involved a situation where something critical to the Organization had happened.

That being the case, the stern expressions on these operatives’ faces were to be expected. But the question of where this incident would go still remained to be seen.

This is quite the unusual case...

Liu Daijin’s job was the management and administration of the western continent’s southwestern division of the Organization, while also being in charge of intelligence and counterintelligence against their nemesis, the Church of Meneos. And while Lentencia was Liu’s base of operations, he’d never truly had a hand in managing the city itself.

In most cases, something of this nature would fall under the jurisdiction of Ruqaiya Redouane, the operative placed in charge of managing affairs in this city. And while Ruqaiya did approach Liu for advice regarding the mysterious man’s familiarity with the Organization’s cyphers, she did not actually ask him for help.

From what Zheng knew of Liu, he would normally respect Ruqaiya’s position

and wouldn't make a move on his own. Ruqaiya's rank within the Organization was lower than Liu's, but she was still in the upper echelons.

No matter how one examined this situation, it didn't make sense.

And despite that, Liu ordered his servant and bodyguard, Zheng, to commandeer a strike force. There had to have been a definite reason for him to do that.

As far as I can tell, none of the information we have should be that alarming...

That thought made the slightest ripple spread in Zheng's firm heart. This wasn't something he would boast of, but all the information that reached Liu was filtered by him. The information delivered to Liu every day came from across the continent, and its sheer volume meant that someone had to filter it so each bit of information reached its relevant department.

This meant the amount of information Zheng had regarding the mystery man was either equal to or greater than what Liu knew.

If anything comes to mind, there's the incident where Misha Fontaine and her husband were killed...? But...

They had been informed that the court thaumaturgist of the Kingdom of Beldzevia, one of the southern kingdoms, was dead, slain by someone. As was her husband, captain of the royal guard. Having people of such high standing killed was big news in this world.

Indeed, the Kingdom of Beldzevia was using all its authority to keep that information from becoming public knowledge, knowing that it would throw their regime into chaos. The surrounding countries were gathering intelligence in earnest, and the entirety of the continent's south was in a very dubious state.

But conversely, this was a situation limited to the southern kingdoms. Compared to the scale of the chess board that was the western continent, the situation in Beldzevia was effectively the same as losing a single pawn. And while losing a pawn is a painful blow in itself, even the Organization understood that sometimes things didn't go their way.

Just like how a professional player would not bemoan the loss of every pawn, the Fontaines' deaths, and indeed, Beldzevia's existence as a whole, weren't

that significant in the Organization's eyes.

If nothing else, I doubt the incident at Beldzevia has anything to do with this... But even if it does, what is he planning to do about it...?

As Liu's trusted aide, Zheng had loyally carried out the old man's orders, because he understood, at least to some extent, what Liu was thinking. But this time, Zheng didn't have a clue about the old man's intentions.

Does he have some inkling as to who that man might be? Maybe it's something that happened before I entered his service?

Zheng had served Liu for years, and it was a major part of his job to naturally understand what the old man was thinking. An aide who refused to act unless explicitly ordered to do so had no place at Liu Daijin's side. He had to know what his master was thinking, and begin preparations ahead of time.

But from the time he received his orders until now, Zheng had been struggling to come to a conclusion about what Liu was planning, and he still wasn't any closer to knowing. Honestly, he wished he could go back to Liu's side and ask. Alas, he'd been given explicit orders, and Zheng had to carry them out.

He placed me in command of a strike force, which means he's cautious enough to prepare for the worst...

Even now, Zheng was a servant in Liu's service, but his true role was that of a commanding officer leading the Organization's elite force, the Hunting Dogs. His martial prowess and strategic capability made him a match for the generals of Qwiltantia, Helnesgoula and O'ltormea — the three greatest countries in the western continent. It wasn't for nothing that he'd survived the battlefields of this maddened, bloodthirsty world.

Truth be told, he was likely the strongest of all the operatives in Lentencia, putting aside Liu himself. This was why he served as the personal butler of Liu Daijin, one of the twelve dragon heads — the de facto leaders and rulers of the Organization. The fact that a man of his status and prowess was dispatched on this mission meant Liu estimated this stranger to be exceptionally skilled.

I still don't know what he's thinking, but... I shall simply do what I was ordered to.

Zheng exhaled heavily, as if to clear all the air from his body, and then took a deep breath. And at that moment, all the doubts had vanished from his heart, as if he'd switched gears in his mind.

He'd employed a method of self-suggestion that had been imprinted onto him during his training in the PLA's special forces. At that moment, Liu had made himself into a precision instrument existing solely for the sake of achieving a singular goal.

"We're up against a single target. His strength is currently unknown. He could be a spy sent by some country or the Church. Liu Daijin orders that we test his capabilities and ascertain his affiliation."

One of the silhouettes following him raised a hand.

"Do you have a question?" Zheng asked him.

"Assuming the target is skilled, do we prioritize capturing them? Or...?"

Zheng regarded the question with a satisfied nod. As thorough as they were, they couldn't be confident of their success. Especially given how little they knew of their target. This sort of situation was prone to unexpected developments.

And this raised the question of how they were supposed to react to an unexpected situation. The fact that question had been brought up was proof that the people gathered here took this mission seriously.

"In a worst-case scenario where the target proves too much to handle, Liu Daijin has given us permission to dispose of them. Still, no matter how skilled he is, he is only one man. And given our strength and numbers, the odds of us failing to capture him are slim."

A vicious smile then crept onto Zheng's lips.

"Of course, assuming your everyday work hasn't tired you out..."

The other silhouettes shrugged and smiled bitterly. Perhaps it was wry laughter towards this challenge at their cultivated skills, or perhaps a chilly reaction to their superior's attempt at humor. Whichever it was, the oppressive air that accompanied Zheng's briefing had been lifted somewhat.

The people gathered here were operatives working in Lentencia, namely

those who were most specialized in fighting. This didn't mean they were adventures or mercenaries, however. Only three of the ten people gathered here had honed their martial skills through adventurer and mercenary work. The other seven worked in professions that, at least outwardly, had nothing to do with such violence.

A butcher, a baker, a messenger, a pub's waiter... Even a beggar, oddly enough. All of their professions were far removed from violence and conflict. But these four were all powerful enough to be considered level four fighters by the guild's standards, which meant they were first-class warriors. With their prowess, they could go to any country on the continent and be granted a posting within the very heart of that country.

And every person Zheng had gathered here was that strong.

Even if they were somewhat fatigued, as Zheng jokingly proposed, the chances of them failing this mission were exceedingly low.

"You've nothing to worry about, Zheng," one of the silhouettes replied. "We will not fail an order given to us by Liu Daijin. In fact, I've got business to attend to tomorrow, so I'd rather we wrap this up quickly..."

The other nine chuckled sardonically.

"I'll take that into account and inform Liu of this. I'm sure he'll be willing to add a little extra to your compensation."

"Heheh, that's kind of you. Running the bakery has become a little hard recently," the silhouette said unapologetically.

Zheng nodded back lightly.

Good, good... They're appropriately tense for the situation, but sufficiently composed. Wonderful.

If they were too stressed before a job like this, there was the chance it would make them freeze in place when it mattered. So while he couldn't let them completely let go of the tension this situation necessitated, he couldn't let them be too nervous, either.

A thread with too much tension placed on it will eventually break.

†

Some time later, a man approached the building's gates from the main street. Judging by his hairstyle and outfit, he likely managed one of the businesses in this pleasure district. He had the neat, tidy appearance typical of a man whose business revolved around the pleasures of the night.

"Mister Zheng, the customer you mentioned is on the move. We've got someone from the store tailing him."

Apparently, this was one of the Organization's members.

"I see..." Zheng said composedly. "Let us begin, then. You're all aware of the plan, yes?"

The silhouettes nodded and disappeared into the dark night, one after another.

Chapter 1: A Chance Meeting with an Old Friend

Stepping composedly through a dark alley that reeked offensively, Koichiro Mikoshiba pulled his hood down below his eyes. He was walking quite steadily; one wouldn't imagine he'd been drinking since morning at the tavern.

This was all calculated, of course.

Koichiro always was good at holding his liquor, and he'd paced himself appropriately, knowing the job he was about to embark on. The number of bottles he'd emptied was impressive, but since he'd also taken care to eat appropriately, he was very much sober. His limbs were full of strength, and he was prepared for any situation.

And it was only natural he would be so cautious; this was, after all, the other Earth. Had he been foolish enough to get blackout drunk in such a suspicious tavern, he'd have been stripped of all his belongings before he'd be sober enough to even realize it.

Or worse, he could have been simply sold off to slavery before he knew it. He thought back to one of the four great classical novels of China, the *Water Margin*, where a man was given poisoned sake. He was then stripped of all he had, and after he succumbed to the poison, his flesh was chopped off and sold for money. Koichiro was lucky enough not to run into a place lowly enough to do that, but he wouldn't be surprised if such a business did exist in this world.

This was a world where any kind of madness, no matter how absurd, could occur.

Heh. They took the bait...

Ever since he left the Echo Hall, he'd felt a gaze fixed on him. And it wasn't the gaze of a curious onlooker, but rather, a more adhesive, clinging gaze that always seemed to come from the shadows.

Koichiro had a clear objective. But to achieve it, he had to rely on an old, archaic method.

Now, then... I'd like to think it went as planned, but did it really...?

He was up against an Organization that had extended its tentacles across all corners of the continent, while keeping its existence hidden from the populace. They didn't exactly have a nameplate at their doorstep like a regular business in town. Of course, Koichiro knew of its existence, and had ways of contacting its members.

After all, before he'd found his way back home to Rearth, Koichiro was one of their leading members.

But this was a thing of the past by now. He had no way of knowing if the signal he'd sent out at the pub in Lentencia was even being used anymore. For all he knew, everyone who saw it thought it to be some drunk sot's bad idea of a joke.

In fact, given the nature of the Organization, the likelihood that it would keep using this cypher for so many years was non-existent. He fully believed it was abolished years ago. True, he'd been tailed since he left the tavern, but he didn't know why.

After all, he'd stepped out of the lights of the main street and into the dark alleys. And the shadows cast by the dazzling lights of the city and its pleasure district hid a great deal of sludge and muck. Put simply, these alleyways were essentially Lentencia's slums, the city's dark side.

Whoever lived here had no hopes for the future. The only way to make a living in these slums was through manual labor. Women could sell their bodies for cash. And in both cases, the wages would be terribly low. So low, in fact, that in some cases one couldn't afford their life necessities. And in those cases, even slavery was preferable.

There was no honest, respectable way of escaping the dark embrace of these shadowy slums. That was why anyone confident in their brute strength turned to crime. And in that regard, there was no difference between both worlds here.

So it was quite plausible that someone had mistaken Koichiro for a drunk with money to spare, and thought to gather their group of thugs to mug him.

Given their skill, I doubt whoever's tailing me is just a casual passerby. The question is whether they're related to the Organization...

He knew they'd kept up their tail ever since he left the Echo Hall, but whoever it was, they were following him stealthily. They weren't quite on Koichiro's level, but they were certainly skilled. They were silent and kept their presence masked.

And most importantly, the way they seemed to corner their prey was perfect. Most people wouldn't even notice them until their throats were already slit. No, perhaps they wouldn't even realize it then. Whoever was following Koichiro was a hunter specialized at stalking human beings.

No, even if someone this skilled isn't working under a country or a group, that could mean...

Feeling an ominous suspicion surface in his mind, Koichiro shook his head as if to banish such thoughts. Of course, this was hardly an opponent he couldn't overcome. Koichiro's prowess was out of the ordinary, and few people on this continent could likely match him in combat.

He'd given away one of his beloved katanas to Asuka, but that did little to take away from Koichiro's skill and lethality. Even still, Koichiro thought the people tailing him wouldn't voluntarily pick a fight with him for no reason.

After all, there was no world where people this skilled would stoop to mugging people in a pleasure district's alleyway. It would be like making a five-star chef work at a fast food restaurant.

Of course, there were no absolutes in this world. Maybe one such "chef" would fall on hard times and wind up unlucky enough to work in such a lowly place. But having many such chefs gathered to work in one place made no sense. So by that reasoning, Koichiro doubted they were mere thugs.

The question remained, though. Whoever these people were, could they be working for the ones he was looking for?

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps against the flagstones reached Koichiro's ears.

I can feel their presence all of a sudden... Two, three... No, there's five of

them... Which means...

The presences surrounding him grew more conspicuous at once, and they all seemed to close in around him from all directions. His pursuers probably sought to force him to go to a specific spot.

Fine, I'll take the bait... Let's see how this turns out. I'm curious to see what they can do...

Koichiro's katana shuddered slightly at his waist, seemingly out of concern for him.

Don't worry, girl... If worse comes to worst, I will put you to use.

He gently tapped the scabbard twice, as if to soothe the blade as he waited for the time to come.

"You there, with the hood," a voice called out to him from behind.

It was just as he was about to turn back after heading into a blind alley. His assailants likely saw this as their chance to strike. Koichiro turned in the direction of that voice.

Hmph... So they're trying to cut off my avenue of escape. They don't intend to let me get away.

A group of men stood at the entrance to the alley, blocking his way out. Tall stone walls surrounded him from three sides, and with the sole exit from the alley blocked, Koichiro was, for all intents and purposes, trapped. It was a truly hackneyed situation, but from the attackers' perspective, they had Koichiro firmly in their grasp.

"Can I help you?" Koichiro composedly asked the smug men standing in his way.

"Oh, nothing special," one man with an Arabic visage and finely-chiseled facial features said. "We just had a little too much to drink in the pub. We were hoping you could help us to some of your coins. See, we're a bit down on our luck. We're the sad sort that can't hold a job, right?"

Of course, they said 'help us to some of your coins,' but the real intent behind those words was clear as day. The other men laughed riotously.

“We’ve heard of you,” another man said. “You’re the one who’s been drinking his ass off all day at the Echo Hall, right?”

“Living the dream, aren’t you?” yet another man piped in. “C’mon, share a bit of that fortune with us.”

The group once again raised their voice in laughter, after which they regarded Koichiro with a nasty smile. Their eyes glinted with murky greed.

Hm, so that’s their angle... I figured they’d pull some kind of performance, but they’re convincing actors.

At first glance, they looked like nothing more than greedy thugs out to shake people down, but Koichiro was smarter than to fall for their act. He wasn’t proud of it, but he’d lived his life up to his neck with people’s lies, and he knew how to tell when someone was acting. The way they looked around vigilantly and kept a careful distance told him these weren’t just bandits.

So there must have been a reason they decided to approach him like this. They likely wanted to gauge how skilled Koichiro really was. And that was certainly something the Organization would do. They were, after all, a secret society. By their nature, they rejected the idea of being known by others.

This was why their operatives worked in inconspicuous professions, and why they didn’t know the names and faces of other operatives. So Koichiro knew that if someone from the Organization saw him make that cypher, they’d deploy someone to go after him.

But to what end? That was the question here.

Are they here to kill me, or to interrogate me...?

Assuming the cypher he used at the Echo Hall was in use, they would suspect Koichiro was one of their own. The Organization was a large secret society, whose influence extended all throughout the continent. Knowing the names and faces of every single operative was impossible for them. In which case, knowing the cypher was what allowed them to recognize an operative.

But if the cypher Koichiro knew was still in use, they likely would have approached him in the Echo Hall already. There’d be no need for these theatrics.

So the cypher's been changed... I suppose there isn't much I could have done differently. But still...

The trick behind the cypher was that allocating the plates wrong or pouring the wrong amount of water into the cup would make it clear that one was faking it. So how would the organization treat a man who left a fake cypher?

Ordinarily, Koichiro believed they would do nothing. It was hard to believe a fake cypher could be the product of a coincidence, but there was still the chance an ignorant civilian might have accidentally piled plates together in a way that might resemble a Chawanjin cypher.

And since there was the slightest possibility of that happening, the Organization couldn't risk sticking its neck out. They were a secret society, one that strove to keep its existence hidden from the general public; they weren't just another crime organization like the mafia.

But this time, the situation was different. The Chawanjin cypher probably wasn't in use anymore, but an operative saw Koichiro correctly perform an outdated cypher and assumed he was a spy from some other, rival group. The question was, would the Organization decide to kill him on the spot or capture him to get information out of him? This situation would unfold very differently depending on which choice was made.

"What're you so quiet for, eh?" one of the men asked him provocatively. "What, did yer jaw lock up outta fear or somethin'?"

With that said, the men took elongated leather bags, which had a thick edge to them, out of their pockets. These were a type of bludgeon called a blackjack, a weapon that would normally be deemed useless in this world. Upon seeing it, Koichiro realized why they were here.

So they're here to interrogate me...

A blackjack offered several advantages. It was usually made from leather or fabric, and so by loading it with something heavy, like rocks, sand or even coins, it could be made into a fairly lethal weapon.

It was much like how even a plastic bag from a supermarket could serve as a weapon if filled up and swung around, assuming one didn't place any

importance on its durability. A blow or two could tear it apart, of course, but its convenience as an impromptu weapon was not to be trifled with.

And the fact that it was heavy but soft meant any blows delivered by it would hit hard, but wouldn't leave marks. One could sneak a weapon like this into a courtroom. It was, in a way, not a weapon for killing, but a weapon designed to inflict pain. Small wonder American police officers used to carry these weapons instead of batons in the past.

But these advantages only meant anything in countries that adhered to human rights and sought to preserve the law. This world didn't forbid the carrying of weapons, so carrying something as esoteric as the blackjack was meaningless. If they sought to kill, a sword or a metallic bludgeon would be much more effective.

And that made their intentions clear. If they wanted to kill him, they'd be free to carry and wield swords or spears.

"Why aren't ya saying anything? What, are you that scared? Huh?" They repeated the same taunt like some kind of caricature of a thug.

Koichiro simply regarded them with a sardonic smirk. He felt like he was being shown some kind of magic trick he already knew the secret behind. Still, he was interested in observing their methods for a little longer.

Guess I should try to shake them up a little and see what they do...

A subordinate's skills mirrored their superior's abilities, after all. Pretending to think things over for a second, Koichiro reached into his pocket and took out a gold coin. He seemed far too calm to make it seem like he was threatened into handing over his money, though. The men exchanged gazes, as if wondering how to react.

"I see, I see... Well, not having enough to eat would make for a hard life. And I can definitely empathize with the pain of not being able to drink your favorite booze..." With that said, Koichiro used his thumb to flick away the gold coin. "Fine. Take it."

The gold coin rolled over the ground, eventually stopping as it hit the Arabian man who'd smugly picked a fight with him.

“Aren’t you going to pick it up?” Koichiro asked, his deep voice echoing through the alleyway.

Apparently these men didn’t expect him to meet their blatant provocation with a taunt of his own, and the confusion was clear on their faces.

Now, how will they respond...?

A gold coin was a small fortune, but none of them seemed to really react in particular to the fact that one had just literally landed at their feet. What Koichiro did struck them as so unexpected, their minds ground to a momentary halt.

The reaction one might expect was for them to drop their act, lose their composure and attack Koichiro. That meant a fight without any coordination or planning to it. A flurry of blind violence. But still, these men were both powerful and held the stronger position in this situation. They knew better than to fall for such a transparent taunt.

The two men standing at the vanguard of the group exchanged gazes and nodded. They then charged forward, swinging their blackjacks through the air. These were practiced movements that made good use of the muscles in their waists, shoulders and arms. They perfectly moved their bodies, which were reinforced by martial thaumaturgy.

It was proof that their hearts, technique and physique — the three qualities that made up a warrior — were in perfect harmony. By Koichiro’s estimate, their strength was around level four, but their organized movements and coordination put them on par with a level five warrior.

I see... Attacking from two sides, while the others serve as backup.

Had they fallen for Koichiro’s taunt, all five of them would have jumped him at once, perhaps cursing him out pointlessly as they did. But instead, they decided to drop the act and begin their attack. They took the confined space of the alley into account, leaving three behind to cover for the vanguards.

The blackjacks whistled as they whipped through the air. Dodging them narrowly, Koichiro analyzed the situation calmly. The man on the left swung his blackjack horizontally, trying to land a blow on the back of Koichiro’s head; a

heavy blow, reinforced by a great deal of centrifugal force. A direct hit would definitely render Koichiro motionless. Depending on how the hit landed, it could even crush his skull.

Good coordination. Very nice.

Crouching down, Koichiro avoided the swing and then took a quick step back to create distance between him and his attackers.

“H-Hey!”

The first one to attack him, a southeast Asian man, suddenly crumbled to his knees and crashed face first into the ground.

“The hell? What did you do?!” One of the men hanging back as a backup raised his voice in surprise, stepping up to take his fallen comrade’s place.

It was clear that each of them was individually well-trained, but their coordination as a team was considerable as well.

“Oh, nothing much,” Koichiro said composedly. “Just landed a blow on his jaw when we crossed paths.”

Even with his opponents glaring at him with clear enmity and bloodlust, Koichiro didn’t let his collected smile fade. He tapped a finger against his own jaw twice, as if to illustrate. It was enough to make it clear what he’d done, though. The men’s bloodlust grew more palpable.

Koichiro didn’t deliver that blow with a fist, but with the heel of his palm. Thanks to that, the man’s jaw wasn’t broken by the blow, but its impact on his brain was severe. The concussion would keep that man unconscious for at least ten to twenty minutes.

I might have underestimated them, though... I knew they’d be tough, but it looks like they’ve seen their share of battles.

Koichiro wasn’t injured by the exchange, but in all honesty, he couldn’t say he’d handled it perfectly. He’d mostly dodged the second blow to the back of his head out of sheer luck. Individually, these people were all quite proficient, but their skill at fighting as a group was what made them truly formidable.

Of course, things would be different if he was allowed to kill them. Shattering

a neckbone or destroying a heart with his bare hands was well within Koichiro's abilities. Throwing them to the ground and locking their joints was child's play as well. And if things truly turned bad for him, he could draw the sword sheathed at his waist.

Still, killing the Organization's operatives wouldn't be wise... And injuring them in a way they could never recover from is a bad idea too.

Currently, there were no relations between Koichiro and the Organization. Koichiro was a former member, but that was a thing of the past by now.

If I were just able to meet them...

There were a few dozen people Koichiro knew in the Organization. Of course, given the cutthroat nature of this world, there was a chance some of them were no longer alive. But at the same time, he knew there could be no chance that all of them were dead.

All of his old friends were unrivaled warriors, each of them a one man army. And even during Koichiro's time in the Organization, they were already very high ranking members. So long as the Organization retained at least some semblance of what it was before, Koichiro was confident that if only he were to meet one of his old comrades, they would gladly lend him their aid.

Even if one had climbed to a high standing in society, they were unlikely to refuse an old friend's request for help. Assuming, of course, both were indeed friends. Naturally, it didn't mean the aforesaid friend could ask for anything. There was a limit to common sense, and compensation would of course be in order.

But all of that hinged on Koichiro not killing any of the Organization's people.

Even if they were his old friends, Koichiro slaying their subordinates would eliminate any chance of negotiations. Old friends or not, they couldn't overlook the death of their subordinates.

Maybe I ought to change things up... Though I wish I didn't have to.

Honestly, what Koichiro was about to do was a dangerous gamble. But at this rate, he would be forced to kill his attackers.

Koichiro silently broke his posture. The fighting aura that emanated from every inch of his body until just a moment ago suddenly dissipated.

“What the hell are you doing?” the Arabian man hissed at him.

Landing a blow on someone’s jaw while crossing paths with them was easier said than done, and the man he’d knocked out equaled Koichiro in size. In the Arabian assailant’s eyes, the fact that he could so easily dodge an attack and land such a crippling blow made it clear how skilled the hooded man before him was. But that just made the way he broke his stance seem all the more incomprehensible. It could be a trick to catch them off guard, but someone as strong as him wouldn’t need to stoop to that kind of trickery to break through them and escape.

“Enough,” Koichiro said.

The words that left his lips left the attackers surprised.

What... is he doing?

They eyed him carefully, so as to be cautious of a potential surprise attack, but Koichiro did nothing of the sort.

“I said enough. We can stop testing each other,” Koichiro elaborated, pulling his hood back.

His eyes glinted red like a demon. Faced with his intense, blade-like force of will, the men had to nervously hold back a cry of surprise.

“My name is Koichiro Mikoshiba. What’s yours?”

His tone made it clear that he wasn’t going to allow them to argue back against him. There wasn’t a trace of the flippant attitude he displayed while living in Japan. There was an overbearing pressure to his attitude; the kind unique to those who not only commanded people, but saw it as their natural lot in life.

“Kalim...” The man replied, still anxious.

The fact his opponent had overwhelmed him enough to divulge his name was a source of great shame for Kalim. But he also realized that launching another attack on this man wasn’t an option right now.

