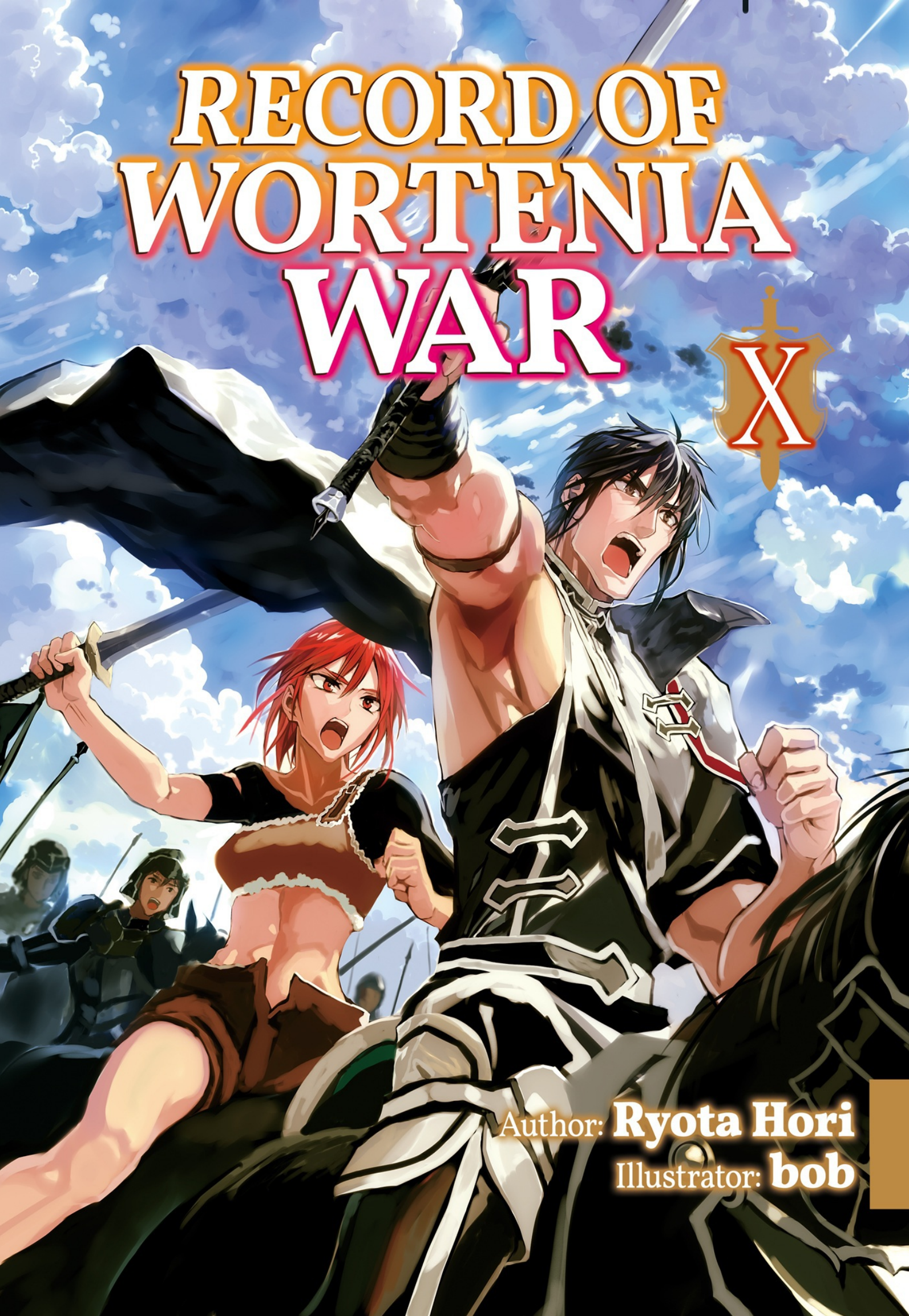
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