“Hmm... Well then. I need you to do me a favor, Kalim.” Koichiro said, handing his still-sheathed sword over to Kalim.



Hm. This flavor is about as close as you could get to what I know from home...

Sitting in Liu's hands was a small porcelain tea bowl, containing a small amount of tea just enough for a sip. A sweet aroma rose from the tea, reminiscent of fragrant olives. This was a type of tea made to resemble the Huangjin Gui, a premium variety native to China.

Of course, for all its resemblance, it was different in many ways. It was still an imitation of Huangjin Gui. During his youth, Liu Daijin lived in the Fujian province of China, at Anxi County in Quanzhou. Compared to the tea he had with his father at the time, this was a night-and-day difference.

That said, such imitations are still necessary for us.

This tea didn't exist just to satisfy Liu's own tastes. There were many different types of tea; depending on the area the leaves were procured in and how they were refined, the same types of leaves could result in different aromas and flavors.

Black tea and green tea were two different types of tea altogether, made with different methods. Chinese tea was divided into six different general types of tea, allowing for a wide range of flavors and scents. Those were sold so as to fit different needs and occasions.

At first, these tea substitutes were made simply to compensate for a sense of nostalgia. But as the Organization grew in size and began seeping into both the western continent's underworld and its society as a whole, things like this tea took on a more important role.

Normally, the cultures of this world and Rearth were fundamentally different. The advance of culture and society had a way of affecting people in a similar way to narcotics. At first, the Organization only sold items like tea to the nobility, but as time went on, they found their way into the common household. By now, recreations of products they knew from Rearth had become one of the Organization's largest sources of income.

Liu Daijin was in charge of the production of tea leaves, but there were others in the Organization who had successfully reproduced cuisine and handicrafts. Still, none of them were the real thing. Quite simply, they were forgeries. And

from the perspective of someone living in modern-day Rearth, their quality wasn't particularly high.

Then again, it is said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery...

In Chinese martial arts, the first thing one learns is forms; that is, to mechanically imitate the movements of the art, as they were passed down by one's predecessors. In a manner of speaking, one might say one was simply imitating or perhaps even ripping off one's own teachers. Apprentice chefs also try to mimic the flavors of their teachers. And as they do, they master the basics and eventually create their own original dishes.

To that end, imitation could not be called an evil deed in and of itself. It could only be called as such when one completely ignored the existence of the original.

Not that this is something we need to worry about in this world, is it...?

The concepts of copyright and intellectual property certainly didn't extend across parallel worlds; Liu noted as much to himself with a sort of sardonic amusement. But just as that thought crossed his mind, a knock came on the door to his room.

"Pardon the interruption, I have an urgent report to make..."

It was his trusted aide and butler, Zheng. The right-hand man of one of the Organization's elders, Liu Zhong Jian, or Liu Daijin, as the Japanese speakers would call him.

"Come in. I'm listening," Liu said, briefly parting his lips from the bowl to permit the man's entrance.

"Excuse me, sir."

Zheng opened the door and regarded Liu with a respectful bow. Normally, Zheng was one to simply enter the room and be done with the report as quickly as possible, but for whatever reason, he now stood at the entrance with his head hanging low. And furthermore, he gripped a katana in his right hand.

"Hm? What's the matter?" Liu cocked his head at Zheng's uncharacteristic demeanor.

His hands, clad in white gloves, were visibly trembling. The first thing that came to Liu's mind at the sight of this was the possibility that Zheng and his men had failed.

No. Zheng? He couldn't have...

He had ten operatives acting under him during this assault. Liu had been briefed on Zheng's plan for the operation; their force would be split up into vanguards and backups, and they would corner their target in an alley. Using ten people and the alley's confined space seemed like a sound plan; perhaps even overly cautious.

But the result, contrary to Liu's expectations, was seemingly unfavorable. Of course, this was all as far as Liu could see at the moment.

"Zheng," Liu regarded him with his usual, soft smile. "I can't hear you from over there. Come closer."

Liu poured Zheng a fresh cup of tea. Regardless of whether Zheng had failed or succeeded at his task, he would need to know what happened if they were to come up with a countermeasure. And so, he tried to avoid putting any pressure on Zheng, so that he wouldn't distort the contents of the report in his stress.

"Go on. Drink."

He treated him the same way he regarded Ruqaiya Redouane, the operative in charge of running Lentencia. It was a simple yet effective way of calming the nerves.

"Thank you kindly, sir..."

But it seemed Liu's consideration only made him all the more uncomfortable. The more considerate Liu was, the more it seemed to dig into Zheng's heart.

"Well? What happened?" Liu asked gently, sympathizing with Zheng's feelings.

But it seemed answering that question was too hard for Zheng, as he struggled to part his lips.

"Well, I..."

Truth be told, if all he had to do was report their attack failed, things would

be that much more simple. As far as this world's established logic was concerned, it should have been impossible for Zheng to have to make this report.

Still, he knew keeping quiet would get them nowhere, and so Zheng took a deep breath. Steeling himself, he placed the katana on the table.

"Oh... Given the craftsmanship, this would be a Japanese katana, yes?" Liu said, narrowing his eyes as he gazed down at the weapon.

It had a black lacquer scabbard, and the grip was adorned with silk threads. The blade had all the traits Liu knew were associated with a Japanese katana.

Hmm... Was this brought in from the eastern continent? I'll admit it's unusual, but is it really that surprising?

Blades similar to shamshirs were in use in the central continent, while weapons close in shape to the Ethiopian shotel were popular in the southern continent. The eastern continent, by comparison, produced swords similar to the liuyedao and katana.

Still, seeing this kind of sword in the western continent was rare. The swords in use on this continent were maintained and tempered in completely different manners compared to a katana. Katanas required different whetstones to maintain their razor-like sharpness, and there were hardly any craftsmen capable of tempering these blades on this continent.

The same could be said for the scabbard and grip. Anecdotes spoke of how katanas could never bend or break, but these swords required appropriate maintenance to exhibit their true prowess. In that regard, katanas were rarely seen on the western continent. Their practicality was limited, since there was no one to keep them whetted after use.

But as impractical as they were, it didn't mean there was absolutely no chance they would be found on this continent. There were still port towns, and while many only traded between different countries within the continent, some of them had merchants that sailed out to lands across the sea.

These merchants would return with their ships full of exotic items which were then sold at high prices to curious nobles. Items such as vases, jewelry and

portraits accounted for some of their merchandise, but some merchants brought in weapons as well.

And so, believing this katana arrived on the continent in such a way, Liu drew the blade from its scabbard. The white blade glimmered, its sharpness so visibly keen that Liu felt as if his line of sight might be cut just by gazing at it.

The quality of this sword was without question. And not just that, it was a thaumaturgical sword that clearly had a powerful enchantment applied to it. But the moment he saw the crest etched onto the blade, Liu felt a jolt run through him.

Am I reading this wrong? No... The crest and sharpness are unmistakable. This sword belongs to him*...*



Liu was by no means an expert when it came to katana; he could barely tell general types of weapons apart. But the katana he was looking at now was a different story altogether. He was confident that even if this singular blade were mingled in with a thousand other katana, he would be able to recognize it and tell it apart from the rest.

And it was only natural that he would. After all, this sword, Kikka, and its sister, Touka... Those twin blades had saved his life many times in the past. He would never fail to recognize the swords wielded by his once-sworn friend, Koichiro Mikoshiba.

But this shouldn't have been possible.

Hurriedly removing the sword hilt's rivet, he examined the inscription etched upon the sword's tang.

But this can't be... Back then, he had Kikka with him...

It was a grand project, one the Organization devoted a great deal of funds and effort to completing, but despite all their efforts, it ended in the worst possible way. Fifty years ago, people from Rearth tried to execute a counter-summoning ritual, meant to return people to their original world, only for the process to go awry. And it was then that Koichiro Mikoshiba disappeared, with both his swords in hand.

"Zheng... How did you acquire Kikka... this sword?" Liu asked with a severe expression he wouldn't normally show. "Did you apprehend the man from earlier?"

"Yes... The man called this sword Kikka, too."

"He did? In that case..."

As Liu spoke, Kikka trembled slightly in his hands. As if to answer Liu's question. And then, Zheng said the decisive words that locked everything in place.

"Yes, the mystery man we attacked identified himself as Koichiro Mikoshiba, the Organization leader who disappeared several decades ago..."

"You don't mean to say... He's still alive?"

At that unexpected answer, Liu's expression contorted.

Small wonder why his right-hand man, normally so aloof, calm, and collected, had hesitated to give this report.

†

Within a brothel in one corner of Lentencia's commercial district, Koichiro Mikoshiba reclined on a sofa in one of the guest rooms, seemingly quite calm.

"Liu Daijin should arrive soon," Zheng said, pouring fresh tea into Koichiro's tea bowl.

"Hm," Koichiro replied in a composed fashion.

There wasn't so much as a hint of the dangerous atmosphere that had emanated from his body earlier that night.

But we engaged him earlier, so this place should be enemy territory for all he is concerned. And still, the way he remains calm... It's like the legends say...

This was the first time Zheng met Koichiro face to face. It had been a few decades since Zheng was brought to this world, and by then, Koichiro had already disappeared. Zheng had been told he'd apparently died.

So it really is him...

Zheng had heard countless legends of Koichiro Mikoshiba. All the stories drew an image of a raging demon, a warrior god of sorts. During the Organization's early years, Koichiro Mikoshiba was praised as the Organization's greatest warrior.

His earliest achievements included the Battle of Castle Dergstein in the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, and the Siege of Truesta, a town in Myest's southern regions. Not to mention countless skirmishes against the Church of Meneos, of which few records remained.

He'd fought in at least ten major wars. If one were to count the minor skirmishes and clashes, he'd blazed through hundreds of battlefields. There could be no counting the amount of merits this man had earned. It was firmly believed that had it not been for this man, the Organization would not have expanded as far as it did.

And this was why the Organization still sang his praises decades later. True, some stories sounded like exaggerations; for example, how he single-handedly slew an entire knight order. But when Liu told him that story was true, Zheng's heart danced in excitement, as though he were a young boy again.

And when faced with such a hero, Zheng couldn't help but let his mask slip ever so slightly. He was a warrior too, after all.

"Do try it, and give me your opinion," Zheng said, encouraging Koichiro to taste the tea.

Of course, it wasn't poisoned. But given the tense situation they were in a short while ago, Koichiro still considered this place enemy territory. A peaceful fool who knew nothing of battle might have been gullible enough to take him up on that offer. But a skilled warrior would think twice, and thrice, before consuming food or drink offered to them by the enemy.

Zheng expected him to politely refuse, or at least wait until Liu was present first.

"Yes, of course," Koichiro said, much to Zheng's surprise.

Nodding, he picked up the bowl and sipped the tea quietly. Its unique taste spread refreshingly across his tongue. The flavor felt a bit thin and diluted, but it contained a peculiar, noble quality to it that made Koichiro's lips part into a smile.

"Hm, a fine flavor. There must have been time spent on brewing it. The water you used is of fine quality."

At those words, Zheng's rigid expression crumbled.

"You can tell? I made it using real Junshan Yinzhen leaves I was lucky enough to acquire. I rarely get a chance to brew it."

It might have come off as impudent, but even Liu Daijin would be hard-pressed to acquire tea on the level of what Koichiro had just drank. Depending on the situation, it could be seen as so valuable no one would be able to attach a price tag to it.

After all, this yellow tea was native to Junshan Island in China's Hunan

province. Only a thousand kilograms of tea leaves were produced yearly, the majority of which would be bought by the more affluent people of China or major tea makers. The common people were unlikely to acquire these tea leaves.

Just a hundred grams of tea leaves cost several thousands of yen; that made it clear just how precious of a commodity these tea leaves were. By comparison, five hundred gram packs of moderately good tea would sell for the same price. The emperors of China favored this tea since the days of antiquity, and it truly could be called a tea worthy of an imperial household.

The question of what tea as rare as this was doing in this world had a ridiculously simple answer. When items from Rearth were found in this world, there would be one of two reasons behind it. They were either brought in by someone summoned to this world, or someone was drawn to this world by a supernatural disappearance. In either case, they were carried in by, or happened to be in the vicinity of, whoever was brought into this world.

Incidentally, this tea was obtained by a young Chinese man who was unfortunate enough to be summoned to this world. He had worked in tea production. Like most young people of the present day, he would never put down his smartphone, but he also had a lot of passion for his craft. He was a bit of an eccentric man who would go around the fields producing tea leaves for research.

The Junshan Yinzhen leaves he had on him when he was summoned were the result of him begging a master craftsman for a sample of the leaves for research. They were the genuine article. And when he was brought into this world, the country that called him to this world happened to find the bag with the leaves next to him. Evidently, he had grabbed onto whatever he had nearby when he was summoned.

Following that, he went through many ups and downs before he found employment in one of the Organization’s tea production factories. When he joined the Organization, Liu learned of the Junshan Yinzhen tea leaves, and bought them off the man for a large sum of money.

One could very well say that this tea had only reached Koichiro through a

series of coincidences piled upon coincidences; a true alignment of the planets. Still, a few hundred people were summoned every year, so as long as one wasn't picky about the brand, it was possible for tea from Rearth to find its way into this world. But it was mostly black or red tea, or even just tea in plastic bottles.

As such, this tea certainly wasn't something one would serve to a person who had no taste for high-class tea. In fact, had Liu not ordered him to use these leaves, Zheng would not have thought to serve it to him. The fact that he did, however, made him all the more pleased to hear Koichiro's honest, positive impression.

"Excuse me," a muffled voice came from behind the door, accompanied by a gentle knock.

With that signal, Zheng swiftly moved to the door and ushered the owner inside. But when the door opened, Liu didn't enter the room. He stood, rooted in place, and gazed into the room with shocked amazement. His eyes were fixed on the man who rose from the sofa to greet him. The two stood for a long moment, their gazes locked on each other.



“Is it really you, Koichiro...?” Liu managed to eventually spit out the words.

This wasn’t so much a question as it was Liu putting his own belief into words. After all, the old man facing him still had some semblance of the young man he once knew in his hardened facial features.

“Aye. It’s been... a long time. Liu Zhong Jian. No...” Koichiro’s lips curled in a profound smile. “I hear they call you Liu Daijin now.”

Aah, he hasn’t changed... He always was like this.

It was half a century ago that Liu Zhong Jian and Koichiro Mikoshiba had raced across the battlefield as comrades, fighting to uphold the Organization’s values. Liu’s hands trembled as his field of vision clouded over with emotion.

“My friend, call me as you will. I will call you as I like, too.”

“I see. Then I will call you Zhong Jian, as I once did.”

With that said, the two smiled at one another.

†

After basking in the joy of their reunion for a while, the two sat down in chairs prepared in the guest room ahead of time. There was so much they needed to ask one another.

“You may stay and listen, Zheng,” Liu told his assistant. “But you must not speak.”

“Understood,” Zheng bowed silently and moved back to one of the corners.

Regarding him with a sidelong glance, Liu started the conversation. From his perspective, a friend thought to be long dead had suddenly turned up alive. He naturally wanted to hear what Koichiro had gone through. Especially if it ended up being related to the Organization’s most treasured wish.

“I’ll admit I never thought we’d meet again like this, Koichiro. When the ritual went awry and you were caught up in it, we all assumed you had died...”

Trailing off, Liu directed a sharp gaze at Koichiro. His eyes were full of an iron will that would allow no falsehoods or lying.

It only made sense he would turn so serious; returning to Rearth was what

they had all sought for many years, and one of the reasons for the Organization's existence in the first place.

"So... Did you make it back to Rearth? To... our Earth?" Liu Daijin put the question which burned in his heart like a howl into words.

Koichiro nodded slowly.

"Yes... I made it back. I'd lived my life on that side up until a few months ago."

Upon hearing those words, a sob escaped Liu Daijin's lips. He leaned forward, pressing Koichiro for more answers.

"And what else? Did the others make it back, too?!"

During their attempt to conduct the counter-summon ritual, they tried to send a few people considered to be traitors to the Organization as an experiment. When the ritual went wrong, twenty-nine Organization members were sucked into the dimensional interstice. The Organization's top brass had no choice but to declare all of them dead.

But since Koichiro survived, there was the possibility the others were still alive. Given the tragic results of the counter-summoning ritual, the Organization had sealed away all information on it, and all further research into the matter was strictly forbidden. But depending on Koichiro's answers, they could very well resume this research. And in the best possible scenario, they'd be able to send their fellow otherworlders back to Rearth at any time.

But while realizing the fleeting hope Liu was overcome with, Koichiro had to relay the harsh truth.

"No, I haven't seen the others since then... They are most likely... I'm sorry," Koichiro shook his head silently.

Seeing the fleeting hope in Liu's eyes shatter, Koichiro could only apologize. But he couldn't lie about this. People's lives were on the line.

"Isn't there a chance they simply landed somewhere else and you haven't met them?" Liu looked at Koichiro with a clinging gaze, as if refusing to give up hope.

That was indeed a possibility, but it had naturally occurred to Koichiro as well.

"No. It pains me to say it, but I believe the chances of that are quite slim.

When I was caught up in the ritual, I found myself in the state of Indiana in the United States. I had been transported to a room in a dilapidated house."

At those words, Liu's expression turned bitter.

"So Adelina Berezhnaya's theory that anyone sent back would turn up in a spot where a person was summoned from was true..."

"Yes. It would seem so."

Upon hearing the name of one of his comrades, who had been caught up in the dimensional interstice alongside him, Koichiro's eyes filled with tears. The counter-summoning ritual was put together using a theory created by that Organization member; a genius Russian woman.

The idea behind it was simple. When someone is summoned to this world, it means both worlds' barriers are lifted. One can liken it to a hotel where the rooms are all guarded by an auto-lock system. Rearth is room A, while this world is room B, and the corridor is the dimensional interstice. The doors are each world's barrier.

By this example, the summoning ritual means someone in room B calls someone from room A to their room. The chant used for the ritual is like an internal phone line between the rooms. The person beckoned from room A opens the door from the inside and easily goes outside, and the door to room B is likewise opened from the inside.

The problem begins when one realizes that Person A doesn't have the key to his room, and finds themselves locked outside; a common occurrence, which in most cases would be resolved by asking the front desk to unlock the room's door.

But there is another method — summoning someone else from Room A (Rearth) to Room B (this world). In the moment that happens, both doors will open, but the problem is getting the timing right. Still, if it does go right, one would be able to infiltrate the locked door by following someone else in.

While that simplified explanation might make the feat seem relatively trivial, there are several problems. They can be summed up as two major obstacles.

The first is the aforementioned timing. This ritual involved moving between

dimensions, and it was still unknown how long the barriers remain lifted. It could be days, months, or mere seconds; perhaps even a split second. And unlike a hotel door, which produces noise when it closes, the barriers make no indication of being lifted or reapplied.

No research was done into the matter, so it would be impossible to confidently say this was the case, but given what few examples existed, it's highly likely people cannot survive in the dimensional interstice.

As such, the act of trying to cross between dimensions is like trying to wade through outer space in an attempt to cross between two spaceships. Even if one has no choice, it's not just a risky gamble; it's borderline suicidal.

Even if one were to successfully clear the obstacle of timing, another problem remains; one would need to summon someone else to take their place in this hellish world. In order to go back home, they would need to condemn someone else into taking their place; not unlike a game of Old Maid.

The latter problem was the greatest subject of debate within the Organization at the time. They were a group of people who were forcibly called into this world to act as expendable pawns, and they had all suffered great hardships since their summoning.

Some were forced to slavery and had their dignity and freedom stripped away from them. Some had their loved ones raped before their eyes. And they would have to leave someone behind in this world to take their place. They all wanted to go home, of course, but they didn't want to do it on account of someone else. They wanted to go home in a way they could all be satisfied with.

That was what Koichiro Mikoshiba, Liu Zhong Jian and the other leading members of the Organization believed. But those who had been jaded by the nature of this world saw this as nothing but idealism. There were many people in the Organization that would not hesitate to take any means possible, no matter how ghastly, to go back home.

And this created a schism within the Organization. It became divided between the Homecoming faction, who insisted on returning home no matter what, and the Opposition faction, who refused to stoop that low no matter how bad things got.

If only we could have talked it out more at the time...

Those regrets had haunted Liu ever since, not to mention many of the Organization's members who knew what happened at the time. But when all was said and done, no amount of talking could change the result. It wasn't that they didn't discuss the matter at all at the time; after all, both the Homecoming and the Opposition factions were adamant about their ideals. This insistence and resolve was something both factions had in common.

They came to their conclusion after laying out everything on the table — their future, their philosophies, their very humanity. And so, no matter what anyone might say, they could not overturn the conclusion they'd come to.

As a result, the Homecoming faction attacked Adelina Berezhnaya, who was researching the counter-summon ritual at the Organization's orders. They forced her to perform the ritual, while Koichiro and Liu led a strike force on the estate where the ritual was being done.

What followed was a battle between comrades who had once shared joys and sorrows. But who was in the wrong here? It was hard to pinpoint any one person who had caused this. Perhaps the Homecoming Faction was right in its backlash against the Opposition Faction, who continued their research into the counter-summoning ritual despite having no intention of using it.

"Do you regret it, Koichiro...?" Liu asked.

"Yes. I'm still not content with all this," Koichiro nodded.

At the time, the two of them decided to stop the ritual no matter what. The result, however, did not go as planned. The attempt to forcibly stop the counter-summoning ritual made the spell go haywire, sucking Koichiro and his twenty-nine subordinates into the dimensional interstice. And, by coincidence or perhaps fate's whimsy, Koichiro was brought back to his world.

The moment he'd realized he'd returned home, Koichiro's heart became heavy with regret and guilt. And even now, half a century later, those feelings hadn't faded. True, he never intended to do it, but Koichiro still found his way back home, albeit at the cost of the lives of many. There could be no denying that.

“I see... I feel the same way,” Liu said, heaving a deep sigh.

Following that incident, the Organization lost many of its operatives, and eight of its leaders, including Koichiro. It was a painful blow. It took more than a decade for the Organization to truly recover from the repercussions of that event.

And in that time, the ones who were able to desperately prevent the Organization from falling apart under its own weight were the twelve commanders led by Liu; those who would go on to be known as the Elders.

Similar to how Koichiro found his way back by way of coincidences and miracles, those left behind in this world also had to make many sacrifices.

“We’ve both been through a lot, haven’t we... Koichiro?”

“So it seems, Zhong Jian.”

And so, the two gazed upon each other for one long moment. As if each of them was reflecting on what the other had experienced over the years.

Chapter 2: The First Obstacle

Roughly a month before the O'ltormean invasion army, led by the First Princess Shardina, began their hurried preparations to retreat, a meeting took place. On the evening of the day following Ryoma Mikoshiba's first meeting with Helnesgoula's queen, the Vixen of the North, Grindiana Helnecharles.

It happened in the citadel city of Memphis, originally an important defensive position for the Kingdom of Xarooda, which was then occupied by Helnesgoula's army. In one corner of a building that was once the center of the city's administration, there were three individuals sitting around a single map.

They had but one objective. To come up with a way to drive Shardina and the O'ltormean invasion army back. Even with Helnesgoula, one of the strongest countries in the continent, on their side, the three kingdoms of the east had limited options.

General Arios Belares had died in the Battle of the Notis Plains, and Shardina's invasion army had already taken root within Xaroodian territory. They'd established a firm bridgehead by building Fort Noltia in the Ushas Basin, allowing them to encroach deeper into Xarooda's domain.

Truth be told, if General Berlares's heir, Joshua, had not repeatedly disturbed their supply lines with guerilla warfare, O'ltormea would have already divided Xarooda's territory right down the middle by now; the history books would have already been written.

Joshua's miraculous struggle was very much the reason Xarooda still clung to life as a country. But that miracle could only last so long. O'ltormea was already drawing on its vast national power to gather troops experienced with fighting in mountainous terrain. Large amounts of food and supplies were piled up in Fort Notis, and then delivered little by little into Fort Noltia.

It was only a matter of time before the invasion army switched over to a large-scale offensive. This left the alliance with only two options. The first was to let Helnesgoula's army march on the Ushas Basin and join forces with the

armies of Xarooda and the two other countries; this would form an allied army that might be able to repel O'ltormea's invasion force.

The other option was to have Helnesgoula launch a surprise attack on the O'ltormea Empire's northern borders, forcing them to consolidate their forces there. In doing so, they would be lightening the pressure on Xarooda's front.

Both ideas had their shortcomings, though.

With the former, it was unclear if Helnesgoula's forces would be able to arrive at the Ushas Basin in time before the battle began. And even if they did arrive before the fighting began, it was hard to say whether the newly formed allied army would be able to fight properly in tandem.

Worse yet, Xarooda had a unique mountainous topography that made the terrain hard to march across. Helnesgoula had a vast intelligence network and was aware of the country's terrain to some extent, but still, deploying an army into another country carried risks.

But the other choice, launching a surprise invasion on O'ltormea's northern border, was just as risky. Should Helnesgoula do this, the first to act would be the O'ltormean northern front armies, marshaled by the crown prince. That army was said to be a force of elites, capable of matching the Emperor Lionel Eisenheit's own elite guard.

A direct clash with those forces would not be decided easily, and there would be no chance for an armistice. Both countries would need to pull all their remaining forces into the battle. And while that would force Princess Shardina's army to pull back, the land would be piled up with both countries' corpses, and rivers of their blood would flow.

It would mark the beginning of an endless war of attrition between O'ltormea and Helnesgoula. And who was to say other countries wouldn't try to take advantage of the situation for their own ends? There was no guarantee the Holy Qwiltantia Empire wouldn't try to capitalize on the war. And that would turn this military maneuver, meant to help Xarooda, into the start of a grand war for the entirety of the continent.

And even if Helnesgoula was interested in helping Xarooda, this was still another country's problem. As Helnesgoula's queen, Grindiana had no need to

take this kind of risk.

But even so, one man fearlessly brought up the reckless suggestion of attacking O'ltormea's northern border. His name was Ryoma Mikoshiba, a baron of Rhoadseria and an otherworlder from Rearth, who overturned Queen Lupis Rhoadserians's inferior position in the recent civil war, winning her the crown.

He passed himself off as some kind of genius, but finally he shows his true colors... Arnold Grisson, one of Helnesgoula's generals and commander of the eastern front, sighed in disappointment. *I have to wonder if this man even came up with the offer he gave us yesterday.*

During their first meeting the day before, Ryoma impressed Grindiana, the ruler Grisson admired and was devoted to, by accurately seeing through her intentions and making her an offer that exceeded her expectations. And that shocked Grisson to no end. Despite being more than twice his age, Grisson was overcome with both fear and awe towards Ryoma Mikoshiba.

But by now, Grisson felt nothing of the sort. Ryoma would have to be a fool not to notice how reckless and dangerous the suggestion he'd just made was. And if he said it knowing how insane it was, he was a serpent clearly trying to deceive them.

"Are you... serious?"

"Yes..." Ryoma nodded composedly. "I want you to order Helnesgoula's armies to begin preparations to attack O'ltormea's northern borderline."

Seeing his attitude, Grisson let out another exasperated sigh and shook his head. Truth be told, had Grindiana not been present in this room, Grisson was inclined to drive his fist into Ryoma's face.

They agreed the previous evening that Helnesgoula would unite with the eastern alliance and act as the union's leader. And the leader of a union was expected to be willing to take some damage to assist the countries under its wing. But that didn't mean it would need to take a risk large enough to potentially bring down its own destruction. The suggestion bordered on madness.

As such, Grisson's exasperation was to be expected. However, contrary to his attitude, Grindiana looked at Ryoma, who sat opposite of her, with glittering eyes. Her gaze was like that of an innocent child who had just been shown a magic trick.

"You just don't understand, Arnold," Grindiana said, and then raised her voice in pleasant laughter.

"But, Your Majesty..." Grisson could only tilt his head quizzically at his mistress's attitude.

Ordering Helnesgoula's armies to begin preparations for an attack on O'ltormea's northern borders meant going to all-out war with the Empire. Grisson couldn't see any other interpretation to what Ryoma just said. Any of Helnesgoula's generals would likely assume the same thing.

Grindiana saw things differently, though.

"You're a little fool, Arnold... Ryoma Mikoshiba wouldn't have made this plan if he didn't think that an all-out war with O'ltormea was perfectly avoidable."

Grindiana smiled as she spoke, with a glimmer dancing in her eyes.

"That's not your intention... Is it, Mikoshiba?" She punctuated her words, regarding Ryoma with a bewitching sidelong glance.

The sheer charm in the gaze she directed at him would send a shiver down most men's spines. But it seemed ineffective against Ryoma.

"Of course it isn't, Your Majesty," Ryoma nodded composedly, pointing at a specific area on the map spread before them.

"Fort Notis..." Grisson cocked his head. "What about it?"

Ryoma pointed at the Notis plains, which were now firmly in O'ltormea's territory. Grisson didn't understand what Ryoma and Grindiana were getting at.

"This is where we'll be aiming for," Ryoma said.

"What?!" Grisson exclaimed, rising to his feet in surprise.

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Later that night, Arnold Grisson sank his body into the sofa, his eyes looking

up at the ceiling. It was just him and Grindiana in the room.

“I can’t believe he came up with something like that...” Grisson muttered.

Ryoma Mikoshiba detailed an outline of how they would offer Xarooda their aid. And for Grisson, a seasoned soldier who had survived countless battles, it was a plan that seemed all too absurd.

Who could come up with something that preposterous...?

Grisson’s heart was flooded with emotion. True, he was at fault for not hearing Ryoma’s idea out to its conclusion. He couldn’t help but regretfully curse himself for raising his voice despite his position as supreme commander of Helnesgoula’s eastern front.

But this was all hindsight, of course. Who could have read into Ryoma’s intentions ahead of time? None of Grisson’s colleagues in Dreisen could have predicted it, either. While they were all gifted generals, they were trained to take command on the field. Put simply, they were tacticians. But this was a matter of strategy. Of course, this wasn’t to say strategy was more important than tactics, but they differed in terms of perspective. Very few people could plan military operations on a national level.

Arnold Grisson was hailed as one of Helnesgoula’s leading tacticians. He took pride in that fact, but by now, that praise felt all too hollow. Especially since there was another monster in this room, capable of the same level of thinking.

“Did it really surprise you that much?” Grindiana asked with her usual composed smile as she took a gumdrop from a jar on the table and placed it into her mouth.

Seeing his mistress’s attitude only made Grisson sigh again.

“I certainly wouldn’t have been able to come up with anything like that, at least. Using our army to shake up the Empire’s northern borders, and using that chance to cross the mountains and attack Fort Notis...”

Grisson’s body shivered as he spoke.

That man’s a monster... He’s on a whole different level.

Grisson was gripped by utter terror at Ryoma Mikoshiba. Ever since Ryoma

came up with the suggestion to establish the four-country union, he'd held a high opinion of Ryoma. But it seemed even that appraisal wasn't quite right. As a general of Helnesgoula, things were going in a very bad direction for him.

Everything's still fine for now, but...

At least some of his anxiety stemmed from the fact that he'd been put to shame in front of Grindiana multiple times over the last few days, but that wasn't all.

How many people in Helnesgoula are capable of dealing with this man...?

The sinking fear he'd first felt the other day was once again settling over his heart. Right now, Helnesgoula was in a cooperative relationship with Ryoma. And the trade treaty bound the four countries together, meaning it was unlikely that relationship would sour anytime soon.

But who was to say this relationship would last indefinitely? And if it didn't, would Helnesgoula have the reliable means to resist this man? If nothing else, Grisson knew full well he wasn't this man's equal. What had happened earlier was that much of a major blow to Grisson's spirit. This man saw the world in a whole different way than he did.

His eye for strategy and tactics is on a whole different level than mine... He's far more capable than I am.

Ryoma's words spiraled nonstop through Grisson's mind. His suggestion was simply that unusual. To be exact, Grisson had already considered the option of attacking Fort Notis. Attacking the enemy's weak point is as effective in a war between countries as it is in a tavern brawl.

After all, the supplies gathered in Fort Notis were the invasion army's lifeline. It was the very lifeblood supporting Shardina's army. Attacking the enemy's line of supply was in no way an impressive display of strategy. Even if occupying the fortress outright wasn't possible, burning the supplies could tilt things in their favor.

But discussing that option and actually implementing it were two different things. The biggest problem was that Fort Notis was sitting deep in O'ltormea's territory. If Helnesgoula's army were to mount an assault on that base, they

would have only two ways of doing it. The first was to attack through Xarooda's territory, and the second was to cross the precipitous mountains running along the O'ltormean-Helnesgoulan border.

Given Xarooda's poor position in the war, crossing their territories was a rather risky idea. Now that Arios Belares was dead, the enemy had built a large bridgehead in Fort Noltia, west of the Ushas Basin. King Julianus I of Xarooda was losing his unifying power rapidly. Of course, there were a considerable number of nobles which had led their armies to Peripheria to stand alongside the king in the bitter war to come.

But there were also quite a few opportunistic nobles who sought to preserve the stability and glory of their names. They remained nestled in their lands, and while they outwardly made preparations to fight against O'ltormea's forces, they could very well have been waiting for the right chance to turn coat. Honestly speaking, those nobles could not be trusted.

It was clear what would happen if Helnesgoula were to march an army through these lands. The O'ltormean invasion force would be tipped off at once, and their plan would have immediately backfired.

But the plan of crossing the border through the mountains was even more foolish. O'ltormea and Helnesgoula both kept a careful watch over the mountain roads that were wide enough to march an army across. If Helnesgoula's were to show any sign of heading south, O'ltormea's northern forces would step up to lock down the highway. They'd be stopped long before they'd reach Fort Notis.

But trying to get off the highway to cross the mountains is even more absurd.

In this world, the towns and highways were protected by barrier pillars meant to keep monsters away. Going off the road meant entering monster-infested territories. Trying to force one's way through by getting off the highways was inviting painful retaliation upon oneself. Even with skilled guides, marching an army through there was a problem.

If one tried to mount a force of ten thousand, it would essentially be impossible. Considering the necessity of bringing supplies, the most they could manage was a single knight order of 2,500 knights. Even then, it wasn't likely

that all of these knights would reach Fort Notis alive.

True, the monsters breeding off the highway were nowhere near the number or strength of the beasts infesting the no-man's land that was the Wortenia peninsula. And some strong adventurers and mercenaries intentionally wandered off the highway to cross borders.

But this was different. Marching an army through a mountainous region infested with monsters? Even if they were graced with the best luck imaginable, only 70 or 80 percent of their men would survive the journey. And if fate sided against them, they could very well be wiped out before they even reached their destination.

Additionally, assuming all 2,500 knights would actually make it to Fort Notis safely, a force that size would be far too small to mount a successful attack. Based on the fort's size, it could house roughly 10,000 men. Due to Joshua Belares's repeated raids on their supply lines, the fort's men were sent out on guard duty and patrols, and Princess Shardina's order to mount an offensive also influenced the numbers in the fort. With all that considered, it was hard to believe the fort was fully manned. At best, it would have 50 to 60 percent of its capacity. Still, it would mean that the fortress would be garrisoned by 5,000 to 6,000 troops.

So even if all 2,500 Helnesgoulan troops were to cross the mountains safely, they wouldn't be able to topple the fortress. To overcome a fortress, one would need three times the numbers of the garrison. A single knight order didn't have nearly enough men. Realistically speaking, mounting a charge on Fort Notis with those numbers would be reckless.

Not to mention, this was going under the assumption that they would only have Fort Notis's troops to contend with. The longer it took to break through the fortress, the more reinforcements they would get from cities in the rear. They would need to overwhelm Fort Notis within a limited timespan, or they'd be boxed in by O'ltormean soldiers on all sides.

With all that in mind, it only made sense from a military standpoint to assume that attacking Fort Notis was impossible. But while even Grisson, so lauded for his tactical ingenuity by his colleagues, deemed it impossible, Ryoma had come

up with a viable strategy for conquering Fort Notis.

It's like the god of war favors him...

The only person he knew who could probably match Ryoma's monstrous intellect was his queen, Grindiana.

"Are you that anxious?" Grindiana said, popping another gumdrop into her mouth as she eyed Grisson's face.

"Doesn't he make you anxious, Your Majesty?" He answered her question with a question.

"Well... I can't say he makes me very anxious, no."

Grindiana brought the teacup sitting on the table to her lips. She knitted her brows in displeasure at the lukewarm tea. If she had any apprehension, it was directed at everyone except Ryoma.

That man knows to be satisfied with his lot in life... If nothing else, he won't let foolish ambition thrust him into a pointless war.

It is said the world is made up of all kinds of people. Some seek stability and safety, while others burn with ambition and seek to constantly elevate their station. Grindiana had carried the responsibility of leading one of the three greatest countries on the continent for many years, and thanks to that, she had been graced with a discerning eye for people's natures.

Based on her observations, Ryoma had a perfect balance of ambition and stability. Depending on the circumstances, he could exhibit either of those traits. But moreover, she had judged him as the type more prone to seek stability.

He fundamentally does not interfere with others. But that only means he hates it when people interfere with him... So long as someone ranks higher than him, he wouldn't normally bare his fangs at them unless they foolishly try to corner him.

He was a sensible man, who abided by faith and trust. And he didn't lust for further riches or authority. Had Ryoma been the kind of man who would stop at nothing to achieve glory or self-preservation, he would have sold the Wortenia

Peninsula to Grindiana back when they met to discuss the union. In exchange, he would have her grant him a noble title in Helnesgoula. Even if he didn't do something that flagrant, he might have attempted to make some kind of other shifty deal.

And that would, of course, be an act of blatant treason against Rhoadseria and a betrayal of Xarooda.

Still, nobles who would sell out their lords to further their own standing were far from uncommon in this cutthroat world. In fact, most nobles fell into that category. The fact that he'd never once tried anything of the sort marked Ryoma as that much more trustworthy in Grindiana's eyes compared to most of Helnesgoula's nobles.

But more than anything, if anyone makes me anxious, it's not him... It's you*, Arnold.*

Her loyal retainer remained seated on the sofa, looking up at the ceiling. As Grindiana gazed at his face, her eyes filled with unease. She didn't intend to condemn Arnold for the dread he was feeling.

She had no doubt that Ryoma had the mind and strategic eye to match even her, whose shrewdness had earned her the title of Vixen of the North. As a general charged with Helnesgoula's national defense, ordering Grisson not to feel some amount of healthy caution and dread toward this man was unwise.

But fearing and shirking someone will buy the dread and unease of the other side as well. Even if such emotions are never put into words, other people have a way of picking up on them; all the more so in Ryoma's case. If all the information she'd dug up on this man proved true, it didn't matter how aptly Grisson might try to hide his feelings; Ryoma would still notice.

For the time being, the fear budding in Arnold's heart is still a tiny sprout. But...

But given time, that small sprout would grow, bloom and mature into a tree of suspicion and fear. And a time may come when that tree would grow larger than the confines of Arnold Grisson's heart could hope to contain, and become a malignancy infecting everyone around him.

The question that remained was how would Ryoma react were that to come to pass.

Naturally, he'd act to eliminate the threat...

But if Grindiana were to tell him of her doubts directly, it would only deepen Grisson's fear and aversion. The most Grindiana could do was to periodically try to patch things up between the two.

I suppose this could be overly anxious on my part, though...

With that thought in mind, Grindiana rang the bell on the table to have her lukewarm tea replaced, praying all the while that the hypothetical winter which could come was nothing but needless concern on her behalf...

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As morning rose, a suffocating atmosphere settled over a certain room in one of Memphis's inns.

"Lord Mikoshiba, are you quite serious about this?"

With that said, Orson Greed, the captain of Xarooda's Monarch's Guard, directed a questioning glance at the man sitting calmly on the sofa opposite of him.

"Yes. I've already made sure everything is prepared," Ryoma said, taking a swig out of a wine bottle. A burning sensation surged up from within Ryoma's body. "Don't you trust my plan?" he added.

"No, I wouldn't say that," Greed shook his head. "Not at this point, anyway. That plan is a gamble, and a bad one at that. But I do realize that your chances are not nil, and I also know we don't have any other options."

Looking away, Greed turned his eyes to the administration building standing tall outside the window.

"The Vixen of the North didn't oppose that plan... And His Majesty ordered me to entrust everything to you, Lord Mikoshiba. I don't think I'm in any position to find fault with your plan."

With that said, Greed heaved a deep sigh. Looking at him, Ryoma gave a subtle nod.

I can understand his anxiety...

The fate of his country was hanging in the balance. If they failed, Xarooda would quite literally be wiped off the map. And he was the captain of Monarch's Guard, a man who had entrusted years of his life to Xarooda. He couldn't avert his eyes from this crisis.

Not least because he had to go back to Peripheria next and report the news of the four-kingdom union to Julianus I. Then, he'd have to deliver a message which was very much the crux of the coming operation to Grahalt and Joshua, who were currently lying in wait at Fort Ushas.

Both were crucial tasks, which could only be entrusted with someone worthy of the necessary trust. But once he'd finished those tasks, he was to take over from Grahalt's role of defending Julianus I.

With the captain of the royal guard, Grahalt, out on the battlefield, Greed and the Monarch's Guard couldn't afford to leave the king's side. That much was unavoidable, and Greed wasn't displeased with the task he'd been given.

But still, with the fate of his kingdom being decided in a place far out of his sight, his anxiety was understandable. And yet, those concerns were the same as a child's whims. After all, Ryoma had hatched this plan despite being the mere commander of a reinforcement squad. He was very much carrying the heaviest burden when it came to Xarooda's survival despite not being part of this kingdom.

Honestly, out of everyone in this war, Ryoma was without a doubt the one to have drawn the shortest straw. Worse yet, his skillful tactician, Lione, and Dilphina, the daughter of the Mad Demon Nelcius, were away from this place, along with most of his soldiers. His spies, the Igasaki clan, stayed behind with Gennou and Boltz to keep the Wortenia Peninsula defended.

The only members of the Igasaki clan at Ryoma's side were Sakuya and a few select ninjas handpicked by Gennou, and he had them dispatched to scout out Fort Notis's internal structure. They were currently on their way to O'ltormea's territory.

With Greed going back to report to Julianus I, the only soldiers left under Ryoma's command were a single knight order of 2,500 knights that Grindiana

had deployed for him. Besides them, there were his aides in the Malfist twins, House Mikoshiba's personal vassals (a group of ten soldiers led by Kevin), and fifteen Igasaki ninja Sakuya left behind to serve as guides through the mountains and bodyguards.

Ryoma's total forces were 2,528 soldiers, himself included.

In terms of raw numbers, they had about as much as a single organized knight order. But most of his vassals, alongside whom he had experience working, were away. Ryoma would have to mount an attack on Fort Notis with soldiers that felt no sense of unity or common interest with him.

It was like trying to play a game of chess with your side only having pawns.

Greed's right. It really is a bad gamble...

Ryoma couldn't help but feel this way. But given the situation Xarooda was in, they were long past the point where conventional means could help them. As risky as it was, they had no other way of saving Xarooda, except resorting to this reckless plan.

Even Ryoma had to acknowledge that this strategy was risky to the point of being a gamble. Firstly, they'd need to avoid O'ltormea's lookouts and cut a way through a mountainous region crawling with monsters. Then they'd need to find a way to smoke out the soldiers within the fortress and sneak inside. Then they'd need to kill the officer in charge of defending the fort, and burn the food and supplies that were likely to be stored in their warehouses.

The probability of any and each of those steps going according to Ryoma's plan was exceedingly low. Still, as low as their prospects were, they would reap further rewards if they emerged victorious. And to ensure this highly improbable victory comes to pass, Ryoma made every preparation and tried to plan out every step meticulously.

Even so, regrets and doubts surfaced in his mind. Couldn't there have been a better way? Did he overlook something? Questions lacking answers swirled in his mind like a labyrinth.

It was then that two small palms rested on Ryoma's shoulders. Small, soft hands. Ryoma knew, without even looking, what that sensation meant.



Right... I did everything I could. The only thing left to do now is to keep believing and move forward.

Ryoma rose from the sofa.

“Right, let’s get started... Call them over. And also...”

Laura and Sara wordlessly nodded at Ryoma’s vague instructions.

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The citadel city of Memphis. A city on the cusp of the Xarooda-Helnesgoula border, and also the home of many adventurers who make a living by exploring the dense forest and steep cliffs near the border.

Beyond the reach of the barrier pillars was a world infested by monsters. But that danger also translated to an opportunity for profit. The monsters’ skins could be used to make leather armor or clothes. Their fangs and claws could be fashioned into weapons. Their ichor, bodily fluids, and internal organs could have medicinal properties, meaning they could be sold for a pretty sum.

The presence of monsters was a threat for mankind, of course, but those creatures could also serve as a source of income.

Memphis was home to many sly adventurers that made their living through hunting monsters. Among them was a group of female adventurers called the “Petals of the Northern Wind,” a group of three women named Olivia, Abby, and Tia. They were quite young, in their late teens to their early twenties. Despite this, they’d been affiliated with the guild for five years and had reached Rank C already. They were skilled enough to be recognized by other members of the guild.

The Petals of the Northern Wind were now climbing the ridges of the mountains south of Memphis as part of their job as the guides of a certain group. It was a job they’d accepted outside of the guild, in an underground pub in the city.

This is bad... I thought we were just supposed to be guides here.

The group’s leader, Olivia, glared at the line of people trailing behind her as she tried to catch her breath. It had been ten days since they’d set off, leading

this group across the mountains. Walking behind her was the leader of this group, Ryoma Mikoshiba, and his two attendants, Laura and Sara. They were clad in their usual black armor as they trudged along silently.

I knew it wasn't an ordinary gig, but... I didn't expect anything like this.

She'd repeatedly cursed her own naivety for jumping at a deal that sounded too good to be true. Still, she didn't have any choice but to accept it; she normally never would have taken a job like this.

There were several reasons she accepted this job. Firstly, a benefactor of hers had set it up; secondly, the reward offered was quite high; thirdly, they'd failed a job for the guild, inducing a hefty penalty for breaching their contract. If they didn't pay that penalty by a set date, the Petals of the Northern Wind would be sold off to slavery.

The first and third reasons were especially crucial. Thankfully, the deposit they got for this job was quite the hefty sum, so they'd already avoided the risk of being enslaved. In that regard, Gran introducing them to this job was definitely a windfall.

And yet, they couldn't exactly be happy about this job, either.

The pay was great, and we had no choice anyway, but...

The job was to lead a group through Memphis's mountains and into O'ltormea's turf. The client Gran introduced to them was a young blond woman, who had informed Olivia of these details. At first Olivia thought they were simply smuggling contraband, but the truth was far darker than that.

She didn't imagine they'd be leading a Helnesgoulan military unit.

Recalling the large, bearded man leading the Northern Wind Brigade, Olivia bit her lips. True, Gran was their benefactor. They owed him a debt too large to put into words. They were both originally from southern Rhoadseria, and despite Gran being well over twice her age, they were both from the same small village and were essentially like family.

Gran was actually the son of the village leader, and had helped change Olivia's diapers when she was still a baby. While their parents worked in the fields, he was the one who looked after Olivia and the other two girls. Gran matured into

a healthy young man and began working as a mercenary, but fate had grim plans in store for Olivia and her two friends.

It happened six years ago; the village Gran and the girls lived in was in southern Rhoadseria, near the border with one of the southern kingdoms, the Kingdom of Britirnia. In other words, it was closely-contested land.

Naturally, the nobles in control of southern Rhoadseria demanded the peasants conscript to fight in the conflict, and the taxation was quite severe. In that situation, they didn't seem to care much for maintaining public order within the domain.

And sure enough, Gran's village was attacked by a group of bandits. Many of the villagers were killed or sold off as slaves. Out of everyone, the three girls miraculously escaped the bandits' grasp. But having been left with nowhere to go, they had only two options left; to die on the wayside, or sell themselves into slavery.

It was then that Gran, who had begun distinguishing himself as a young mercenary and the leader of the Northern Wind Brigade, returned to the village. He took in the three girls, who were hiding in a dilapidated house, and taught them how to handle a weapon and live on their own.

Since the three girls moved their operations to Memphis, their relationship with Gran had become a bit more distant. But they were still close enough that whenever Gran would accept work in northern Xarooda, he would drop into Memphis to check on them.

It was because of this closeness that they accepted the offer he brought them, even if it lacked the guarantee that came with guild-associated work. But had Olivia known the real details ahead of time, she never would have agreed to this. The Petals of the Northern Wind tried to make a living as adventurers, and getting mixed up in a war between two countries was the last thing they wanted.

True, adventurers and mercenaries both used battle as a means of profit. What set them apart was that adventurers mostly fought monsters, while mercenaries fought other people. Still, it wasn't a major difference or an ironclad rule. Vanquishing and pursuing bandits took tracking abilities, and

adventurers were often deployed to take care of them, despite bandits being human. Conversely, mercenaries were often hired by governors to guard their domain, and there were cases where they were ordered to slay monsters.

The difference between an adventurer and a mercenary was extremely vague at times. This was why the guild managed both mercenaries and adventurers and mediated work for both. Olivia, for example, called herself an adventurer, but had experience hunting down bandits.