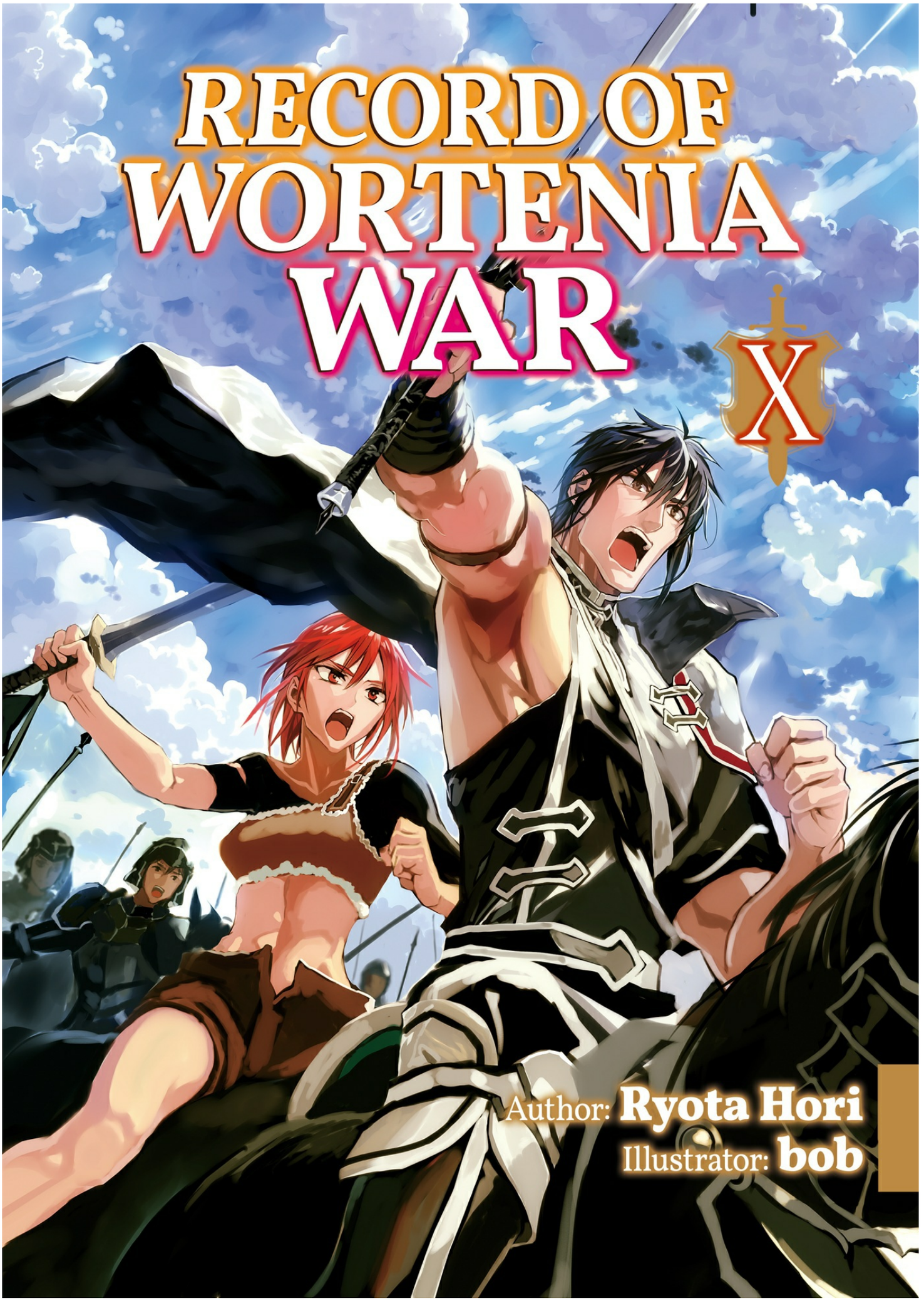
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Author: Ryota Hori
Illustrator: bob