That didn't mean Olivia and the girls actively enjoyed fighting other human beings, or wanted to be on a battlefield. They held a great deal of indignant anger toward bandits, given what had happened to them in the past, but they still hated the act of killing, and were haunted by guilt whenever they had to do so.

I might be naive for feeling this way, but... Still.

Olivia tightened her grip on her sword; it was a gift Gran gave her when she first became an adventurer. She always thought she wielded this sword for the sake of the helpless and the weak, for those who fell victim to bandits like her family and friends. Her two comrades felt the same way.

They knew, of course, that when it came to surviving in this continent, such thinking was nothing more than sugar-coated lip service. But even if they only served as guides, they didn't want to take sides in a war.

"You all right, Olivia?" One of her comrades, Tia, suddenly appeared beside her. "You kinda look down."

Her face was full of concern. She probably wasn't on board for this mission either, but they'd already accepted the advance payment for the job. They couldn't give it back, since they needed to pay off their penalty to the guild.

Even if they did manage to find some way to produce those funds, they probably couldn't talk their way out of this just by returning what they'd been given. And their benefactor, Gran, specifically asked them to take this job. They couldn't say no.

No, no, I have to stay focused... All we need to do is guide them, that's all.

If Olivia, as their leader, were to let her dissatisfaction show on her face, that

emotion would go on to spread to Tia and Abby. And if that were to happen, they wouldn't be able to do their job. Their cooped-up feelings would overflow, and they would definitely give up on the job. And if they did that, the group following them wouldn't be able to cross the mountain range.

Of course, since this wasn't a job they got from the guild, they wouldn't have to pay a penalty for dropping the gig. But this was about more than just money. Discarding this job would mean tarnishing something more important than money: their dignity and reputation. And that extended not just to Olivia's group, but to Gran, who introduced them to the client.

We can't do that to Gran...

Those emotions constricted Olivia's heart.

"I'm fine, Tia. We should be at the summit soon, we can take a break there," Olivia said, pointing up at the peak so as to blow away the heavy mood.

It was then that she noticed what looked like a black dot within the sun.

What...?

The sun's light was too bright, making it difficult to recognize what that dot was. Olivia held up a hand to block out the sunlight and looked intently in its direction.

It's getting bigger...

At first it was tiny, but the dot was growing gradually in size.

"Oh, no!" Upon realizing what the black dot was, Olivia raised her voice in a shout. "Everyone, get down!"

This would achieve little, but honestly, it was better than nothing. After all, they were faced with the strongest monster in Memphis's southern mountains; effectively, the king of this region.

An Eagle Lord... Oh, no.

Olivia intentionally led them in an effort to avoid its territory, but they somehow ran into it anyway. The western continent had some monsters that were effectively giant versions of creatures from Rearth. Like squids and octopi in the sea, as well as other land animals and avians. The greatest of them were

the dragons, which stood dozens of meters tall. Their breath could melt armor like butter, and their scales deflected weapons easily.

They were like bomber jets with the sturdiness of a tank. A final boss, in game terms. But even so, as powerful as the dragons were, they weren't the apex species of this world. As mighty as they were, they had natural enemies.

The Eagle Lord was one such creature; not unlike the Roc from Sinbad's tales in *One Thousand and One Nights*, it matched the dragons in terms of size and flight speed. The flapping of its wings was capable of blowing a person away.

And so, Olivia told them to get down, but mere humans had no way of opposing this creature.

"So that's an Eagle Lord... It's hard to tell from a distance, but apparently it's as large as they say."

As the soldiers formed a circular formation and held up their shields, a voice spoke from Olivia's side. Massive monsters like this one were seen as something of a natural calamity. And among those monsters, the Eagle Lord was considered on a class that was close to the strongest monsters in existence. If the Guild were to put up a request to eliminate one of these creatures, only Rank A mercenaries or adventurers could participate, and only a group of several could possibly pull it off.

"So, what do we do?" Ryoma asked, holding up his own hand.



His eyes were narrowed as he gazed up to the sky, looking at the Eagle Lord circling above them. Apparently, he'd judged that the wise thing to do was to ask the guide for her opinion. But honestly, Olivia didn't know how to deal with this situation either.

After all, the Eagle Lord was simply circling in the sky above them. Did it recognize them as prey? Was it preparing to swoop down to attack them? Or perhaps it had its eyes set on something else? This was a situation where they could be attacked at any moment. They couldn't sit idly by and wait.

Do we run? Not like we're able to... This ridge is too narrow. If it was just us three, maybe we could manage it, but this many people? It's impossible... And even if we try to hide...

The ground was dotted with rocks, and the road was only wide enough to accommodate two or three people. Normally, Olivia would have run away from this place without a second thought. But with 2,500 people behind her, having them all run off at once was a recipe for a lethal accident. Depending on the situation, it could result in more casualties than the Eagle Lord would inflict.

All the same, waiting in the shadows for the danger to pass them by wasn't an option either. There were hardly any large boulders on the ridge, let alone trees, so there was nowhere to hide all of these people.

And that leaves...

Olivia admitted, very unwillingly, that the only remaining option was to meet their attacker with an assault of their own. But of course, given the cramped terrain, they couldn't hope to employ any group tactics.

"Whether it attacks us or not, we can't just ignore it... But that means..." Olivia trailed off.

Sitting idly by just so this monster could devour them was absurd, but blindly waving their weapons at it wouldn't help them either. Realistically speaking, a small force would have to distract the Eagle Lord while the rest rapidly escaped the area. This was the most efficient, most reasonable suggestion, but Olivia couldn't bring herself to say it aloud.

I'd imagine it's hard for her to bring it up...

Ryoma aptly noticed the hesitation in her eyes. Saying someone would have to draw the Eagle Lord's attention might have come across as innocuous enough, but the reality was that whoever served as the decoys would essentially be left to their deaths. Olivia held her tongue because she feared she might be ordered to fill that spot.

The knights Grindiana entrusted him with only obeyed Ryoma temporarily, because their queen had ordered them to do so. They'd left Memphis as soon as Ryoma was given the right to command over them, so there was no trust between Ryoma and the soldiers. If Ryoma were to order them to lay down their lives now, the knights would revolt against him.

That said, ordering Olivia's group to do it was honestly a difficult call to make. They had the weakest standing out of everyone present, and were arguably the most expendable. But Ryoma had to bitterly admit that without them, their chances of successfully crossing this mountainous region were all the slimmer.

When it came to knowing where the watering holes and shortcuts were, a map wouldn't be enough. Having Olivia's group guide them would also lower the chance of running into monsters, as they knew which areas were populated by these creatures.

True, they had run into an Eagle Lord, but those creatures reproduced in very small numbers and were a rare breed. The chances of actually encountering an Eagle Lord in this region were less than one percent, as hard as it might be to believe, given that they were unlucky enough to run into one.

Yeah, we ran into this thing, but that's just shitty luck on top of shitty luck...

To that end, discarding their capable guides here was actually quite risky. Which left the Igasaki ninja escorting him, and Kevin's unit as well. Given their loyalty, they'd gladly take up the role of decoys if Ryoma ordered it. But if Ryoma did this, they'd definitely die.

Given no other choice, Ryoma would order them to die if need be, but he didn't think now was the time.

No choice, is there...?

He wasn't enthusiastic about this decision. Still, this was the choice that

ensured the most people would get away alive, including the decoys. He couldn't stop the operation over something like this, especially not this late into the game. Greed should have already given Joshua and Grahalt his message by now.

Ryoma's hands brushed over Kikoku, the sword sheathed at his waist, confirming its presence.

It's a bit sooner than I expected, but I'll have to put you to work... You ready?

Kikoku's blade trembled ever so slightly, as if to answer Ryoma's question with affirmation. An imploring shiver, as if the blade had spurred him to let it sip the blood of a victim.

It was then, however, that someone stopped Ryoma.

"Master Ryoma... We'll stay behind."

Laura silently parted her lips, and Sara, who stood beside her, nodded silently. They'd likely come to the same conclusion as Ryoma.

Guess there's no point in trying to stop them... They'd probably do a better job at distracting it than a bow would, anyway...

Truthfully, Ryoma didn't want to put the sisters in harm's way. Seeing as it was his role to lead others, this sentiment may have come across as cowardly. But the sisters had been with him ever since he'd been summoned into this world. By now, he felt as strongly for them as he did for his family.

Given their prowess, they were the first people he should have nominated for this task. But he intentionally excluded them from the count. The problem was that Sara and Laura felt exactly the same way about him.

Was this romantic affection, or loyalty towards the man who saved them from slavery? Whichever it was, the two of them didn't want to expose Ryoma to danger. And furthermore, Ryoma wasn't adept at verbal thaumaturgy, so the two of them were more reliable at launching long-range attacks that would distract the Eagle Lord. And if they were to defeat it, using this method would no doubt be necessary.

Still, I can't let just the two of them handle this...

They were up against a monster which was a match for a dragon. He was confident they could both handle it, but he wanted to ensure there was another layer of safety.

“All right. When I give you a signal, fire the most bombastic spell you’ve got,” Ryoma said, and then turned to Olivia, who still hadn’t grasped the situation. “That’s that, then. We’ll be the decoys and distract it. You guys, go back the way we came and try to find a way around this area. We’ll regroup at the campsite we had planned for tonight.”

These people... Are they crazy? Olivia was dumbstruck.

What kind of commander would willfully march towards his own death?

“Are you... serious about this?” Olivia asked.

Ryoma replied with a cheerful smile. And then, he took a deep breath and allowed the chakras in his body to open.

“Go!”

Either way, he’d decided to do this; he couldn’t afford to waste any more time. With that word as their signal, Ryoma and the twins left the group and raced down the ridge, using the superhuman speed afforded to them by martial thaumaturgy. The wind roared in their ears as the scenery blazed past them.

Perhaps finding their sudden movement to be irritating, the circling Eagle Lord began descending. In response, Ryoma rapidly scanned the environment, and upon spotting a relatively open space drew Kikoku from its sheath.

“Now!” he called out to the twins.

At Ryoma’s command, the two began chanting.

““O great wind, breath of the gods that sweeps over all! Abide by your children’s will and return all of creation to the gods’ side!””

Their song-like chant was a harbinger of death. The five chakras in the Malfist sisters’ bodies opened, and their limbs surged with prana. As they concluded their chant, they raised their hands to the heavens.

“Catastrophe Tornado!”

This was one of the strongest spells the Malfist sisters had in their arsenal. As soon as the spell was triggered, dark clouds began brewing in the sky. The air rumbled as little by little two twisters formed, accompanied by the rolling of thunder.

““Take this!””

What they had conjured was a spear of the gods, capable of severing and tearing through anything in creation. The two pairs of hands held up to the sky turned at the Eagle Lord, and the two whirlwinds bridging heaven and earth coiled around the enormous avian.

The Eagle Lord’s cry echoed throughout the area. It was as if it had just been pressed and chopped up by two mixers. The spell crushed and shredded the Eagle Lord’s body, a shower of blood and fragments of bone spewing forth. And eventually, its scream faded into the sky.

“Master Ryoma! Finish it!” Laura called out.

As she did, the whirlwinds died down and the Eagle Lord’s tattered body crashed into the ground.

Chapter 3: The Second Obstacle

Faced with the vast plains spreading beneath the cliff he was standing on, Ryoma heaved a deep sigh. He was standing on high ground, overlooking the border between the Notis plains and the forest north of it. A short trek south would bring them to their destination, Fort Notis.

“Well, one way or another, we got through the mountains...”

In terms of time, it took them about three weeks to get here. Ever since they entered the mountains south of Memphis, they had to move slowly along the foothills, so as to not draw O’ltormea’s attention.

Of the soldiers Grindiana gave him, several hundred didn’t survive the journey. Of course, when Ryoma came up with this plan, he kept in mind that these losses were well within the realm of possibility. After all, he based this strategy off the example of Hannibal Barca’s crossing of the Alps, where tens of thousands of soldiers died during the journey.

That said, Ryoma’s journey wasn’t perfectly comparable to Hannibal’s. Hannibal crossed the snowy Alps in the dead of winter, while Ryoma had to break through a region swarming with monsters. But they were the same in the sense that they’d crossed uncharted territory along a trackless path to infiltrate enemy territory.



Choosing not to discard Olivia's group was the right choice.

Ryoma thought back to the adventurers he'd just paid the rest of the reward to and parted ways with. After he and the twins pushed back the Eagle Lord's attack, they made their way to the planned campsite for that day, and regrouped with Olivia and the others.

Olivia looked at the three of them as if they were ghosts. Encountering something on the scale of an Eagle Lord was usually a death sentence, after all. The only one who could even injure such a creature would be archers armed with powerful bows, or thaumaturgists skilled with verbal thaumaturgy.

But there was definite meaning in how Ryoma had willingly volunteered to be the decoy. Having the leader of this expedition not only act as the decoy, but also slay the monster in the process, caused any displeasure or complaints any of the soldiers had about him to disappear.

Indeed, following that incident, the Helnesgoulan soldiers had completely divested themselves of any skepticism they'd initially had; and the same could be said of Olivia's group. They clearly didn't want to buy the ire of three people who were capable of defeating an Eagle Lord.

Not like I did very much back there, though...

The Eagle Lord was already barely breathing after it was struck by the Malfist sisters' thaumaturgy. Ryoma's only contribution was to drive Kikoku into the dying Eagle Lord's heart.

Even so, they did technically defeat it together. It was just a matter of how precise one wanted the truth to be. Still, the Malfist sisters, effectively the real top achievers here, actively directed all the praise and credit at Ryoma. Insisting on setting the record straight now felt like a wasted effort.

I'll just think of it as a windfall, I guess.

The soldiers' misunderstanding of what had happened only acted in Ryoma's favor. As that thought crossed his mind, Sara whispered into his ear from behind.

"Master Ryoma... Sakuya's waiting for you at the tent."

Upon hearing that report, Ryoma's eyes narrowed sharply. Depending on the information Sakuya was about to deliver, his plan might be in need of heavy revision.

"All right. Tell her I'll be right over."

Sara bowed and turned around, leaving hurriedly. Ryoma started going after her, but stopped after a few steps.

"Now then... How will the dice fall?" he whispered to himself, turning a backwards glance to the plains sprawling beneath the cliff.

As if locking gazes with some unseen enemy...

†

"So? How did it go?"

As soon as Ryoma entered the tent he spoke to Sakuya, who awaited him on one knee. Ryoma's attitude couldn't be called courteous, and the Helnesgoulan knights around them were quite taken aback by how callous he was being.

No one intended to call Ryoma out on this, however. Not after he'd led them through three weeks of grueling travel. Simply put, they'd grown used to him.

"Milord. As I suspected during my preliminary investigation, Fort Notis doesn't have any particular weak points that we can exploit."

"Right... Is going on an offensive with the numbers we have impossible?"

"Yes. They have three layers of walls and a moat... We'd need tens of thousands to successfully besiege them."

Ryoma already knew as much, but Fort Notis's defenses were ironclad.

This isn't anything new, though...

Fort Notis was the invasion army's lifeline, after all. And the supplies accumulated within the fortress's walls only contributed to its impregnability.

Still, there was a limit to how long Helena and the others could hide within Fort Ushas. Helena was known as Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War, and with her was the Tempest — Ecclesia Marinelle, Myest's renowned general. And they also had Joshua Belares, who was effectively on the same level as a

general.

Faced with three powerful generals, even an army led by Shardina Eisenheit herself wouldn't topple the fortress easily. But combat could be fickle and subject to chance. The slightest carelessness could shake up the flow of battle. And it was probably best to assume that the enemy would want to finish this as quickly as possible.

Still, there's no point in asking for the impossible... We'll have to move our schedule ahead.

Ryoma asked Sakuya that question with the faint hope she might have discovered some kind of opening they could exploit. But if there wasn't one, there was nothing to be done about that.

Ryoma wasn't thrilled about having to use the tactic he was about to employ, but given the situation, he couldn't let his personal preferences be a factor in his decision-making.

"Did they change the captain in charge of the fort's defenses?" Ryoma asked.

"No. It's still Greg Moore," Sakuya shook her head.

Ryoma chuckled in his heart.

Moore, the Water God's Blade... I was a little worried when I heard Shardina was reorganizing her forces, but things are still going as planned.

The personnel had not changed since their previous investigation. Having a different captain in charge of the fort's security would have been a major problem for Ryoma, but thankfully, that wasn't the case.

"All right... Then we move as planned. You all remember the procedure, right?" Ryoma said.

At that question, the atmosphere grew chilly in the tent.

"Of course. We shall show you the might of Helnesgoula's knights, Lord Mikoshiba," one of the knights said, to which his colleagues raised their voices in a cheer.

Ryoma nodded silently.

†

With the village burning and smoldering before her eyes, Sara parted her lips morosely.

“This is the third one already...”

Ryoma averted his gaze from her.

We don’t have a choice...

They knew this was coming; they were prepared for this. But this was still disheartening work. They were indiscriminately burning down the villages around Fort Notis. Attacking the enemy’s villages and looting them for supplies was considered a viable tactic on the battlefield, but Ryoma would have preferred not to resort to this.

We have to do this if we’re going to take down the fort.

He wasn’t going to make excuses, but Ryoma didn’t do this out of a desire to torment O’ltormea’s subjects. He simply had no other recourse. In that regard, the razing of this village was just part of his strategy, and Sara knew this. She was rather pale, but was doing her job.

Still, this village is probably doing better than the other ones...

The villagers were gathering in the village square. So long as they didn’t try to fight back and cause pointless havoc, they wouldn’t need to die, and Ryoma told them they were allowed to take all their valuables and food with them. It was hard to say how much this helped them, though. Being left without a home in this world could be quite difficult. But still, he wanted to avoid needless murder and pillaging whenever possible.

And he had another reason for doing this; he needed these villagers to survive at all costs.

But Ryoma didn’t know to what extent the soldiers attacking the other villages followed his orders. Helnesgoula and Xarooda were bitter enemies of O’ltormea for many years, and the citizens of each country were full of dark loathing for the people of their rival countries. So the soldiers could have taken Ryoma’s absence as a chance to vent that hatred.

It almost felt natural that they might do this. They were ordered to make it seem like the razing was the doing of bandits, so they mercilessly stole, burned and ravaged. And even within the context of a war, it was a gruesome sight. But at the same time, this was the result of these villagers choosing to live in a militant country that actively chose war.

“Milord! Enemies from behind!” One of the Igasaki ninja, who was standing as a lookout, hurried over to Ryoma.

Ryoma nodded at his report.

Greg Moore... He’s moving in, just like I thought.

Given Fort Notis’s importance, they couldn’t easily send out soldiers from the fort, even if their country’s citizens were under attack. As stalwart as the fort was, it couldn’t defend anything without soldiers to man its posts. But if one were to examine the situation from another angle, that evident truth illuminated another conclusion.

He probably sent the same number of troops to the other villages, too...

Thankfully, Greg Moore was a skilled commander. Even while he served as the commander responsible for the security of the fort, he understood the unrest hanging over O’ltormea’s territory. He was a remarkable officer, for all intents and purposes.

And this was exactly why he was playing into Ryoma’s hands.

“All right, we shouldn’t stay here any longer. Hurry up and retreat!” Ryoma ordered, his lips curling up into a smirk.

He’d realized his prey was charging into the trap he prepared.

†

A few days later, the time had come.

Before Ryoma’s eyes was the large fortress, lit up by torches. This firm stonework structure wouldn’t fall to any half-hearted attack. The thousands of troops garrisoning this structure would scare off anyone reckless enough to approach it.

Sitting in this fort’s warehouses were large stores of food and equipment

gathered to facilitate O'ltormea's invasion into Xarooda. This base was also connected with the urban areas in the rear.

If Ryoma were to topple this fortress head-on, he would need tens of thousands of troops and some siege weapons. It would mean being prepared to take great losses, and even then, the siege would last months.

And all of this was assuming the base didn't receive any reinforcements. It was indeed an impregnable fortress.

"So this is Fort Notis... Yeah, it's just as impressive as I've heard," Ryoma whispered as he sat upon his horse, lifting his helmet's visor.

The fort grew larger as they approached it. Ever since it was built several months ago, it had served as a defensive stronghold against Xarooda. Just as how Fort Ushas was the final line of defense against an invasion from O'ltormea, Fort Notis was O'ltormea's lynchpin for securing the eastern front.

"Yes. But now..." the attendant at Ryoma's side replied with a voice reminiscent of a bell's chime.

Her face was obscured by her helmet's visor, but the supple curvature of her chest and the silver, silk-like locks spilling from her helmet revealed it was Laura.

"I guess..." Ryoma shrugged and nodded. "It took a lot of work to set the table for this moment. If I screw up here, I won't be able to look Helena in the eye."

True, toppling Fort Notis would be difficult using conventional methods. But it wasn't impossible, so long as one wasn't picky about their methods. And to that end, Ryoma had sacrificed a great deal and spent a lot of time preparing for this.

And now, at last, the moment had arrived. This was the one in a thousand chance he needed...

"Sorry for the wait!" A knight galloped out of the fortress, approaching Ryoma while gasping for air. "It took some time to explain everything, but it looks like they'll give us permission to enter the fort."

Raising his hand in thanks, Ryoma turned to face the long column of men

behind him.

That's all our preparations complete... They're all acting just the way I told them. Except...

Ryoma looked calm on the surface, but his heart was gripped by anxiety and impatience. The fate of a country was resting on his wide shoulders. Most people would be paralyzed by the sheer fear and pressure of it all.

But in the bottom of his wavering heart, unbeknownst to Ryoma, there burned a craving for battle. His emotions were contradictory. A person who feels no fear or anxiety is the same as a vehicle with no brakes. The true form of courage is in knowing to suppress those feelings of fear and anxiety and convert them into strength.

That requires such a conflicted heart. To know fear, but to not allow oneself to be dominated by it. And perhaps this very contradiction is part of what makes one a hero.

It'll be fine... It'll work... This is no different from before.

Ryoma's lips went dry with stress and excitement. His mind flashed back to a scene from years ago, back when he was still a child. From the days when he proudly and ardently fought to protect the place he belonged to.

"Let's go!" Ryoma called out.

Everyone around him nodded. The column of soldiers began advancing down the long highway between the town of Aruo and Fort Notis. The clicking of hooves and the grinding of carriage wheels against the ground rumbled through the air. Silvery armor glinted as the light of the torches illuminating the dark night reflected against it.

Like an army of messengers, risen from the underworld to herald the approach of death...

The Notis Plains were close to the O'ltormea-Xarooda border, and now, the O'ltormean army was preparing to enter the final stages of its invasion. And these plains, the very site of where Arios Belares, the Guardian Deity of Xarooda, suffered an honorable defeat at the hands of Shardina Eisenheit, the first princess of the O'ltormea Empire, would prove the site of that final battle.

†

Sitting in an office nestled deep within the stalwart walls of Fort Notis was the officer in charge of the fortress's defense, as well as the leader of logistical support for the invasion army. Greg Moore. As he heaved a deep sigh, a puff of purple smoke billowed out of his mouth.

"The next transport unit has finally arrived. With an escort unit of two thousand... Mm, if nothing else, we can rest easy for a time."

The taste of the cigar in his mouth, a high quality product brought in from the central continent, calmed his nerves.

"Yes, apparently they brought in the supplies and gear from the capital."

Moore rested his cigar on an ashtray and received a document from his aide. The paper did indeed have the official seal of the O'ltormea Empire applied to it; it was an official document.

"Right... The escort unit's significantly smaller than I thought, though."

"Yes..." the aide said uncomfortably. "I think it's fair to assume they were hit by a raid..."

Moore felt a slight spasm in his temple at the sound of those words.

"Joshua Belares..." he hissed bitterly.

Moore had golden, shortly cut hair and stern facial features. A scent unique to a man who had survived long on the battlefield wafted up from his body. The scar running across his left cheek gave him a striking, menacing impression. His stomach was beginning to jut out, owing to his age, but no one doubted his capacity as a warrior.

And as a warrior, he was well above simply first class, but he was given the position of ensuring the fort's defenses and being in charge of logistical support for a reason. Moore's thick fingers unconsciously rubbed against his right leg's thigh. This was an injury he'd suffered while fighting Xarooda's knights during the Battle of the Notis Plains.

His leg had been stomped on by a horse's hoof, horseshoe and all, meaning he would have needed to have it amputated. In truth, his leg shouldn't have

been attached to his body right now. By using copious amounts of very expensive nostrum and with the aid of thorough healing at the hands of a skilled verbal thaumaturgist, his leg had been able to sufficiently recover from the incident.

But it wasn't the same. An odd sense of discomfort constantly lingered over it, never once fading. It didn't get in the way of his everyday life, but whenever he put on his armor and picked up his longsword, he found that he simply couldn't bring himself to step on that leg properly.

He had no trouble going up against weak soldiers who weren't capable of martial thaumaturgy. Whether someone could use that power or not made all the difference in battle, after all. And when he fought young knights, who had only recently acquired the power of thaumaturgy, he could still win. Young, foolish soldiers who still hadn't ascertained the limits and bounds of their power were full of overconfidence. To a veteran like Moore, they were no different than a weakling with no power at all.

But if he was facing an experienced warrior who had mastered martial thaumaturgy, Moore's condition put him at a disadvantage. All it took was that slight sense of discomfort, that echo of an injury that could never quite heal... that alone was enough to become a fatal handicap on the battlefield.

And it was because he knew this that Moore accepted the responsibility of organizing Fort Notis's security.

If only my leg would move properly... I'd take to the frontlines myself and crush those Xaroodian dogs alongside Princess Shardina...

He didn't intend to speak ill of or look down upon the duty of guarding the rear. The soldiers on the frontlines can only fight because they had a supply chain that kept them fed. But Moore had fought on the battlefield for many years, and this situation left him impatient. His eyes turned to his broadsword.

"That impudent pest... The outcome of this war is evident, and he still struggles... I suppose not knowing when to give up runs in that family. But to attempt to stop O'ltormea's noble pursuits... I wish I could run my sword through his gut already."

This war had lingered too long by now. He'd heard the hostilities had run into

a stalemate at the Ushas Basin. Princess Shardina sent him a rebuking letter just the other day. Hearing of it made Moore, who could not take part directly in the fighting, that much more embittered.

“The supply caravan sent out a few days ago to Fort Noltia was hit by a raid, so Princess Shardina’s anger is understandable,” Moore’s aide said, trying to calm his superior. “But that does not change the fact that Fort Notis is the invasion army’s lifeline.”

The man knew that Moore was exceptionally rational, but wasn’t easy to stop once his anger got the better of him. Not unlike a bull enraged by a red capote. This was one of Greg Moore’s few flaws, as he was otherwise knowledgeable in politics and economics, too.

“I’m well aware of your anger, sir, but we should avoid acting carelessly and getting caught up in Joshua Belares’s raids.”

“He’s already pulled back to the Ushas Basin. Do you think his army’s really going to come out again?” Moore asked.

“That man is eccentric,” the aide nodded. “After the last raid a few days ago, his unit moved back to the Ushas region, but given the chance he could launch an all-or-nothing attack on us.”

The aide advocated caution, knowing his superior could very well rush to the frontlines in spite of his injured leg should his temper get the better of him. Of course, the odds of Joshua attacking the supply lines again were low.

With his troops now inside the Ushas Basin, going back to the border regions would be too taxing for Joshua’s unit, given their mobility. And with the day of Shardina’s planned all-out offensive fast approaching, Xarooda’s side, which was lacking in numbers, likely wanted as many as possible to assume defensive positions.

Still, the chances of Joshua attempting to attack them weren’t zero. If they were to lower the supply units’ level of caution and be hit by another raid, the balance of the war could start tilting against them.

“Yes, you’ve got a point... We should stay vigilant, at least until the Ushas Basin has been seized.”

“Yes. Given a few more days, Her Highness should commence her offensive on Fort Ushas. If that fortress were to fall...”

“We’ll be able to divide Xarooda right down the middle and strike down each part of the country individually,” Moore finished his aide’s words, his lips curling up into a smirk.

The aide nodded wordlessly. They’d been informed from the frontlines that Shardina was preparing to launch a decisive assault on Fort Ushas. Joshua Belares knew this, and this was why he’d moved his men, who had been attacking the supply line in the mountainous region along the border, into the Ushas Basin.

“Yes... And to do that, we just need to bring the supplies we were delivered now over to the frontlines. The 2,000 men we got this time should be enough to keep the supply line safe.”

Joshua’s raiding force, which dominated the mountainous regions of Xarooda, was estimated to be about 10,000 men in size. That was the entirety of Joshua’s forces, though; only a few hundred to a couple of thousand men attacked each individual convoy.

They were launching their surprise attacks along narrow mountain passes and roads. In order to maintain mobility, each unit couldn’t be any larger than that. Joshua himself was already in the Ushas Basin, but there could still be a few raiding parties hidden in the mountains.

If they were to relegate 4,000 men to guarding the convoy this time, however, the possibility of any problems occurring was remote.

“Yes, a force of 4,000 should stave off any ambushes that impudent whelp left behind. The only problem is we’ll have fewer soldiers left to garrison the fort...” Moore said, patting his stubbled chin pensively.

Fort Notis had an initial garrison of 12,000 men, but Shardina reorganized their forces for the upcoming offensive, leaving only slightly over 5,000 soldiers in the fort. This was more than enough to fight off any bandit attacks, but was too small of a force to hold a defensive fortification, even if they were well within O’ltormean territory. This was cause for some anxiety.

And worse yet, incidents of bandits attacking and burning down villages had been rampant as of late. To deal with them, Moore dispatched 2,000 of his men to maintain the peace, reducing the garrison to a mere 3,000.

If they were to send an additional 2,000 to guard the convoy, Fort Notis's garrison would grow even thinner than it already is. And as impregnable of a fort as it may be, this was a precarious position to be in.

"Perhaps we can wait for the units we sent out to the surrounding villages?" the aide proposed.

Moore shook his head, pulling out a directive from his desk drawer.

"No. With how urgent things are on the frontlines, we need to act as quickly as possible."

Moore was aware of how dangerous a position he was placing them in, but he wasn't going to oppose Shardina's will when she was about to launch her all-out attack. Reading his commander's resolve from his expression, the aide nodded.

"Understood. I'll make the preparations. Excuse me, then."

The aide bowed and left the room. Watching him close the door, Moore whispered silently.

"Just a little longer... Once this war ends, everything will go back to normal..."

The Empire of O'ltormea aspired to become sovereign of the western continent, but originally it was but a small country in the center of the continent. The Emperor, Lionel Eisenheit, skillfully led it alongside his talented retainers to forcefully conquer their neighbors, resulting in the present state of the Empire.

As a result, the foundation of the Empire's control was more fragile than that of other countries. One could say O'ltormea's domination was in a highly unstable state at present. The biggest reason was that the national defense had grown thinner as a result of the invasion of Xarooda. Shardina expected the campaign to be a swift one and drew many soldiers from across the country to bolster her invasion.

The small farm communities were especially influenced by this. They were

considered to have little strategic importance, and most of their men were relegated to the war effort, leaving only the bare minimum necessary to maintain the public order. This was done because O'ltormea was surrounded by rival countries in all directions, meaning Shardina couldn't draw any soldiers devoted to guarding the borders.

The result of that was the public order within the country had significantly worsened. Villages and towns located far from the major highways were consistently being plagued by bandit raids. Moore wasn't one for pampering the commoners, of course, nor did he have any lofty ideals about the duties of the ruling class.

In this world, what mattered was the fate of the country, not the fate of the individual. Especially not when it came to the commoners; in the eye of the nobles, their lives were as expendable and worthless as trash.

But a decline in public order wasn't a problem a militant country could ignore. It was easy to say the commoners had no value, but no political policy could completely ignore their existence. The public order failing would mean O'ltormea would lose its dignity and awe, and make the commoners begin doubting the legitimacy of its rule.

One could believe the commoners were no different from cattle, but having them rise up in revolt would be problematic. True, given how much stronger knights were compared to commoners, it could be quelled with military might. But that would do nothing to resolve their disgruntlement.

Tax revenue and trade would take a hit, leading to an inevitable decrease in supplies. And with the invasion of Xarooda being underway, the decline within the country could cause Shardina's campaign to wither away behind enemy lines.

We can't let the commoners' discontent blow up now. At best, we have to keep them pressured on one hand and alive on the other...

The fact he was both a warrior and had the capacity to realize this made Moore exceptionally capable, for all O'ltormea was concerned. The Empire had vast territory, and if all one wanted was a powerful warrior, there were many knights available that could match Greg Moore. And there were others who

were as educated and intelligent as him. But few were as graced with both martial might and intellect as he was.

I just wish I could have a person with a broader outlook as my aide... The thought crossed Moore's mind.

The aide from earlier was by no means incompetent, of course. He was an accomplished warrior and a dependable commander on the battlefield. But right now, what the Empire needed wasn't people who were only good for fighting battles.

Just the other day, the villages around Adelpho were hit by a band of what was estimated to be several hundred bandits. The damage of those raids was vast. To deal with that, the capital pressured Moore to dispatch soldiers to maintain the public order. This forced Moore to cut into the garrison's numbers and reassign a good number of his men for this purpose.

The roads had to be safe to ensure the safe passage of the transport convoys, so it wasn't as if the matter was unrelated to him. Still, this wouldn't normally fall under Moore's jurisdiction. He still had to do it, however, since there was no one else capable of handling it. And this was precisely why Shardina, despite the explosive situation she's in, entrusted him with Fort Notis.

"Your Highness... You need only wait patiently for a while longer..." Moore whispered to Shardina in the distance, his eyes looking at the starry sky outside his window.

This was the very vision of a soldier loyal to the O'ltormea Empire. However, this was exactly why Greg Moore failed to notice the presence of the Grim Reaper, creeping in behind him...

†

"Hm..." That thin, subtle whisper seemed to echo exceptionally loudly through the large room.

This was the central tower standing at the heart of Fort Notis. At its top floor was a bedroom, and lying atop the bed was one man, looking up into the air. A few whispers escaped his lips, though they were closer to sighs.

Letting out another whisper, Moore tossed in his bed. He'd squeezed his eyes

shut and buried his face in the pillow, but then once again turned around and lay on his back. The curtain of darkness coating the night sky was beginning to grow thinner. Within 30 minutes, the light of dawn would begin to shine on the horizon.

He didn't go to sleep any later than usual, meaning Moore spent hours lying in bed, unable to fall asleep.

I can't sleep...

It felt as if something was writhing inside his body. A vexing, irritating, inexplicable something was rocking Moore's heart. One of the most essential skills when it came to life on the battlefield was getting sleep whenever possible and being able to wake up quickly when the need called for it.

Soldiers needed sleep, but they were on the battlefield, where the enemy could attack at any time. There's never any guarantee one would get all the sleep time they require. To that end, a soldier needed to maintain the focused balance of resting whenever they could while being prepared to promptly react whenever the enemy might strike.

But despite that, Moore simply couldn't fall asleep that night.

I suppose I'll give up and get out of bed...

Rising from the bed, he rang the bell sitting at his bedside to usher in an attendant.

"Excuse me, sir..." the attendant said as he entered the room. "Can I help you?"

Moore instructed the attendant to bring some cold water.

Hmm... Good. He thought to himself as he poured himself some water from the pitcher and emptied the cup.

The chilled water ran down his throat and quenched his thirst. Apparently his anxieties had been tormenting him more than he realized. After taking another breath, Moore lay down on the bed again. He had no intention of sleeping this time.

I don't understand... What's happening?

It felt as if Moore's warrior intuition was trying to alert him to something. If he had to compare it to anything, it was similar to the same premonition he might feel before the enemy launched a surprise attack at night. An inexplicable creeping feeling, as if something was slithering up his spine.

But Moore wasn't on the battlefield. He was safely within O'ltormean territory. In a mighty fortress protected by tall stone walls and strong soldiers. True, there were fewer soldiers in the base than there should have been, but this couldn't be compared to camping out on the frontlines. Even if this fortress in the middle of the Notis Plains were to be attacked, the ones doing it would likely be the soldiers of Xarooda. But that could only happen if Shardina's expeditionary force were to be defeated.

The expeditionary force losing would put the future of O'ltormea in danger. If things were that dire, someone would have reported it to me by now.

But he hadn't received any news of Shardina losing.

"Am I imagining it...? No..." Moore tried to convince himself, but shook his head.

Rising from the bed, he gripped his longsword, which was leaning against the wall.

I've only survived this long by trusting my intuition.

The thick steel blade had a complex pattern etched onto it. It was tempered by a high-class blacksmith and had a thaumaturgical sigil endowed upon it by a high-level thaumaturgist. This sword was very much Moore's other half; it had survived countless battlefields alongside him. The blade's intense sheen illuminated his face, and feeling its cold weight in his hand calmed his heart.

Rationally speaking, this odd sense of dread must have been his imagination and nothing more. But his intuition was the answer he came up with by weighing the facts against his own well of experience. There was no surefire method of discerning which was correct, logic or his intuition. In the end, it boiled down to what he chose to believe in and what he chose to reject.

And in truth, his warrior's intuition wasn't wrong. A pack of proverbial starved wolves was lying in wait behind Moore, biding their time for the right moment

to sink their fangs into his jugular...

†

The fort's courtyard spread out before their eyes, full of wagons. These wagons were brought into the fort rather late into the night, but since they'd be sent out into Xarooda's territory the next morning, they weren't brought into the warehouses, leaving the mountain of supplies as is.

This was the direct result of Ryoma's plan, of course. He intentionally planned it so the supplies would reach Fort Notis in the middle of the night.

Apparently, the fort didn't have enough hands on deck. Which made sense; one couldn't hope to maintain a base meant to house 10,000 with a fourth of its intended garrison. Corners had to be cut in one field or another. And this was what Ryoma was aiming for.

Idiots...

Their choice was an efficient one, to be sure. These supplies were to be sent out the following morning, so there was no point to spending the night carrying them into the warehouses. But skipping out on that bit of work would cost the entirety of Fort Notis a painful price.

If they had carefully checked the cargo, they might have realized there was a major discrepancy between what had been brought in and the documents they were presented with.

Ryoma regarded the sight before him with a smile.

"Begin," Ryoma said, swinging his arm forward.

At his signal, the Helnesgoulan soldiers clad in O'ltormean armor charged through the fort. They all carried large amounts of oil. No matter how stalwart the stone fortress may be, it would burn if the fire were to begin from within. After all, it couldn't have been made entirely out of stone.

"Alrighty. Let's just hope this goes the way I want it to..." Ryoma muttered.

In the interstice between night and day, people tend to let down their guard, making it an ideal time for a surprise attack. The soldiers standing guard during the night watch, wary of a night raid, grow fatigued around this time, and their

concentration begins to fail.

As mighty as Fort Notis may be, all of its defensive qualities would mean nothing if it was ravaged from the inside. And by the time dawn fully rises, the fort will have descended to total chaos.

“Fire! There’s a fire!”

“Put it out! Water, someone go get water!”

It started as a small disturbance, but before long the situation spiraled out of control.

“An enemy attack! An attack from Xarooda!”

“It’s not an attack, calm down. Gather your units and await orders.”

“Do you want to burn to death, you idiot?! Forget orders, hurry up and get water!”

The sight of the raging flames struck fear into the soldiers’ hearts, and the black smoke obscured their field of vision. Fires were a terrifying hazard in either world. Screams echoed from every direction. Conflicting information was flying back and forth, and no one could ascertain the truth.

Everyone was saying whatever came to mind, and the Helnesgoulan soldiers and Igasaki ninja disguised as O’ltormean soldiers spread groundless rumors, scrambling the chain of command.

“Now’s the time... Sara, Laura, each of you lead 500 men and set fire to the warehouses. The security should be lax now.”

““Yes, Master.””

The fort’s barracks and watchtowers were the first to catch fire, leaving the O’ltormean soldiers in a panic as the fire advanced to the warehouses. This was all planned ahead of time.

“Now listen, we have plenty of oil and fodder to trigger the fire. Don’t be shy and use as much as possible! We’re burning this fort to the ground!”

““Understood!”” The twins nodded and ran off, preparing to lead their soldiers.

The two of them were aware of the fort's structure ahead of time, and betrayed no signs of confusion.

"Right, it's about time I move out, too..." Ryoma whispered as he watched the Malfist sisters leave and drew Kikoku from its sheath. "Let's go. Cut down everyone you see! Take no prisoners! This is a massacre!"

""""Oooooooh!""""

At Ryoma's shout, the Helnesgoulan soldiers behind him raised their voices in a warcry.

†

Just as Ryoma's early morning attack began, the situation was moving in the central tower.

"A fire?"

Those two words felt like they rumbled from the bottom of the earth, hitting the aide who hurried into the room like a blow to the face. Surprised to find that Moore had already changed into his armor, the aide continued.

"Yes!" He shouted since he didn't have the time to catch his breath. "Fires have broken out around the fort, starting with the west and east towers."

"What?! What in the world happened...?!" Moore's brows furrowed. "How did this happen? Weren't the guards at their stations?"

"We don't know. It all happened so suddenly... All the units are trying to put out the fires, but... It doesn't look like they can take control of the situation... For now, we've given them orders to prioritize taking out the fires to the best of their ability."

Extinguishing the fires was critical for resolving the situation, to be sure, but it was questionable if these orders were the correct choice given the situation. That doubt made Moore's thoughts accelerate. And as his mind put the facts together, he came to a single conclusion. At that moment, the unease he felt through that night had become a conviction. Once he examined the situation calmly, there were many unnatural points.

Damnit... They really were from Xarooda... In which case, are they after me?

No, this is bad... If that's what they're after, the expedition to Xarooda would be run into the ground... At worst, even Princess Shardina will...

Putting out the fire was a high priority, but it was clear that this whole affair was someone's doing, and that meant it shouldn't be treated as a common fire. And whoever did this had their eyes set elsewhere...

"You idiots!" Moore barked at his aide. "Why did you leave your stations?!"

Clicking his tongue angrily, Moore ran off without looking twice.

We can still salvage this... We still have time...

If he were to calm the chaos and reorganize the chain of command, Moore would be able to give efficient orders and turn the situation around. But that required him to directly assume command. To show himself to his men and inspire them.

"But how do we...?!" Moore's aide ran after him, his face desperate.

Following both of them were a few dozen soldiers who were in charge of guarding the central tower. Moore raced down the stairs, the metallic sound of his armor echoing through the staircase. But just as Moore reached the first floor and made for the door to the courtyard, several figures blocked his path.

"What are you doing?!" the aide barked at them. "How dare you stand in Captain Moore's way?!"

The class system in this world was steep, and Moore was a high-ranking knight entrusted with commanding a fortress. Normally, no one would have worked up the nerve to stand in the way of someone in such a lofty station. Given the situation, the aide didn't intend to actually punish these soldiers, but they made for a good example when it came to reinstating order.

"What unit are you from? State your names!"

The wall of soldiers parted, and one man stepped forward. Sensing something was wrong from the man's composed gait, the aide raised his voice and stepped forward.

"Take off your helmet! Show me your face!"

The aide carelessly approached the man with hurried steps, intending to tear

the helmet off his head. But as he watched this unfold, Moore was overcome by an eerie sense of premonition.

“Wait! Get away from them!” Moore shouted.

“Huh?” The aide turned around.

Moore’s shout echoed through the fortress, and the next moment, something cold stabbed through the aide’s stomach.

“Ah... Ugh... Ngh?!”

The thing that stabbed him left his body, churning up his insides in the process. The taste of blood filled the aide’s throat and thick fluid rose up from his stomach as he toppled backwards.

“Wh-Why...?”

The aide looked up at the bloodstained katana in the hands of the man who stabbed him, but his gaze soon lost its intensity. It was as if a layer of mist had settled over his field of vision. The light faded from his eyes, and so the aide expired. Not knowing, even at the very end, why he had to die.

“So that’s what happened... You’re one of Xarooda’s lackeys, aren’t you?” Moore said, upon which all the soldiers behind him drew their weapons at once.

The men were dumbfounded by what had happened, but Moore’s declaration yanked them back into reality.

“Give me your name...” Moore asked, his voice chillingly cold.

Sharp, lethal bloodlust emanated from Moore’s body.

“Sure, why not?” the man said, and took off his helmet.

The face beneath it was that of an agreeable young man. One couldn’t say it was unattractive, but it probably depended on individual taste. But this man did have an intense *something* that seemed to draw people in.

“I don’t believe we’ve met, have we? I’m Ryoma Mikoshiba, the governor of the Wortenia Peninsula in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

He regarded Moore with a bright, carefree, sunny grin, bowing his head as if he wasn’t facing an enemy. But that amicable, soft smile only struck Moore as terrifying. It was as if Ryoma was an inexplicable monster in human form.



Chapter 4: The Hour of Harvest

In the room at the bottom floor of the central tower, the two glared at one another as the ringing of clanging armor filled the room. Deep breaths echoed all around them, probably from fear at the knowledge that they were surrounded by soldiers ten times their numbers. Or perhaps because they sensed something from the soldier smiling composedly in front of Moore.

Moore found his name to be familiar, though.

Mikoshiba? I've heard that somewhere before...

Moore clearly recalled an exchange he had in the capital with Saitou, Shardina's aide.

Right... This is the man who killed Sir Gaius...

Moore fixed his gaze on the man smirking in front of him. On the surface, he only looked like an inconspicuous, well-built young man. His smile looked as friendly and natural as anyone's. But Moore didn't miss the dangerous light glinting in the depths of his dark eyes. That light... It was his hatred for the O'ltormea Empire.

He's hiding his true intentions... I see. Yes, this man is a threat to the Empire...

Moore had heard countless rumors about this man from Saitou. The most dangerous beasts concealed their fangs purposefully. And in the case of this particular beast, those hidden fangs were oozing with venom. A lethal venom called craftiness...

I've heard more of him than I'd care to know. A careful man that leaves no room for oversight... For a man like him to take to the frontlines, no matter how advantageous it might be...

Moore jerked his chin at his subordinates, gesturing for them to go up the stairs. It was a slight sign, but these men served under Moore for a long time and realized his intentions. Several soldiers hurried up the stairs.

Good... If I can just buy us time, I can prevent the worst case scenario.

The central tower's warehouse had a large number of things they couldn't allow to fall to the enemy's hands. Watching them leave, Moore nodded lightly and turned to Ryoma, who was still smiling and making no signs of moving.

He looks composed... Is he staying still for a reason? No matter. I need to stall for time, anyway.

O'ltormea was known even across the sea as the great hegemony at the heart of the western continent, and this man was the sole person to have escaped their grasp. A mere otherworlder, a person even inferior to a slave, was able to slay the court thaumaturgist of this country, Gaius Valkland. An escaped criminal, who dragged the Empire's name through the mud.

Publicly, Gaius's death was regarded as an accident. They couldn't afford to make known to the general public the fact that a chief vassal of the Empire was murdered in the Emperor's castle and that his killer got away. By the Emperor's orders, the events of what happened were not allowed to leak from the castle. Thanks to that, the Empire retained its dignity.

But the more they tried to hide the truth, the more likely it was to eventually come out. The common citizen might not have learned of it, but those working in professions relating to the government likely heard a rumor or two. It wasn't spoken of loudly, out of respect for the country's dignity, but Ryoma Mikoshiba was a bitter rival for the Empire.

Looking around, Moore clicked his tongue in displeasure.

This is bad... Everyone's caught up in his pace.

They all surely hated this man, who had driven the Empire into crisis. But seeing the knights stiffen around him, he saw them murmur in what was a mix of awe and terror. To them, Ryoma was the most hated existence imaginable. All the troubles the Empire has gone through recently began when O'ltormea's strategist and court thaumaturgist, Gaius, was murdered.

The root of all their current troubles stood before them. But as a warrior and a fellow man, Moore couldn't help but acknowledge Ryoma's might, somewhere in his heart. He'd escaped the capital's guarded borders on his own

and shook off Shardina's persistent pursuit to escape the country.

A country and an individual. The former was incomparably stronger than the latter, a difference of night and day. And despite this, the man before them escaped the O'ltormea Empire's fangs. Even if he was their enemy, O'ltormea's knights couldn't help but admit his achievements. They couldn't help but admire the strength he had and they lacked, even if he was on the other side of this war...

I don't have a choice. My only hope is to focus on buying time...

This was a choice that would move things from the worst possible conclusion to the second worst conclusion. Moore didn't have the chance to hope to achieve more than that given the situation. Realizing how the others would react, Moore bitterly parted his lips.

"I see... You're as interesting as the rumors make you out to be. You drew the Empire's attention to the frontlines so you could burn down our warehouses, killing the expedition force without ever fighting them..."

He tried to speak calmly so as to feign composure, but it seemed it was a wasted effort. All the gazes in the room fixed on Moore. Ryoma, however, didn't bat an eyelash, his smile as relaxed as before. Seeing that confirmed to Moore that his earlier suspicions were true.

I can't blame the knights. Even I didn't notice until it came to this.

Feeling his knights' dumbfounded gazes on him, Moore focused on keeping his failing resolve intact. True, he had his suspicions, but halfway through his words, Moore felt pressure bear down on him like a tightening noose.

They believed they could use their vast army to one-sidedly invade Xarooda, but all it took was this to completely overturn that confidence. The soldiers were understandably unnerved. They believed their country to be in a position of unwavering superiority, but now they felt as if they were fools dancing on thin ice the whole time.

What a man. He calculated all of this... Wait, but that means the bandit attacks on the villages... That was his doing?

The pieces of the puzzle were clicking into place in Moore's mind, forming a

whole picture. The towns around Fort Notis were attacked all at once, forcing him to send out his men, only to be attacked just as the garrison was at its thinnest. It was all too unfortunate of a development for Moore. So unfortunate that it couldn't possibly be a coincidence.

But how did they get into the country? The borders with Helnesgoula and Xarooda are heavily guarded... Wait, no... It can't be, did he...?

Only one option came to mind, but it was far too difficult a path to tread. Realistically speaking, it was impossible to have guards all across the vast borderlines spanning all the way across Helnesgoula and Xarooda. There were no satellites or radios in this world, after all. The highways connecting the towns were spread across and along the entirety of the continent, and keeping them secured was much more feasible.

But if one were to leave the highways, and enter the vast forests and mountains located off the road, any national borders become vague. Even if a country were to demarcate a borderline along the map, there's no one to actually keep those borders guarded.

Only the highways' important points and the cities were actively guarded. So if one were to try to go off the beaten path and cross the forests and mountains, it was theoretically possible to enter any country. Some of those who make their living through fighting, like mercenaries and adventurers, and those who operate in secret like bandits and those belonging to the underworld, often choose to do so.

But moving a military force off the highways was another matter altogether. Not only was maintaining a supply line difficult, but marching speed became a major problem. The lack of a paved road makes it impossible to march at satisfactory speeds. And even if one chose to brave the dangers involved in marching an army across a pathless road, it would be impossible to completely mask their presence.

No spy, no matter how poor they were at their job, would fail to notice them. And the larger the army, the likelier they were to be discovered. And one had to bolster their ranks if they were to march through land infested with monsters.

On top of that, maps were hard to come by. Scouting was a duty that fell

upon the country's administration, and the land's topography was a closely guarded military secret. With that in mind, having a reliable map of the frontier regions was unlikely, to say nothing of a rival country's territory.

One had to bring many troops to ensure safe passage, but they'd need to minimize their numbers to ensure they wouldn't be spotted. These two conflicting conditions were both equally important.

And so, while crossing borders by going off the highways wasn't unprecedented in this world, tactically speaking it was like relying on a gamble paying off to succeed. It was the equivalent of clinging to a miracle.

But that miracle had been made a reality right here. In the worst possible way for the O'ltormea Empire...

"So it was all your part of your plan...?" Moore asked.

"Yeah. Not gonna lie, though, it took quite a bit of work," Ryoma shrugged.

Moore quickly realized what Ryoma meant by that.

"The bandit attacks were scattered in a wide area around Fort Notis. You split up your forces into small units that crossed the border and started attacking towns and villages."

"Yeah. The important part was to not draw attention to ourselves ever since we left Memphis. The rest was picking routes that the Xaroodian knights and some of General Belares's irregulars were familiar with. It was a huge gamble, but it worked out."

Incidentally, the routes the Xaroodian knights used happened to be the same road Ryoma took when escaping Shardina after killing Gaius. The same forest strip, to the north of the Notis plains. Ryoma didn't imagine that bit of experience would end up being helpful now.

"Belares's irregulars? The Crimson Moon Brigade..."

Private forces organized by the deceased General Belares. They were effectively nothing more than bands of former bandits, and they were still as ruthless and unforgiving as they were before reforming. The names of those bandit groups were quite detested by the people of eastern O'ltormea.

“I guess they were ordered ahead of time to familiarize themselves with O’ltormea’s topography. I simply made use of that.”

“The ends justify the means, is that it?”

“Yep. Even criminals have their uses. And if I can use them to edge out that win...” Ryoma trailed off, that calm smile still on his lips.

Ryoma knew full well that the Crimson Moon Brigade were a band of truly vicious criminals. He’d crossed blades with them once when he was making his escape from O’ltormea. Had Ryoma not saved Laura and Sara from them back then, they’d have lost their chastity.

These bandits were the polar opposite of Ryoma’s personal sense of justice. Ryoma very much hated them, enough so to want to kill every last one of them... But he wasn’t going to let that emotion overcome him if it cost him an opportunity to win.

What is this man... How?!

That didn’t mean he was going to forgive them for their actions. He simply put up with them for as long as they were of use to him. Sensing Ryoma’s emotions from his gaze, Moore swallowed nervously. A knight or a warrior wouldn’t come up with such a plan. This was something an aged politician or a diplomat might think of. His iron will struck terror into Moore’s heart.

I can’t let him walk away from here alive... This man poses too much of a threat to the Empire.

Even in this disadvantageous position, Moore knew he had a chance of walking away the victor. Assuming he made full use of his thaumaturgic sword’s power and was willing to sacrifice the lives of the soldiers around him, that is...

But Moore chose to fight rather than run.

I’ve bought more than enough time... Now to settle this.

“Fight me one on one, Mikoshiba!” Moore suddenly declared.

Everyone present looked at Moore in shock. It was clear to everyone how this encounter would conclude. So in that case, if there was any chance of turning things around, it was through a battle between the two generals.

But this was just Moore's interest at work. Logically speaking, Ryoma had no reason to accept his challenge. Moore was confident, however, that Ryoma would never turn him down. If he was one to reject this proposition, Ryoma never would have shown his face here to begin with.

And that means that whatever he's planning doesn't matter.

Fighting spirit ran through Moore's limbs. Excitement raced through his heart. His muscles bulked up and the blood pumped violently through his veins. His Muladhara chakra began racing, surging prana into his body.

Moore silently stilled his breathing, taking control of the flow of prana. In accordance with his will, the second and third chakras, Svadhishthana and Manipura, also went into operation.

I'm ready... I will *kill you... Even if I have to die to do it!*

Moore gripped his sword. And as if the weapon picked up on its master's will, the seal etched onto the sword lit up in a bluish glow.

†

Black smoke billowed from the granary as it burned. The smell of the charred provisions inside filled the air. The sound of clashing swords, of death and screams, echoed all around.

This was a slaughter that had produced countless casualties.

Laura stood unflinchingly on that battlefield, her gaze fixed on the central tower illuminated by the crackling flames.

"Laura, how are things going on your side?" A chime-like voice accompanied by the clatter of clanging armor reaches her ears.

That voice was too fair to be on this battlefield. Laura replied to those words without turning to face the one who'd spoken them.

"Everything went smoothly. Thanks to Master Ryoma stalling Moore, the warehouses are all burning as planned. Assuming they try to extinguish them now, the fire's too fierce to stop. Even if Moore were to use his thaumaturgical sword and its power to manipulate water..."

Cinders rose from the burning warehouses in front of them. This was the

result of all the oil they'd carried with the convoy they brought in. Perhaps this situation was salvageable right when it started, but with the fire having spread so far, nothing could be done to stop it by now.

Of course, if the fort's commander, Moore, were to take command, there might have been a glimmer of a chance to turn the situation around. But Ryoma was stalling him, making that development highly unlikely.

"And how did things go on your side?" Laura asked.

"No problems in particular," Sara replied, gripping a bloodied iron sword. "Mostly since they thought we were on their side... The sudden fire threw the chain of command into a state of chaos, so taking care of the O'ltormean soldiers was simple."

"I see. Looks like you got away unscathed... I'm glad you're safe," Laura nodded, throwing a glance in her direction.

She could get a grasp on the situation just from the tone of her sister's voice, but had Laura truly been worried, she would have regarded Sara differently. Sara didn't show any displeasure at her sister's attitude, however, and simply stood beside her.

Sara felt the same way. They had once been betrayed by their trusted vassals and sold into slavery. The one who saved them, who granted them their freedom and human dignity, was this young man. For the Malfist sisters, nothing mattered more than his life. Indeed, they would cast aside their own lives if it meant saving his...

"By now, Master Ryoma is probably..."

Sensing the faint tinge of sorrow in Sara's voice, Laura turned to her sister again.

"He's likely fighting Moore one-on-one right now, yes?" She asked.

Laura had no way of knowing for certain, of course. Their last war council hadn't delved that far into what might happen. But Greg Moore had vast military fame, and if Ryoma could claim his head, the merits he would get at the conclusion of this war would be even greater.

That prospect was too appealing for Ryoma to pass up, as he was actively seeking to increase his own power and the Wortenia Peninsula's footing. He was lacking in money, resources and authority. Given his personality, he was not about to let this chance to gain more of all of those things at once pass him by.

"I knew it... Shouldn't we go and help him?" Sara said, her voice thick with sorrow and concern.

Strong though Moore may have been, he could still be defeated, given superior numbers. But Laura simply shook her head silently.

"He doesn't need our help... He wouldn't accept that match if he didn't think he had a good chance of winning. You know that as well as I do, Sara."

Ryoma had gathered a great deal of information using Simone and the Igasaki clan, and that information indicated that Ryoma was weaker than Greg Moore.

After all, Moore was capable of opening his chakras up to the fourth and strongest one — the Anahata chakra. Even though Ryoma did learn to wield martial thaumaturgy, Moore had lived through countless battles and was seen as superior to Ryoma, both as a practitioner of thaumaturgy and as a warrior.

And on top of that, there was the matter of the power housed in Moore's thaumaturgical sword. Even with Ryoma's unique constitution as an otherworlder, that wouldn't be enough to overturn the overwhelming advantage Moore possessed in terms of experience and equipment.

Sara was right to be concerned. Laura understood this perfectly well. But even so, she didn't doubt Ryoma would win in the end. No... She desperately clung to that belief.

"We only need to fulfill our roles down to the letter." She forced out those words, from the bottom of her heart.

There was no way she wouldn't be concerned for him. Laura knew, after all, that there were no absolutes when it came to battle. It wasn't a matter of trusting him or not; it was the simple emotion of wanting to be at a loved one's side.

But at the same time, she knew they had important roles to fill. Much as she

worried for her master, she knew she had to validate his trust. And her voice was heavy with the conflict between those two opposing emotions.

“We launched a surprise attack, and their chain of command is a shambles. But given time, the situation will quiet down, and allowing the O’ltormean soldiers to get away alive is too dangerous. So put aside your unnecessary concerns and focus on your tasks.”

Laura looked at her, her eyes emanating an iron will. But Sara noticed the way her shoulders shivered, ever so slightly.

Laura...

There was a lot Sara wanted to say. But she picked up on Laura’s feelings, turned her eyes to the central tower again, and left silently to fulfill her role.

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At the same time Laura and Sara were having that conversation, the battle between Ryoma and Moore had concluded its prelude. The two men stood with their gazes locked on one another as the battle approached its climax.

A faint, silvery light shone over Ryoma’s face. In his hands was a battlefield katana, boasting a blade thicker than any hatchet the Igasaki clan’s smiths had ever forged. It was named Kikoku — a katana forged by a master craftsman, and capable of matching even the most fabled of Japanese katanas.

Ryoma lightly licked his dry lips, holding the katana under his arm as if to conceal it behind his large frame.

Moore, the Flying Slash...

The man he faced had two aliases, and that was the second of them. Thinking back on it, Ryoma was filled with excitement. If he was to take the safest plan possible, he should have had the Helnesgoulan soldiers at his back charge in and attack the enemy.

But that would be lacking in tact, not to mention style.

Both methods would result in him claiming Moore’s life, but the method he chose would determine his reward.

I can’t get enough of this buzz... It’s like my spine’s tingling nonstop...

Settling matches in a one-on-one fashion like this was rare on the battlefield. As such, Moore's suggestion was a windfall for Ryoma. The air whirling about Moore's body was very much a match for Ryoma's grandfather, Koichiro: the scent of a strong, powerful warrior.

And indeed, Greg Moore's might with the broadsword echoed as far as the neighboring kingdoms. Slaying such a glorious warrior would be an immeasurable accomplishment. He would be able to set more conditions before Lupis to further develop the Wortenia Peninsula, and his own name would be revered across the continent.

In that regard, this match was a priceless opportunity. But even putting that calculated reason aside, Ryoma was elated from the bottom of his heart.

"Ooooooooooh!"

Moore raised his voice in a battle cry, swinging the broadsword over his head. The sheer vigor of his shout rattled the air in the room. The abundant prana coursing through Moore's body activated the thaumaturgical seal etched onto the sword's blade.

There were still ten meters of distance between the two, but Moore stayed still, swinging the blade down. The next moment, an invisible crescent was fired along that slash's trajectory, towards Ryoma.

Ryoma drew his blade at once, as if in reaction to the attack. A shockwave ran along Ryoma's hands, and a splatter of blood billowed out of one of his shoulders.

"Kuh...!"

Had the katana not curbed the shockwave, Ryoma's arm likely would have been severed along the shoulder. A dull pain emanated from Ryoma's left shoulder, but the fighting spirit in his eyes hadn't withered in the slightest.

So that's the strength of a thaumaturgical sword of water. Ryoma whispered to himself, seeing the water droplets running across the blade. *I would never have known to block it if I hadn't researched it ahead of time.*

It wasn't unlike a water cutter used for industrial purposes. Ryoma had seen one once, on a TV show. It operated by firing a jet of highly-pressurized water

through a small hole, and it was used to cut through metal. Ryoma didn't know the exact details, of course, but this sword likely operated on a similar principle.

Except this time there was no machinery in place, and Moore's sword didn't have any innate ability to compress water. He wasn't carrying a water tank, either. The only things at play here were Moore's prana and the applied thaumaturgy on the blade; nothing more. That made it a very user-friendly method of attack.

It launches a fast jet of water in accordance with the swing... Which means it has the same force it would have had if he'd sent the blade flying at me.

A flying blade of water... In conceptual terms, it was no different from a slash attack, but the force behind this attack was massive. It allowed Moore to attack one-sidedly while keeping his distance. And unlike verbal thaumaturgy, he didn't need a chant to activate this attack.

On the battlefield, where every split second could mean the difference between life and death, this was an overwhelming advantage. Not only did it increase the reach of his blade, but if he were to slash horizontally, this attack would prove a menace when fighting groups of enemies.

This wasn't to say this technique didn't have its flaws, though. The water blade itself was blindingly quick, but the fact that it relied on Moore's swing meant that the opponent could predict the timing and trajectory with which the attack would be unleashed. Correctly swinging one's arms and fixing one's legs on the ground would enable any opponent to potentially block the attack.

It's a tricky weapon to go up against, yeah... But it's fired along the sword's trajectory, and I can handle that... So not yet. I can shake this off without martial thaumaturgy, at least for now.

Glancing quickly behind him, Ryoma lifted his katana up to a mid-level posture and braced himself for the next attack. Holding it behind him wouldn't allow him to react to the rapid water blade in time.

The water slash should be most effective when the target is within a radius of 20 meters from his body.

This was an estimate, but Ryoma was confident it was accurate. This was

because the slash that had cut into his shoulder bounced off from the surrounding Helnesgoulan soldiers' armor. This was proof that the pressure and speed applied to the water was being diminished according to the laws of nature.

Compared to the water cutters in Ryoma's world, its range was long, but if this was really a fantasy world that ignored the laws of physics, Moore's slash wouldn't have been weakened; it would have cut into the soldiers.

In this regard, the fact that the water slash was made solely out of water was a problem. If the water contained any powdered abrasive compounds or rock it would have been more lethal, but ordinary water didn't have much cutting potential. It might have been powerful enough to cut through human flesh, but not through thick steel armor. The fact that the katana's blade didn't even bend from clashing with the water slash was proof of this.

The blade wasn't entirely unharmed, though. Noticing a nick in the blade, Ryoma clicked his tongue and read Moore's state of mind.

He's wary of my range. He's probably trying to keep me in check with his thaumaturgical sword's long-range attack.

Ryoma glared at Moore, looking out for any movements he made. True to Ryoma's predictions, Moore clicked his tongue at having his first attack blocked, but raised his sword overhead again. And then, he swung it down, unleashing another water slash at Ryoma.

One slash. And then a second. And a third. A flurry of consecutive attacks assailed Ryoma, not sparing him a moment to breathe. Moore went from an overhead splitting slash, to a right side slash, and then to a left side slash. The blade whistled through the air.

And as Ryoma blocked one water slash after another, he felt a premonition sneaking in.

Is this the same as before? No, these slashes are too monotonous...

If all he was doing was swinging downwards, it was easy to pick up on the rhythm of his swings and avoid them. Why was he doing so deliberately? The answer to that doubt soon became apparent.

The moment the sword swung down a third time, Moore kept the blade down and then swung it upwards in a cross slash. Had Ryoma been unprepared for it, it would have likely slashed him across his defenseless flank.

Ryoma cut down the successive water blades with his katana and vigilantly went back to a middle-level posture.

He went from a vertical slash to a horizontal one. Right. So that's what he was aiming for.

He repeated a sequence of monotonous attacks to condition Ryoma and then suddenly broke his timing to unleash a different attack. Had Ryoma been the slightest bit careless, he would have died.

The two glared at each other. The surrounding O'ltormean and Helnesgoulan knights swallowed nervously as they looked over the duel.

If I stay on the defensive like this, I'll never beat him. Was he a worse match for me than I thought?

Ryoma needed to close the distance between him and Moore if he was to win. Conversely, Moore only needed to keep up his barrage of long-range water slashes until Ryoma's stance inevitably broke. And his final attack likely wouldn't be a slash, but rather...

He's probably aiming for the fastest kill... No, maybe that's where my chance is.

The option that flashed in Ryoma's mind was the fastest possible attack for a sword, and he predicted Moore would gamble everything on that. But the next moment, Moore betrayed Ryoma's expectations; rather than focusing on ranged combat, he sprinted forward and closed the distance between them.

Moore's third chakra, the Manipura chakra, revolved rapidly, granting his body superhuman strength and agility. It was the speed of a raging animal. And in the blank of an eye, sparks flew between the two combatants and a shrill metallic screech rang out.

For a moment, Ryoma's massive form soared through the air. His body was thrown backwards as it attempted to repel Moore's bullet-like momentum.

Shit, that was close. He kept my attention fixed on his long range attack so he could close the distance... Not bad.

Ryoma smirked indomitably as a streak of blood ran down his cheek. The iron-like taste of blood filled his mouth. The moment Moore closed the distance, he unleashed a water slash which brushed against Ryoma's face. Then, using the long-range attack to keep him in check, Moore closed the distance at once and brought the battle to a melee.

This was a reckless combat style for a verbal thaumaturgist, who needed time to chant. And on top of that, Moore's blade left a mark on Ryoma's katana. A deep nick was visible on the razor-sharp blade.

I can't completely control Kikoku yet, so he's got the edge in terms of his weapon's prowess... If we keep clashing like this, the blade will snap.

Kikoku was a war katana given to him by the Igasaki clan; a weapon unrivaled in its craftsmanship. But unlike Moore's thaumaturgical sword, it didn't have the graces of endowed thaumaturgy applied to it.

Or, put more precisely, this katana wouldn't exhibit its true powers until it acknowledged Ryoma Mikoshiba as its master.

In other words, Kikoku, as it was at that point in time, wasn't any different from an ordinary katana in terms of durability. Its blade could be nicked, and depending on the situation, it could snap.

It was better than an ordinary weapon, in that placing it in its sheath would cause it to naturally mend itself. But still, it could break. And that couldn't be said for Moore's thaumaturgical sword. Blood splatter would do nothing to dull the blade, and being charged with its wielder's prana made its durability skyrocket.

Ryoma could use thaumaturgy, but Moore far eclipsed him in terms of experience with martial thaumaturgy. And this clash made Moore realize Ryoma's blade didn't have any endowed thaumaturgy applied to it.

That's fine. The weak have their own way of fighting. I just have to adjust my tactics to account for my weaknesses.

There was the difference in the abilities of their weapons, and Ryoma sensed

a clear disparity in their thaumaturgy skills when they clashed. In terms of who was stronger, Ryoma was no match for Moore.

But while a stronger person was more likely to win, it didn't mean that the weaker person was bound to lose.

Ambushing someone in their sleep, attacking in large numbers, taking one's family hostage, using poison... So long as they weren't burdened by ethics and the weight of their reputation, it was perfectly possible for the weak to overcome those stronger than them.

And even if one wasn't that desperate, so long as they didn't give up, a way to win could always present itself. That was something Ryoma's grandfather had taught him since infanthood, and that was why he never backed away from a fight.

The moment he realizes the difference in our weapons and martial thaumaturgy, he's going to become arrogant and attack me at once. He should be getting angry right about now. The next attack should decide this...

In a few seconds, the decisive moment would come. And that would grant Ryoma his chance.

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The sounds of clashing blades echoed around them as their intense duel continued. After several moments of thrusting against each other, the two interlocked shadows both jumped back.

They'd repeated these exchanges several times over already. Both were breathing heavily, their shoulders rising and falling with every gasp.

"You're tougher than I thought..." Moore whispered, as Ryoma once again vigilantly raised his katana in a middle-level posture.

His thaumaturgical sword's water slashes failed to perform as well as he had hoped, and even after turning to melee combat he failed to defeat Ryoma.

I never imagined tactics like this. So that's this man's... an otherworlder's fighting style.

Moore was operating under a major misunderstanding, but even with all his

long career behind him, this was Moore's first time locking blades with an otherworlder in one-on-one combat. Moore's fighting style was the very incarnation of toughness. He augmented his well-built body with martial thaumaturgy and pummeled his opponent to defeat. A simple, straightforward fighting style he was familiar with.

Most knights in this world employed this straightforward fighting style which made use of muscle strength to its absolute maximum. Ryoma's style, by comparison, did make use of his innate strength, but also had the flexibility to use the opponent's own strength against them. It was both tough and soft all at once.

Ryoma didn't prefer one over the other, because for him, the objective in battle was to slay his opponents. When the need called it, he relied on toughness to block blows. But then other times he relaxed his body, and used softness to overwhelm.

By mixing those styles together, he made use of the ebb and flow of his body's power; using the soft to oppose the tough. And this was a first for Moore, who had been used to fighting opponents that used the same tactics he did.

By its very nature, the soft style required sensing the flow of the opponent's power and controlling it, and this required a great deal of technique and concentration. It required one to remain perfectly focused on their one opponent, and very few people could pull this off in the unique environment of a battlefield. Even Ryoma's teacher, Koichiro, would likely struggle to do the same.

Of course, Moore didn't know any of this, but he could vividly tell based on experience that Ryoma's fighting style was unlike anything he'd known before.

But so be it. It doesn't change what I have to do.

To obtain victory, Moore gathered information little by little, examining it methodically to win.

Do I use the water slash to whittle down his stamina? No, he can even block a flurry of those. It'd scratch away at him, but it won't be a fatal blow. That's just a waste of prana.

Of course, even a scratch counted as damage. A large amount of small injuries can lead to more bleeding, which would result in a drop in stamina. But delivering each of those scratches with the water slash would consume a considerable amount of prana.

In both trade and combat, cost effectiveness was crucial. The returns had to match the investment one put into every action. Moore's gaze turned to the blade in his hands for a moment. Endowed thaumaturgy didn't require chanting, making it more convenient, but it wasn't a perfect or ideal power.

The amount of prana it consumed was a major problem when it came to combat. Even a seasoned warrior like Moore, capable of operating his third chakra at full force, couldn't ignore how much prana it consumed. On top of keeping three chakras constantly operating, he also needed to charge his sword with prana. Moore would eventually exhaust his great reserves of prana. Even the most efficient car would be rendered useless without gasoline.

Then, do I settle this with a melee battle?

Moore had to deny that idea immediately.

No, if he stays on the defensive like this, I won't be able to deal a finishing blow. Even a melee battle would draw this out for too long. And if this battle lingers, I'll lose when my prana runs out.

In terms of overall strength Moore was superior to Ryoma, but that appraisal wasn't absolute when it came to the limited conditions of a one-on-one duel. Moore's superiority stemmed from his greater mastery of martial thaumaturgy. That meant that once he would exhaust his prana, Moore would go back to being nothing more than an ordinary knight.

Of course, that didn't mean Moore was terribly weak in that condition. But if he couldn't slay Ryoma with that power on his side, he naturally wouldn't be able to do so without it.

Moore was currently facing a carnivorous beast that was a mix of human intellect, animalistic strength and an iron will. Showing him the slightest opening would spur this beast to lunge at him and tear his windpipe to shreds.

In terms of pure technique, he's probably stronger...

Moore was using martial thaumaturgy; Ryoma, by comparison, wasn't. It was a bitter truth, but Moore had to admit it. A fight meant facing up to reality. But that reality was something only the two of them, the participants of this duel, could see at the moment.

"""Ooooh! Victory to Sir Moore! Glory to O'ltormea!"""

The O'ltormean knights' cheering rang in Moore's ears. The duel looked as if Moore was one-sidedly raining blows on Ryoma, and it filled the soldiers with burning morale. And unlike Ryoma, Moore was unharmed. Everyone was confident Moore was winning.

Tch. You goddamned idiots, no one asked you to do this... Moore swore under his breath, sneaking a glance around.

Normally, this cheering should have pleased him and spurred him onward. But contrary to how it may have looked, he was at a loss with how to handle this situation, and their oblivious cheering only served to annoy him. And worse yet, the unpleasant sensation in his bad leg was growing little by little, and this weighed down on his heart.

Stepping on it feels weird... Him blocking my flurry probably did it... I knew I should have let it heal longer...

The way one plants their feet is crucial for delivering a flurry of blows, but he couldn't manage it now. It was the slightest sense of discomfort, an echo of an injury that could never quite heal, but it was always roosting somewhere in his body. Constantly tormenting him in the smallest of ways. To compensate for that, he had to break away from his usual form, but that only made him lose balance and made the pain that much greater.

So I'll need to go for a melee battle after all... It's the only way.

He'd denied this option before, but realized he didn't have an alternative.

In that case...

He still had a final ace he'd kept in his sleeve. Using it meant Moore would pay a steep price, and once he used this ace, it would not be usable again. But Moore had decided. Even when reinforced by martial thaumaturgy, swinging the broadsword required that he plant his feet on the ground firmly.

Just a little longer... Hold on, just a little longer...

Regarding his throbbing leg with one more glance, Moore raised his broadsword overhead. The bloodlust he let off turned keen, like a blade. The blade swung over his head lit up at once, like a lamp.

“Diiiiiiiiiiie, Mikoshibaaaaaa!” Moore roared in a battlecry.

At that very moment, his fourth, strongest chakra started rotating at full speed. He’d pretended to prepare for a prolonged battle, only to bet it all on this blow.

First blow, a diagonal slash along the shoulder from above.

Martial thaumaturgy reinforced his body, and that boon extended to his reflexes and the speed of his thoughts. A single moment became drawn out, lasting many times longer than it actually did.

Moore’s blade slashed down from its upper left position, and as it traveled to the right, Moore charged it with vast amounts of prana, forming a water blade that was larger than anything he’d produced thus far. The broadsword swung down, extending longer than its blade’s length.

Second blow, a right sweep.

Next, the blade jumped up, unleashing another water slash into Ryoma’s right flank.

Tch... he blocked it.

The katana in Ryoma’s hands blocked the water slashes with its thick blade. Had everything gone as it had until now, this would have been the end of Moore’s offensive. But this time was different. He had a third attack pattern, one he hadn’t shown so far. He couldn’t use it frequently, but Moore’s broadsword was capable of more than just swinging down. It could launch three consecutive attacks.

By its very nature, a broadsword’s weight and length made it so that it was difficult to deflect its blow when swung. On top of that, Moore’s broadsword was made uniquely according to his specifications. It boasted a length of nearly 1.5 meters, and was almost twice as thick as a standard broadsword used for

fighting on the battlefield.

Its weight exceeded ten kilograms. And while that wasn't too heavy if one only wanted to lift it, it was an entirely different story when it came to swinging it around as a weapon. By comparison, a typical one-handed sword weighs an average of 1.5 kilograms. A two-handed broadsword is double that, ranging from three to five kilograms. Moore's broadsword weighed roughly three times more than a standard one.

On top of that, swinging a broadsword around applied centrifugal force, which increased its weight several times over. Wielding it required a great deal of diligent effort. Simply to use this one weapon, Moore needed to temper his body to perfection and master martial thaumaturgy. And even with all that, wielding it wasn't a simple task.

Moore's eyes fixed on Ryoma's exhausted figure. It seemed as if the effort of blocking that flurry of water slashes finally overcame him.

You let down your guard, you idiot!

Moore had taken the time to condition Ryoma. All the swings and sweeps he'd shown Ryoma so far were to set up a situation where Moore could launch a fatal surprise attack.

Take this!

The broadsword dug into Moore's hands, its weight increased by the centrifugal force. Moore opposed the law of inertia, straining every muscle in his body to stop the sword's circular swing. This reckless feat tore muscles and snapped tendons. The strain to his footing was particularly hard.

But Moore withstood that pain. He clenched his teeth so hard the taste of blood spread in his mouth. This was the quickest of Moore's techniques. A thrust that hit the enemy with all the power and strength his body could muster.

Terminus... Thrust!

He gambled everything he had on this moment. With that emotion in heart, he directed all the prana in his body to the Anahata chakra and squatted down to concentrate all his strength.

But the next moment, the two of them crossed paths, a strange metallic sound rang out, and red sparks flew through the air. In that one moment, the two shadows sprinted through the distance of several dozen meters. Silence hung over the square.

What...?

Something flowed down Moore's neck. Something with an eerie, vividly familiar sort of warmth... His respiratory duct and esophagus had been slashed open. Something warm bubbled up in the back of Moore's throat, and red blood leaked from between his lips. Moore fell backwards, all the strength draining from his body.

He... He used... martial thaumaturgy...

Moore saw what Ryoma did. A feat that could not be explained unless he had used martial thaumaturgy. He closed the distance between them with superhuman speed, thrusting his katana with all his might to skim along the bottom of the longsword, push against it, and slash at Moore's neck.

At that moment, Moore understood what Ryoma had been going for. He realized the meaning behind the composed smile on Ryoma's lips as he looked down at Moore's expiring form...

"Your Highness... Forgive m—"

As his consciousness faded, Moore uttered his final words. Words of apology to Shardina, who was fighting on Xarooda's lands. Words that lamented his failure.

Knowing full well that his apology served to do nothing but satisfy himself...

Chapter 5: Two Sides of the Coin

“Are you the messenger from O’ltormea? I haven’t seen you before. You said your name was... Sudou?”

A suffocating silence hung over the audience chamber. Julianus I sat on his throne, regarding the middle-aged man kneeling before him with a mixture of pity and scorn. This was the sweetest possible moment a country that had to tolerate inferiority and weakness for so long could desire.

A turning of the tables. The sense of superiority, of being in the commanding position, of being strong, filled Julianus I’s heart like sweet mead.

“Yes, Your Majesty. It is an honor to be in your presence.”

“What business do you have here, then? Did you come to demand we surrender once again?” Julianus I asked, the bitter irony in his voice quite evident.

It was only a few days ago that Xarooda had been informed that Fort Notis had fallen to Ryoma Mikoshiba. With their base razed to the ground, the O’ltormean invasion force was left without a supply base. As a result, their supply line was cut off in the middle of their assault on Fort Ushas, leaving them isolated in Xaroodian territory. Tens of thousands of O’ltormean soldiers and officers were left trapped.

Any army, no matter how large, couldn’t function when isolated from its homeland. Trained officers might be one thing, but uneducated conscripts and opportunistic mercenaries would naturally become demoralized.

In that situation, an appeal to surrender was the last thing O’ltormea would be sending Julianus I. The fact that he mentioned this to Sudou was nothing short of vitriolic sarcasm.

Sudou, of course, aptly read the king’s emotions. This wouldn’t stir any anger in him. He simply raised his head composedly and spoke to the pathetic jester sitting opposite of him.

“Of course not, Your Majesty. A demand for surrender? No...” Sudou shook his head, as if the prospect was absurd.

“What did you come here for, then? Surely not to chat over tea, I’d imagine. Your side doesn’t have the time for pleasantries right now.”

The arrogance seemed to drip every now and then from the king’s tone of voice. Sudou simply regarded his words with a sardonic smile. The victory at Fort Notis was but a single battle. But the significance of this victory was clear to all.

Until now, O’ltormea had held all the momentum in this war. They decided where and when to attack. This right to choose gave them complete control over the direction this conflict would go. But now that Fort Notis had fallen, O’ltormea has effectively switched positions with Helnesgoula, the leader of the four kingdom union.

The war hadn’t been completely resolved yet, but Xarooda had pretty much been saved from its predicament for the time being. Seeing Julianus I struggle to restrain his elation at this development made Sudou desperately stifle a chuckle.

What a stupid man... A jester if there ever was one. You didn’t even earn this victory on your own...

True, Xarooda had been given a thread of hope to hold onto. Given how the Empire had been freely encroaching on their land so far, cutting off the invasion army from its supply line was basically a turning of the tables.

But that didn’t solve all of their problems at present. In fact, despite solving a few of their problems, they still had a great many problems they needed to resolve. And the most crippling problem of all was that Xarooda didn’t break out of this deadlock on its own.

Let’s make him realize just what position Xarooda is really in, shall we?

True, they’d turned the tables on O’ltormea, and the invasion army was currently in dire straits. But that was only a temporary situation.

“I’ve come before you today in the hope of putting an end to this unfortunate war,” Sudou said, punctuating every word, as if trying to spell something out to

an ignorant child.

“What?” Julianus I furrowed his brows, not quite understanding what Sudou was getting at.

“Put concisely, the O’ltormea Empire seeks peace with Xarooda.”

The moment the word “peace” left Sudou’s lips, Grahalt, who was standing at Julianus I’s side, exploded with bloodlust. A blizzard of hatred blew against Sudou’s skin. However, this was a mostly unconscious reaction. Had Grahalt truly had been enraged, he’d have drawn his sword instead. Julianus I, seated on his throne, didn’t betray any signs of anger either.

I suppose he’s not stupid enough to press me angrily here...

Contrary to the information Sudou collected before coming here, he found Grahalt and Julianus I were rather calm.

Both Julianus and this Grahalt Henschel are surprisingly sound. There should be room for negotiations if that’s the case.

The peace offer came across as sudden, since the O’ltormea Empire was the aggressor in this war. It was only natural for Grahalt to be angry, since it was his kingdom that had been encroached upon and consistently trampled so far.

The fact that he was able to maintain a calm facade was proof of his impressive self-control. He realized that as angry as he was, lashing out would achieve nothing. And someone who knew that much could be negotiated with.

If he’d have just drawn a sword and charged at me, negotiations would have gone out the window.

Sudou was confident his victory was assured so long as he could reason with the other side.

“My apologies, but I don’t quite understand what you’re getting at. What is the meaning of this?” Julianus I asked.

“It is exactly as I’ve said, Your Majesty. The O’ltormea Empire seeks to make temporary peace with your kingdom.”

An unwavering light lingered in his eyes.

“You’re... serious.” Sensing Sudou wasn’t lying, Julianus I heaved a heavy sigh.

He was overcome by exasperation. The utter shamelessness of invading a country, only to come seeking peace once the situation soured made Julianus’s anger go over the peak and turn to shock.

“You do realize how this war began, yes?” Julianus I asked him with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course, Your Majesty. It began with my country invading yours,” Sudou replied unapologetically.

Sudou had predicted Julianus would say this much. If his nerves were faint enough to waver from this, he wouldn’t be capable of diplomatic negotiations. The important part was to maintain a confidence that bordered on arrogance.

“And knowing this, your country comes to me, asking for peace...?”

A firm, unwavering light of will lingered in Sudou’s eyes. Julianus, by contrast, was overcome by an odd sensation that had clouded over his heart. Something about Sudou’s attitude made him anxious.



“You shameless fools...”

Sudou heard the words slip from Grahalt’s lips before he could stop them.

“And you seriously think we’ll pay this offer of yours any mind?” Julianus I asked.

If this was a few months ago, Julianus would have lunged at this opportunity. But now, the scales of the war tipped in Xarooda’s favor. He had no reason to accept this offer. Sudou didn’t seem bothered by his response, however, and replied with a smile.

“Yes. I understand your country’s predicament, Your Majesty, and as a result that’s why I’m confident that you will agree to our offer.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what I said. I would very much like to extend a helping hand to your country.”

Sudou’s attitude was preposterously haughty, to the point of coming across as outrageous. So much so that Julianus outright forgot to shout at him and fell silent. The idea of someone acting so patronizing toward a country’s king was utterly unimaginable.

But despite this, Julianus couldn’t bring himself to order his soldiers to behead this insolent man. Perhaps the survival instincts of a cowardly fool alerted him, granting him a sense of ominous premonition.

“To begin with, are you not perhaps under a mistaken impression, Your Majesty...?” Sudou’s lips curled up into a nasty smirk. “You seem to believe that you are in a commanding position.”

Plastered on his face was a sneer, pitying a fool who didn’t know his place.

“Are you implying that I’m not? Your army is isolated from your territory, trapped and cornered in our land. Considering my forces’ surprise attack has severed your supply line, I’d assume your army should be rationing what little remains of their food right about now.”

Julianus tried to maintain composure, even as the anxiety Sudou induced ate away at his heart.

“They have no food, no spare weapons. No matter how large your army is, it’s powerless in practice.”

“That much is fact, I’ll grant you,” Sudou nodded. “As you say, our army will wither away before long. But if you think that places you in any position of superiority, Your Majesty, I’m afraid that you are quite deluded.”

This is the clincher...

Negotiations had a flow to them, and Sudou’s experience told him that now was the decisive moment.

“To begin with, Your Majesty, how do you intend to end this war? Do you really believe you’ll be able to destroy the Empire?”

“What?” Julianus furrowed his brows in confusion.

“My question is simple, Your Highness. There are three ways to end a war. You either beat your enemy to the ground and eradicate them, lose to your enemy and perish, or broker peace before the war ends. Now then, of these three options, how do you intend to end this war?”

He would either win, lose or admit to a draw. In truth, there were more ways of ending a war, but put concisely it comes down to these three options.

“Well...” Julianus I was at a loss.

Sudou had just pointed out his lack of foresight. Just the other day, Helena and her forces had received news of Fort Notis’s fall and attacked the retreating O’ltormean soldiers, dealing considerable losses to the enemy. The war was certainly swinging in Xarooda’s favor.

But that was only true for this particular battle.

Opportunistic nobles still ran rampant in the country and would get in the way of gathering conscripts. The Royal Guard and the Monarch’s Guard took heavy losses, greatly diminishing their strength as an army.

And Xarooda’s lifeline, the reinforcements they had gained from their neighbors, would never agree to invade O’ltormea’s territory for them. Their interests lay in helping Xarooda and ending the war quickly so they can go back home as soon as possible.

Staging a reverse-invasion into O'ltormea's land was impossible in these conditions. In which case, there could be only two conclusions to this. Xarooda would either have to fight a pointless, fruitless war it could never win until its last day, or give up at some point and negotiate for peace.

In that regard, the fact that the messenger they received this time came offering an armistice instead of demanding they surrender was a major step forward.

"Now that you understand your position, allow me to ask once more, Your Highness. Will you continue to fight a war you have no hope of winning?"

Sudou's question was like the devil's tempting whisper. Faced with his composed smirk, Julianus I could only nod at Sudou's words.

†

On that day, an air of manic fervor hung over Xarooda's capital city of Peripheria. And this wasn't true just for Peripheria, but indeed, throughout the kingdom. It was proof that the dark clouds hanging over the capital had cleared. The main streets of the capital's center were full of people. Men and women of all ages, mothers carrying children and elderly citizens alike all waved and cheered enthusiastically at the marching soldiers.

"All hail Xarooda! Glory to our kingdom!"

"The gods' blessings upon His Majesty! Glory to our kingdom!"

The citizens lined up in the streets, beaming with joy as they spoke of victory. Just the other day, the year-long war with the O'ltormea Empire had come to an end through a peace treaty. It marked the end of many taxes that had been imposed on the people because of the war, as well as the return of many conscripted husbands and sons.

Hope was on the horizon; a return to ordinary life seemed likely. But some people felt completely detached from the joyous mood filling the castle town. One such person was the king of this country, and the very man who had decided to accept the peace treaty.

He was now seated in a lounge chair set in his office, looking up at the ceiling despondently.

“Do you think my choice was the correct one to make?” he asked with a deep, sunken voice.

This was proof he was doubting the validity of his decision.

“I do not know, Your Majesty...” faced with Julianus I’s clinging gaze, Grahalt shook his head. “But it did buy us time. That much is fact.”

“Time, you say...”

The O’ltormean military was beginning to evacuate Xarooda’s lands. And while this was only a temporary retreat, depending on the negotiations, this peace treaty was on track to end up buying them several years. It would give them the time to reorganize their damaged knight orders.

“We can’t waste what little time we do have...” Julianus I said morosely.

“Indeed,” Grahalt nodded.

†

A room in the royal castle situated in the heart of Peripheria. After Ryoma Mikoshiba and his strike force toppled Fort Notis, they received word of the messenger that arrived in Peripheria carrying an offer for a peace treaty. Upon hearing of the news, Ryoma immediately took his troops back to the capital.

Look at them cheering. Oblivious idiots.

Ryoma directed a sneering gaze out the window, looking down at the city. In this moment, he understood fully the meaning of the phrase, ‘Ignorance is bliss.’

This is pathetic.

The people likely had no clue just how dangerous their situation really was. They could only see what was unfolding before their eyes. Like children playing on thin ice, at some point, their footing was bound to crack and send them plummeting to an icy grave.

But being able to see into the future isn’t all that simple, is it?

The image of Julianus I, King of Xarooda, flashed in Ryoma’s mind. Being able to foresee the future wasn’t necessarily something to be labeled a good or

comforting thing. And only a handful of people could predict how phenomena will come together to form a future.

Just because they could see a coming catastrophe doesn't mean they could always prevent it. Any number of unpredictable factors could throw their preparations off. Worse yet, given Xarooda's current state, the kingdom didn't have the strength to perfectly prepare itself for what was to come.

I guess it's up to the old man's skill as a ruler, but... Yeah, I don't see things ending well.

Julianus I accepted the peace treaty, seeing it as a gleam of hope, but O'ltormea was already beginning to move and had beaten him to the punch. Anything Julianus did now would likely fail to influence things in the long run. Realistically speaking, Xarooda's national power and position were far too weak, and fixing that would take them far longer than the amount of time they reasonably had.

Worst of all, O'ltormea probably only came forward with the peace treaty because they knew they were going to win eventually. By Ryoma's estimate, there were traitors and turncoats hiding among Xarooda's nobles, people in influential positions. Otherwise, O'ltormea's actions couldn't be explained.

The negotiations are still ahead of us, but it'll only be a few years at most until hostilities begin again.

It was likely that O'ltormea would sneakily drag out the negotiations until their preparations were complete and cut off the talks once they were ready to fight again. And then, they'd simply invade Xarooda again, with their forces reorganized.

For O'ltormea, this peace treaty was simply a way to prevent their invasion army from being wiped out. They had no real intention of making peace with Xarooda. And when that became clear, the cheering citizens would all too easily become an angry mob, which would turn its indignation on Julianus I. He would be seen as the foolish king who was all too blind and oblivious to his rival country's intentions.

Such were the masses; they raised their expectations unrealistically, and when things didn't go as planned, they soon changed their minds and hurled

insults. And because Ryoma didn’t personally dislike Julianus I, thinking of his eventual fate filled Ryoma’s eyes with sorrow.

Well, it’s out of my hands now. I’ve done everything I could, and I’ve met all of my objectives. I shouldn’t be involved with this country any longer...

The people were cheering at the end of the war, but things simply weren’t so simple. Ryoma could imagine this country’s eventual fate. But the next moment, the sound of casual conversation behind him dispersed that image.

“I haven’t had anything like this flavor so far, but these are some lovely tea leaves. Where were they produced?”

“Yes, I believe they’re from Risnorth.”

“Oh, from the central continent?”

Sara nodded quietly at Helena’s question and presented the porcelain teapot in her hands.

“I brought it from Sirius, since it’s one of Master Ryoma’s favorite blends. Would you like another cup?”

Helena looked at her empty teacup silently for a moment, but then perked up her lips in a smile.

“The faint sweetness of the tea leaves goes so well with the aroma... Yes, I’d love another.”

As Helena spoke, Laura approached her and held out a plate.



“Oh? Is this...?”

“These are sweets I’ve made based on Master Ryoma’s stories and instructions. They’re called macarons. They taste lovely.”

“My, really? Their shape is quite interesting,” Helena said as she took up one macaron and examined it fixedly.

She then took a bite, chewed and swallowed.

“My... You’ve put little sugar in it knowingly, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Apparently this is how it’s often made in Ryoma’s homeland.”

In truth, they didn’t limit the amount of sugar in the macarons per se, as it was done to maintain the balance of sweetness.

“Hmm. That’s quite nice, Ryoma,” Helena said.

“Yeah, I’ll admit gathering the ingredients was a bit of a hassle,” Ryoma regarded her with a bitter smile.

When it came to sweets, dried fruit was the most common example in this world. Confections made from sugar by the hands of a chef were a luxury exclusive to those in the higher echelons of society. And of course, these nobles made a show of their wealth by ordering their chefs to use obscene amounts of sugar.

The same could be said of normal cuisine; these nobles cared little for flavor or balance, and simply saw cuisine as an extension of their wealth and political standing. That made the confections of this world feel like dull, gaudy lumps of sugar. Every time Ryoma tasted one of them, he grew tired of it after the third bite.

Ryoma liked to drink and didn’t mind sweets, but eating those confections, Ryoma could practically feel the cavities forming in his teeth.

Gotta thank Asuka...

She forced him to help her with cooking, which he mostly found irritating at the time. Now, though, he had a newfound appreciation for his cousin. Ryoma accepted a cup of tea from Sara and sunk himself into the sofa opposite Helena.

“So this ends the war. At least, for the time being,” Helena said slowly, hanging her head.

“Yeah. A satisfying conclusion, all in all,” Ryoma replied.

“Yes...” Helena said, falling silent.

For now, the O’ltormean forces had been pushed back to the border. As generals in charge of the reinforcement army, they’d achieved much, even if the end of this war was nothing more than a temporary respite.

“After the messenger explained the details of the armistice, I had a little talk with Ecclesia.”

“Did she have anything to say?”

“She said she would probe the situation while staying in contact with her homeland. I’m sure she saw through O’ltormea’s intentions as well... But honestly, there’s nothing any of us can do.”

“Any chance she can call for reinforcements?” Ryoma asked.

Helena shook her head.

“Myest doesn’t have the leeway to do that... Honestly, expecting any more reinforcements from them is probably asking for too much.”

Xarooda, Rhoadseria and Myest: of the three kingdoms of the east, Myest was considered the strongest and most stable, with its affluent economy and commerce. But its wealth bought it many enemies. Its southern borders were constantly in a constant state of tension. Given that Myest’s primary military force was its navy, the number of foot soldiers they could send out to Xarooda was limited.

And what’s more, this war was far from Myest’s territory. They were effectively fighting on faraway, foreign soil. They sent their army since they realized the importance of these reinforcements, but they certainly didn’t like the prospect of fighting in this war. And from this perspective, the peace treaty was by no means an unfavorable development for Myest.

“In that case...”

“Yes, I’ll have to return to Rhoadseria per haste, as well... I must gather more

soldiers and prepare for the next war to come. The question is how far Queen Lupis's reforms have progressed..."

It had been more than six months since their reinforcements set out for Xarooda. It stood to reason that Lupis's efforts had had some kind of effect in that timeframe.

"I doubt anything good happened while we were gone," Ryoma said curtly, to which Helena could only reply with silence and a sardonic smile.

She had her own doubts that Lupis had made any progress with her reforms.

"I suppose the length of this grace period depends on Julianus I's skill..." she eventually said.

"I'll have to leave the rest to everyone else. I've done my part, and it was more than enough. I can't afford to leave Wortenia unattended any longer."

Don't involve me in this any longer. Sensing that insinuation clearly in Ryoma's words, Helena directed a probing glance at him.

"If you ask me, you've gotten plenty of leeway out of this. More than I imagined."

"What? No. This isn't enough. Honestly, we're barely getting started."

Even as he said that, a light smile played over Ryoma's lips. It isn't enough. Ryoma's words weren't false, but they weren't completely true either; they were simply a reflection of the situation.

Had everything gone according to Ryoma's plan, his stronghold in Sirius would have already finished its initial development. And once that was complete, all that would remain was to take his time and extend his influence throughout the entirety of the peninsula.

And in that regard, Ryoma did have some leeway, but if he could, he'd have preferred to use that time to develop the peninsula further.

And besides... Staying involved in this war any longer won't earn me anything.

Ryoma strongly believed that. He managed to build up a reputation as a compassionate general among the soldiers who participated in this expedition, and made a name for himself as a skilled strategist among the surrounding

countries. And most importantly, he'd formed connections with Helnesgoula and Myest, two quite powerful countries.

Reputation, connections, gain...

Not to say he couldn't aim higher; if he really had to, Ryoma might have been able to come up with a way to really earn Xarooda a true victory in this war. But Ryoma didn't want to. It was a question of the amount of work he'd have to put in, not so much about the gain it would bring him. And even if he believed he might be able to pull it off, the future was full of unpredictable factors, and he couldn't be sure he'd be able to do it. Ryoma wasn't all-knowing, and there could be pitfalls lying in wait for him if he tried to go ahead with such an idea.

Aiming any higher than this would be greedy.

Having gained more than he initially planned meant that earning any more could be harmful. Being overly successful only draws the envy of others; to avoid that, choosing to stop there struck him as prudent.

Still, in terms of personal emotion, Ryoma felt more affinity towards Julianus I than he did for Lupis. If possible, he'd have liked to do more to help him, but offering any further assistance now would be difficult.

"Well, that's fine... It wouldn't be right to burden you any further," Helena sighed, picking up on his emotions.

Personally, Helena would have liked to have dependable people on her side before the hostilities resumed. But considering how the Wortenia Peninsula's development was still incomplete, not to mention the strain such a thing would place on Ryoma, she couldn't bring herself to ask more of him.

If that one understood politics like Ryoma does, he would make quite a fine general...

The image of the blond boy she'd taken under her wing flashed through Helena's mind.

"What's wrong?" Ryoma asked.

"Oh... I just thought of Chris a little, is all..."

A bitter smile spread across Ryoma's lips. He probably realized why her

expression clouded over.

“What, did he lose his temper when he heard about the peace treaty?” Ryoma asked jokingly, shrugging.

“Yes. He yelled at me quite a bit, actually,” Helena nodded slightly.

“Wow. He... must have been really upset.”

Chris was a young man with a pretty face. The thought of his fair face contorting angrily and screaming at Helena made Ryoma crack a smile.

“Well, I can’t blame him. As a commander on the field, he’s right to feel that way. You look displeased about the way he acted, though.”

Ryoma’s siege annihilation plan was a deadly scheme which took a great deal of preparation, but setting it up would cost many lives. It was a plan they could only pull off once; there was no second chance with it.

But then, the king of Xarooda, the country involved in this war, chose to accept the peace treaty without consulting the other countries he called for reinforcements. Just as they were about to tighten the noose around O’ltormea’s invasion army and wipe them out...

In that regard, Chris’s anger was to be expected. But that was based on his perspective as a commander on the field. Whatever the correct choice is could change based on one’s position. Much like how the view is different from the foot of a mountain compared to its peak...

“Of course I am. He’s acting no differently from those two...”

This was proof Helena had put her hopes in Chris. She was seeking a future successor, and was hoping to put him in charge of Rhoadseria’s military affairs. Helena’s daughter had been killed, and she treated Chris, the grandson of one of her closest aides, as a surrogate son. To that end, she wanted to see him come to the correct answer on his own.

“Well, what did you expect? Chris was mistreated for a long time, from what I hear. You understand what that means, right?”

General Albrecht, the late general of Rhoadseria and leader of the knights’ faction, had loathed and tormented Chris for a long time. The young knight had

had to bear obscurity and scorn for too long, despite being more talented and wiser than most of his peers. Coupled with his feminine beauty, this made Chris develop something of a complex.

He hated nothing more than to be looked down upon. He wanted to be acknowledged. Those emotions constantly swirled in Chris's heart. After all, everyone wants acceptance from their peers...

"Yes... You're right."

Helena knew perfectly well that there was no comparing Chris to Ryoma. Chris's skill with a sword was top-class among the knights, and he was certainly clever enough. In terms of talent and achievement, Chris was, without a doubt, an elite worthy of shouldering the next generation of Rhoadseria.

But his youth made his flaws stand out. He was exceptionally bad at reading people's intentions, and he had a weak understanding of how countries worked...

And I can't help but compare him with Ryoma. Even if I know doing that only drives Chris into a corner even more...

But given the situation Rhoadseria was in, that comparison was a natural one to make. If only this boy, with his average face and faint smile, would simply stay by her side...

Heaving a deep breath, Helena took a sip from the teacup in her hands.

†

A certain country existed in the southern regions of the western continent: a city-state formed around a temple made of solemn marble. While the southern kingdoms and the Holy Qwiltantia Empire, one of the three great powers on the continent, quarreled over their borderlines through the years, this country clung to life. No matter how the borders of their surrounding countries shifted, this country never changed. The hegemony at the heart of the continent, the O'ltormea Empire, attacked the southern kingdoms in its desire to take over the port cities, but even it never thought to attack this country.

And so, this beast slumbered undisturbed. But once it awakened, this beast would bare its fangs against the rest of the continent, tearing the other

kingdoms to shreds.

The name of that city-state was Menestia, the holy city. The fortress where the God of Light Meneos was worshiped, and the stronghold of the Church of Meneos, the religious powerhouse that had spread throughout the continent.

In such a war-torn world, religious authority and abstract divine right would not be enough to enable a religious organization to defend itself. And so, that castle of white marble stood, protected by tall ramparts and deep moats. More than anything, the watchful gaze of its skilled sentinels and guards ensured its stability. They stood clad in thick armor and with sharp poleaxes in hand.

As they patrolled the town encircling the temple, their eyes glinted with desire. These soldiers were unlike the image of the pious, merciful men in service of a god. And that wasn't true for just these soldiers. All the people of this country were like a pack of starved wolves. Believing they were graced by their god, they were fools who believed that any action they took was pardoned and allowed by divine providence.

They called out their god's name, using it as a tool to fulfill their desires.

And sitting in the city's center, in the depths of the temple, was the most exalted person in this city, resting upon a seat as luxurious as a king's throne. Swirling a glass in his hand, he listened to his subordinate's report with an amused expression.

He was clad in a white mantle made of lustrous silk and adorned with golden threads. Coupled with the gemstone-inlaid staff of office in his hand, the man's attire made his status clear to all.

"Oh. So O'ltormea withdrew their men from Xarooda?"

"Yes, Your Holiness..." answered the old man bowing before him. "Apparently, Fort Notis has been toppled, and the head of its garrison, Moore, was slain."

"And their casualties?"

"According to our spies, O'ltormea offered the peace treaty almost as soon as their troops were isolated, and as such they avoided being surrounded and eradicated. However, Helena Steiner and Ecclesia Marinelle led an assault on

them, costing the Empire the lives of 10,000 soldiers."

At those words, the man's lips curled upwards. His smile was nothing less than the devil's sneer. Most men would freeze in terror at the mere sight of this smile. However, the old man's blank expression didn't budge despite facing this malicious smirk.

"I see, I see... Ten thousand. Not a fatal blow, given O'ltormea's national power, but..."

"They've lost Fort Notis and all their supplies are reduced to ashes."

"Either way, withdrawing their armies was a wise choice... For both countries."

"Yes."

"Xarooda's king comes across as an obstinate man."

"The rumors made him out to be a feeble-minded king, but I did not expect this."

At the old man's words, the man gave a satisfied smile. This was proof that the man kneeling before him was in his service.

Just as their army was about to be surrounded and wiped out, O'ltormea called for a peace treaty. And before the negotiations began, O'ltormea successfully withdrew its army back across its borders.

This alone marked Julianus I as a foolish king. On the surface, his territory was one-sidedly ravaged by O'ltormea, and he simply let them go home without Xarooda having gained anything. Most rulers would at least demand reparations from the Empire to cover for the losses they took.

But therein lay the pitfall, the trap O'ltormea sprung.

Not many realized that given the gap between O'ltormea's and Xarooda's national power, negotiations were effectively meaningless. Any promise O'ltormea might be forced to make would be meaningless. Pacts only have binding power when breaking them would inflict some kind of penalty.

For comparison, a country's law could be seen in the same way. Laws only have meaning when they have a physical extension capable of punishing those

who break them, e.g., the police. Only when there is a presence that actively seeks out and judges lawbreakers do people truly begin to uphold the law.

Laws, by themselves, do not have much meaning, and the same can be said of verbal agreements and negotiations. Negotiations are based on both parties upholding their parts of the deal, but what if one side has an overwhelming advantage over the other?

Parents and their children, teachers and students, an employer and his employees, a superpower as opposed to a weaker country. These examples differed in scale, but in essence they were the same thing. And in this case, O'ltormea loomed over Xarooda in terms of national power.

O'ltormea could make some kind of agreement with Xarooda in these negotiations. But did Xarooda have any kind of strength to make O'ltormea actually honor it? The strong have no obligation to make any promises to the weak. Had O'ltormea deemed Xarooda's presence necessary for some reason, they could easily negotiate with them. But the Empire didn't care about Xarooda's opinion of it.

As the man seated on the throne rotated his glass in his hand, he pondered over the situation.

It's impossible, and Julianus knows it. It doesn't matter what deal they'll strike; eventually, Xarooda will be stomped out with sheer force.

Even if they could demand the Empire pay them a large sum in reparations across a long period of time, it was questionable if O'ltormea would actually pay. And most people failed to realize this. They tended to naively assume that a promise that's been made would always be upheld.

"So, they forced O'ltormea to pull their army out of Xarooda before the negotiations began? Good call."

"Yes, Xarooda would struggle to hold war councils and reorganize their forces with that army still in their hands, and pulling that army back will also be seen favorably within the country."

"You're saying that inspiring hope in the nobles might inspire them to help?"

"If nothing else, it's better than having that army still within their territory."

Of course, it was hard to say how much that would help given that many of the nobles were already in O'ltormea's pocket. However, that they got O'ltormea to retreat in the first place was a solid fact Julianus could use as a weapon to persuade the nobility.

"I suppose that from Xarooda's perspective, this development is a glimmer of hope."

"Yes, if that war had continued the way it did, they would not have been spared from defeat. Had they succeeded in surrounding and wiping out the invasion army, O'ltormea would not have accepted it quietly. Especially since there was a chance that attack would have claimed the life of the army's supreme commander, Shardina."

"Hm. Normally that would have been a desirable outcome for Xarooda."

In most cases, claiming a general's head would end a war. But in this case, it would only serve as the catalyst for the next war to come.

"Given Xarooda's position, that would not have been wise. Of course, if they were to do nothing, the outcome would have been the same, so they had to try and surround the invasion army..."

"If they were to claim the life of his beloved daughter and a royal, the Emperor would discard all internal affairs to make Xarooda's conquest the first priority."

"Yes. He'd likely organize a second front in a matter of months. And Xarooda would not be able to prepare for it in time. They might have thought of some kind of countermeasure for it, but since the Empire was the one to offer the armistice, they likely felt their chances of victory were greater by agreeing rather than by sticking to that plan."

"So they chose to buy time for an eventual victory rather than insisting on the immediate victory... Not bad."

"Yes. It wasn't a bad idea, but..."

"The more desperately Xarooda's king tries to cling to life, the longer this war will last. And that's exactly what O'ltormea wants."

“Yes. Ever since this war started, prices across the western continent have been skyrocketing. My spies report that quite a few companies they’re involved with have been making a profit. It’s likely this armistice was orchestrated by someone moving behind the scenes.”

“Like vultures closing in on decaying flesh.”

The irony in the man’s smirk was stark. But that description was an apt way of describing those who plot to use war to make a profit for themselves.

“Quite right, Your Holiness.”

Of course, they couldn’t send out a messenger to Xarooda telling them not to resist any further, and even if they did, it wouldn’t change anything. Xarooda’s continued existence wasn’t that important to them. But for Julianus I, nothing mattered more than his kingdom living on.

After a few moments of long silence, the man suddenly spoke.

“Do you have some kind of plan, then?”

“I do, Your Holiness.”

“Hoh.”

“Have you heard of a certain company located in the citadel city of Epirus, the Christof Company?” the old man asked, to which the man shook his head silently.

Of course the Pope of the Church of Meneos would not have heard of a small company located in a distant province.

“No. What about this Christof Company?”

“We can use the same method as they have to make a profit out of this war.”

The Pope’s eyebrow twitched at the old man’s explanation.

“Are they involved with them?”

“We don’t know as of yet, but there is a noble we suspect may be collaborating with them.”

Hearing this much, the Pope soon realized what the old man was getting at.

“I see. So you want to shake up that noble and see what happens...”

“Yes. We’ll scout things out to see if he’s in league with them, and if he isn’t...”

“He should make for a fine pawn.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

“Good, good. Let us go ahead and do that,” the Pope said and clapped his hands with a smile.

And the only thing that could be heard from that throne room was its master’s maddened laughter.



Epilogue

The curtain of night descended over the town of Lentencia. Sitting in one room of a mansion located on the city outskirts, two men clinked their cups together. The time was just past midnight. In this Earth's logic, it was long since the time most people have turned in for the night. But for these two, who were rekindling their old friendship, the night was still quite young.

"I never imagined your return would result in all this..." Liu heaved a sigh after hearing all that happened to Koichiro since.

In truth, being reunited with an old friend whom he had believed to be dead for years filled Liu Daijin's heart with joy. But having heard what his friend had just said dampened his elation.

"Your grandchild and your grandniece..."

Koichiro nodded somberly at Liu's words.

"When it happened to my son and his wife, I still thought it might be a coincidence. But with so many of my relatives being called one after another, it's hard to write it off as an accident," Koichiro said morosely, before silently downing another cup.

Yes... I can see why he'd feel that way, Liu thought to himself.

The summonings that took place in this world were unlike the summoning magic one might be familiar with from a game; it could not be done often. Thaumaturgists skilled enough to use the summoning ritual were few and far between to begin with. The spell exacted a heavy burden on the caster, and the catalysts needed to perform it were precious and rare.

It was also difficult for any one individual to gather all the conditions needed to perform an otherworld summoning. Only the most wealthy of merchants or nobles could manage it, and even then, it would take a great deal of effort and resources. One could safely assume this kind of endeavor was usually handled by entire countries.

With that in mind, all the countries across the western, eastern, central, southern and northern continents could only summon a few hundred otherworlders every day. And the people it summoned were essentially selected in random. Several hundred, out of the seven billion human beings that live on Rearth.

And despite those astronomical odds, people who were related to Koichiro Mikoshiba were summoned not once, not twice, but three times over. He had to begin suspecting there must have been some kind of causality at play. And if there was a cause, it must have been his return to Rearth.

“That is truly... a curse.”

When he first heard that Koichiro had made it back home, Liu was elated. There was a chance he might see the sights of the homeland he thought he would never encounter again. And even if he didn’t have that chance, that door was open to his comrades in the organization. They had hope. And with this, their hatred for this world might be curbed somewhat.

But what if, upon returning, they would discover their families and loved ones would be the next to be called into this world as a result? No. They would have to abandon the idea of going back home that way, unless the circumstances were terribly pressing. The sorrow and despair of it all was beyond description.

Liu Daijin’s description was accurate. It was, indeed, a curse.

“That it is...” Koichiro muttered and took another swig.

Talking about this weighed on Koichiro’s heart. So much so that he felt like he wouldn’t be able to discuss it without alcohol in his blood. The guilt of forcing not just his son and his wife, but also his grandson and grandniece into this hell weighed him down constantly.

“And what do you intend to do now, my friend?” Liu asked him gently.

“First, I have to take Asuka back...” Koichiro replied, to which Liu raised an eyebrow.

“Oh... Not your son or grandson?”

Koichiro shook his head silently.

“My son and his wife are beyond help by now. I don’t have enough clues to search for them. And my grandson should be fine. I’ve taught him all that I can.”

Those words could come across as quite cold, but those were his true feelings. His son and his wife had been summoned into this world nearly 20 years ago. He had taught his son the family traditions and trained him in martial arts, so he should have been able to put up some kind of a fight. But he had only learned those arts at a layperson’s level.

Koichiro would mention his grandson, Ryoma, from time to time. But he had granted Ryoma knowledge and passed his techniques down to him. Even in this cutthroat world, he ought to be able to survive. Put conversely, those skills were utterly worthless in modern Japan, so long as one didn’t tangle with the likes of the yakuza.

This was a world where one had to be ruthless, to be able to unflinchingly kill when needed. Even if his son did manage to survive, it meant he had lived through a hell so terrible that his nature would have been completely warped, just as Koichiro’s heart once was.

Yes, Koichiro wanted nothing more than to save his son from this hell if he could. But he knew it was far too late for that now, and there was someone else who needed help much more.

Then, there came a few gentle knocks on the door.

“Who is it?” Liu asked.

“It’s Zheng. I have a report.”

Liu nodded softly.

“The door is open. Come in.”

“Excuse me, then,” Zheng entered the room clad in his perfect tailcoat and bowed. “I have the results of the investigation.”

He was holding a few documents in his hand.

“Are these the results?” Liu asked, to which Zheng nodded and handed the documents over. “Hm.”

Liu took out a pair of glasses from his chest pocket and began reading through

the report. One page, two, three... Upon having read the first sentence, he heaved a slight sigh.

“You said your grandniece’s name is Asuka Kiryuu, yes?”

“That’s right,” Koichiro answered, to which Liu nodded.

“I see... Apparently, she was sighted in the holy city a few months ago. However...” Liu trailed off.

Koichiro directed a sorrowful gaze at Liu, realizing something was wrong from his expression.

“You can’t help her?” He asked.

This was always an option in the back of Koichiro’s mind. Even if he had been a leader of the Organization, that was half a century ago. He’d clung to this old friendship for lack of another option, but he realized full well he could very well be rejected.

But Liu shook his head slowly at Koichiro’s question.

“Don’t be a fool, old friend. If it’s for a relative of yours, I would do anything within my power. And my will is the will of the Organization; I won’t let anyone interfere.”

Liu punctuated those words by taking a vigored swig of his drink. Seeing this made Koichiro understand what Liu really meant.

So I have the Organization’s assistance guaranteed to me. But even so, they can’t save Asuka...

That was the only conclusion possible.

“Are you saying even your power isn’t enough to take her back?”

Liu nodded slowly.

“I’m afraid so. Right now, it is quite difficult... She’s been taken under the wing of some troublesome people. And to make things worse, she resides in the first citadel of the holy city.”

With that said, Liu handed one of the documents over to Koichiro.

I see... If what’s written here is true, even the Organization would struggle to

get Asuka out of that city.

The Organization's power was vast, to be sure. It had enough power to overcome any of the continent's countries easily, even the O'ltormea Empire with its hegemonic ambitions. But alas, one other group existed on the western continent capable of matching it.

The Church of Meneos had existed for many years, and it had become quite the powerful faction. But even so, in the past the Organization would have been powerful enough to extract a person or two from the holy city of Menestia.

Because Koichiro knew of the Organization's strength, he had previously run the risk of using an old Chawanjin cypher to attract its attention. However, Koichiro didn't predict that the Church of Meneos's influence was far greater than it had been 50 years ago. The Organization had grown in power as well, so the two were evenly matched.

But what really made the situation difficult was that Asuka was under the protection of Rodney Mackenna, captain of one of the ten knights orders under the Church of Meneos's command.

"Rodney Mackenna and his step-sister, Menea Norberg, have bad blood with us. They've given the Organization some trouble."

"Are they skilled?" Koichiro asked.

"They're both Zheng's equals, if not stronger," Liu nodded.

Koichiro found himself looking up. He'd already heard that Zheng served as Liu's aide. And if those two stood head to head with a man strong enough to lead the Hunting Dogs, the Organization's elite force, that was sufficient information to describe their power. Koichiro himself wouldn't be able to go easy on Zheng. Any fight between them would have to be a battle to the death.

And the two who took Asuka under their protection matched Zheng, if they weren't even stronger than him. Worse yet, Asuka was in the highly guarded first citadel. Only the most skilled people would be able to sneak in there. Liu was right; taking her back would be difficult.

"Of course, we could do it assuming we'd be willing to go on an all-out war with the Church, but..." Liu said.

Koichiro cut him off, shaking his head. Even if it was in the name of rescuing his beloved grandniece, Koichiro couldn't ask his friend to start a war. If the Organization and the Church of Meneos were to openly clash, the continent would truly burn.

And if that were to happen, the holy city Menestia would be caught up in the hostilities. In fact, it was the enemy's stronghold; assuming it wouldn't be embroiled in the war would be foolish. And since Asuka lived there, it would place her life in jeopardy.

"If nothing else, there's little we can do unless she leaves Menestia."

Koichiro hung his head powerlessly. But the words Liu uttered next made him look up vigorously.

"However... That chance may present itself soon enough."

Seeing Koichiro react like that caused Liu to chuckle.

"You're like a father worrying over his daughter's wellbeing," he said.

"Don't tease me!" Koichiro snapped at him.

Liu laughed out loud at Koichiro's sulking expression, but after laughing for a moment, his expression darkened.

"Allow me to ask you one thing, though. What is your grandson's name, again?"

It was a sudden change in topic, and seeing the seriousness in Liu's eyes made Koichiro answer suspiciously.

"It's Ryoma... Ryoma Mikoshiba."

At that answer, Liu sank deeper into his seat and looked up at the ceiling, deep in thought.

"Then... Sudou's report was correct," He whispered into the air.

He took a sheet of paper and handed it over to Koichiro.

"What's this?" Koichiro asked as he looked down at the document.

But after he'd read a few lines, his expression changed to shock.

“This is a report delivered from one of our people working in the continent’s center,” Liu said, heaving another deep sigh.

The report in Koichiro’s hands detailed the events of the O’ltormean invasion army’s withdrawal from Xarooda, and Ryoma Mikoshiba’s name was clearly written there, as one of the reinforcements dispatched by the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Another page detailed all the information Akitake Sudou had dug up on Ryoma.

As Koichiro’s eyes scanned over the page hungrily, Liu shook his head. Ryoma Mikoshiba had been nothing but a source of agony for the Organization he led. Ever since his murder of the former court thaumaturgist of the O’ltormea Empire, Gaius Valkland, Ryoma had impeded the Organization’s plans time and again.

Thankfully, Sudou was in charge of the situation, and his quick-witted maneuvering allowed them to proceed without their plains requiring any major revisions. But in most cases, Ryoma’s constant interference would have branded him a target for assassination by now.

And at the same time, his proclivity to get in their way was stark proof of his unusual capabilities. If nothing else, Liu had to respect Ryoma, both as a fellow child of their original world, and as a man. Because he had climbed up as far as he did, despite starting out with nothing at all.

“This grandson of yours is... quite a monster, indeed.”

Saying this, Liu reached for a box of tobacco sitting on the table. He would need this to calm his nerves, it seemed. Taking out his favored pipe from the box’s drawer, he stuffed tobacco leaves into the pipe bowl and ignited it using fire thaumaturgy.

Some time passed, and Koichiro eventually looked up from reading the report. His expression was full of pride. His education was not in vain. He’d found the beloved grandson he’d raised with care and devotion, and this filled him with more joy than he’d ever felt before.

But on the other hand, he’d given Ryoma all his knowledge and training, fashioning him into a modern warrior. In a sense, Ryoma achieving this much was to be expected. And while Ryoma had all the tools to cut open a path

through whatever might come his way, the same couldn't be said of Asuka. For better and for worse, she was just an average high school student.

"So, what does this have to do with saving Asuka?" Koichiro asked, using every bit of willpower he had to suppress his desire to hurry over to his grandson's side.

Liu billowed smoke from his pipe, basking in its aftertaste.

"Soon, the Church of Meneos will be dispatching a messenger to Rhoadseria."

Koichiro tilted his head quizzically. He didn't immediately understand the meaning behind those words.

"Put more simply, your grandson's penchant for making a bloody mess of the O'ltormea Empire's plans made him draw the attention of the Church's top brass."

This was not entirely surprising. The Church of Meneos's declared purpose was to ensure the stability of the western continent. With Ryoma building up a name for himself so quickly, it was only natural they'd become interested in him.

"The one dispatched to meet him is set to be one of the Pope's close aides, Cardinal Roland. And the escorts sent out to guard his person are..."

As Liu finished his sentence, Koichiro's lips curled up into a smirk. After hearing that much, the conclusion he'd come to was obvious.

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've kept up with the series since volume 1, thank you for waiting out the last four months since the previous volume. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

At the time of this writing, we're entering the third month of the year. This marks the first time since we started re-publishing the series through HJ Novels that I've failed to get my manuscript in on time. I'd planned to submit the plot outline at the end of last year, submit the illustration notes in the middle of January, and get the manuscript in by the end of the month. But I ran into health issues, and there was so much to write, I simply couldn't find the strength to keep going for some time...

With that said, one can definitely say that the volume you're holding right now is the product of a miracle.

I would like to extend my thanks to the editors who helped with the publishing of volume 9, as well as everyone else who worked on it. I've really made you all run the gauntlet for me this time.

The upcoming volume 10 is set to be a turning point in the story, so I certainly intend to put out my best effort to deliver it to you in a timely manner. I look forward to your continued support for *Record of Wortenia War*.

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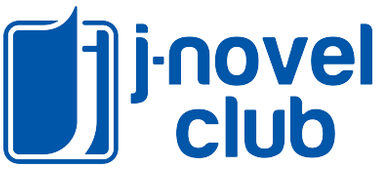
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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 9

by Ryota Hori

Translated by ZackZeal Edited by Nathan Redmond

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