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

X



Author: Ryota Hori
Illustrator: bob


RECORD OF
WORTENIA
WAR
“Kikoku…”
Ryoma whispered
the katana’s name as
he held it up against
the bonfire’s light.


“You are, after all, a national hero.”
“First I must apologize and thank you.”


“My apologies for calling you so late.”
“Oh, I don’t mind.”



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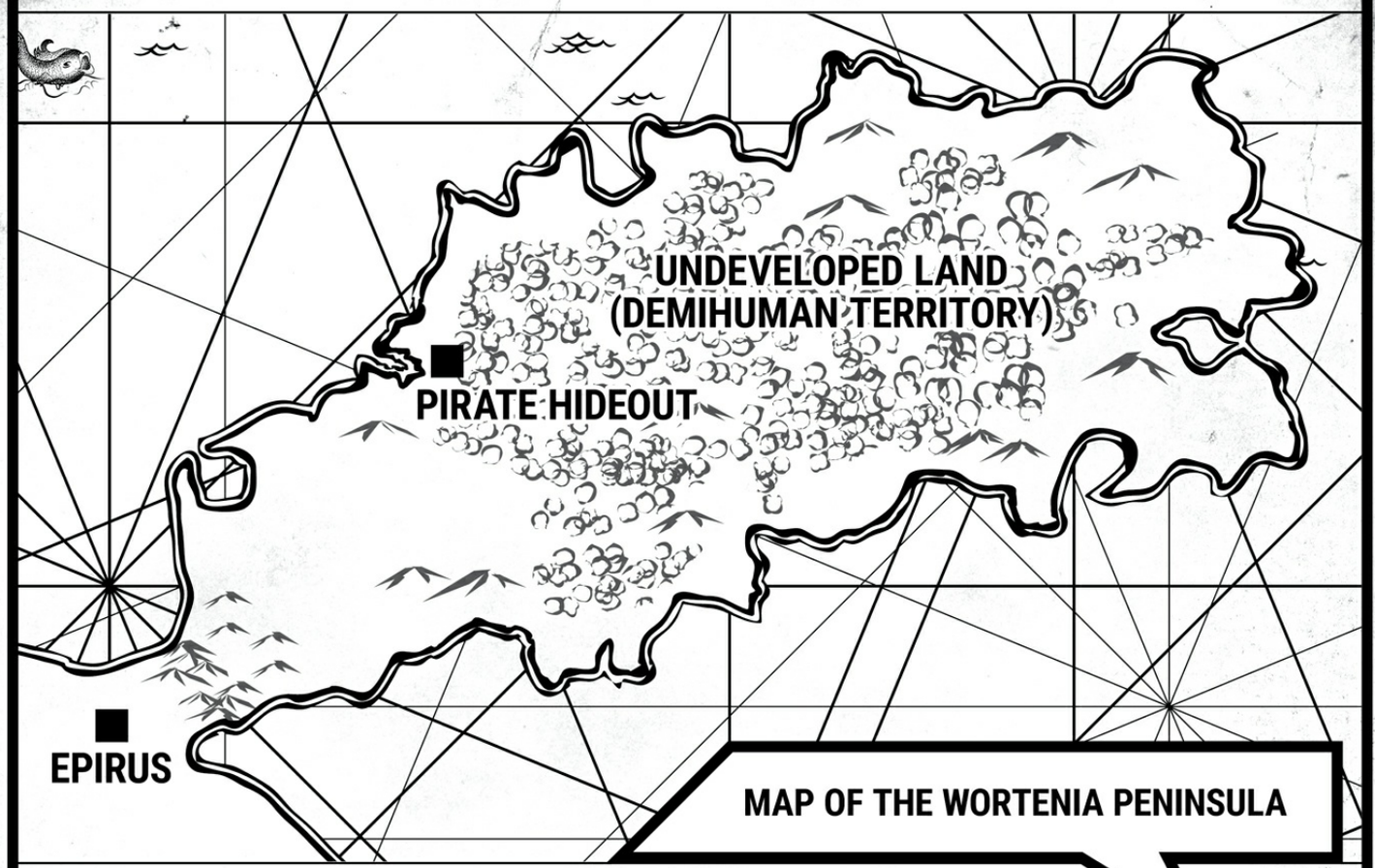
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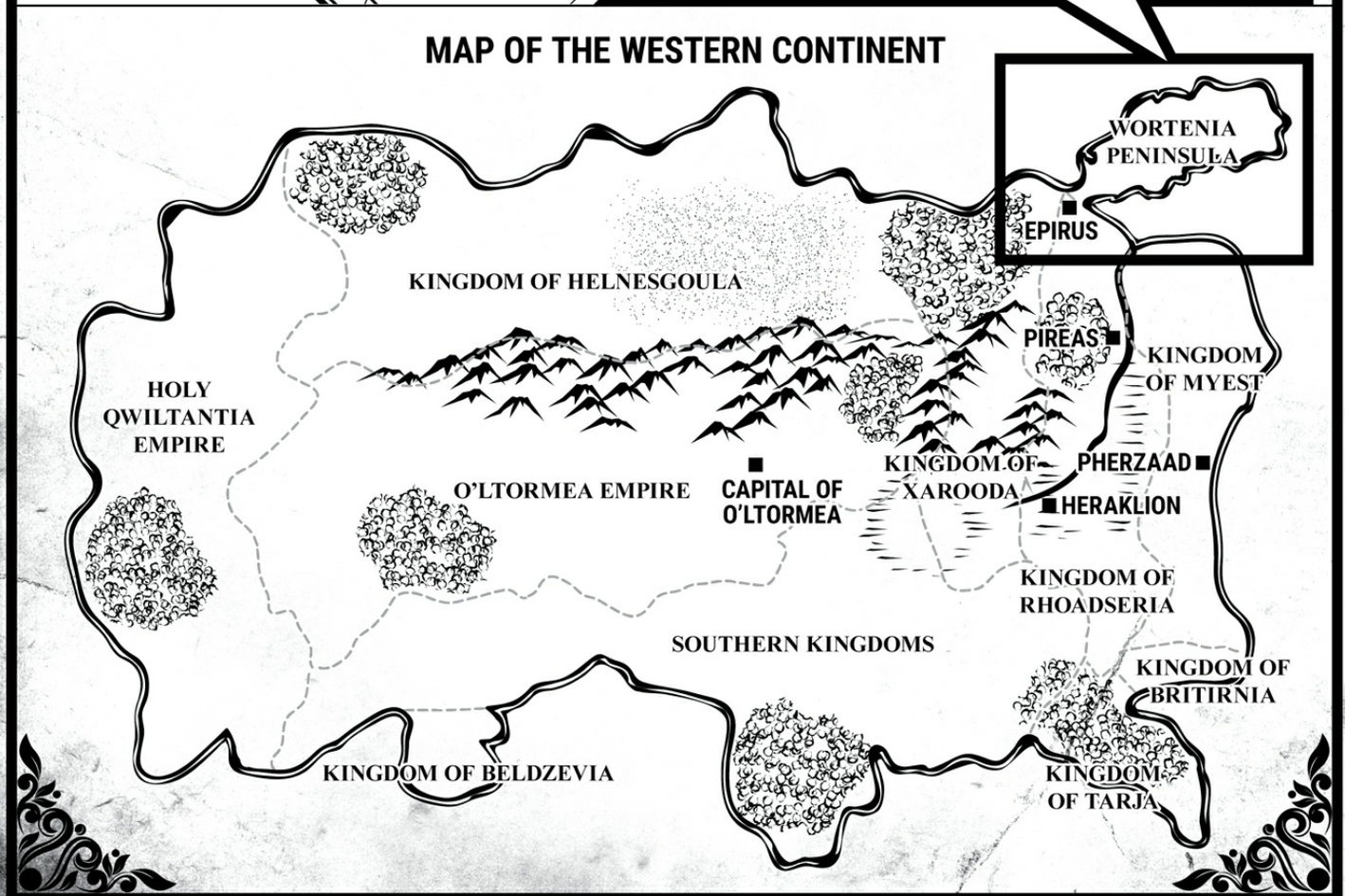
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Prologue

It was early morning. A chill breeze brushed against the skin. Though, perhaps morning wasn't quite accurate since the sun hadn't even begun to peek above the horizon. Night would still reign for another hour. The only illumination in the area was the faint light of the lamps the watchmen of Liu Daijin's estate were holding and the twinkling stars.

But one shadow crept through the darkness. A white mist issued from his lips and faded into the air. His heavy breathing wasn't surprising, though; he'd spent an hour performing the Rituzenn breathing technique.

The technique was, and in of itself, quite simple. Banal, even. One would spread their legs shoulder-length apart and lower their waist. Then they would hold out their arms in front of their chest, forming a ring. The important part was to bring the fingers of both hands together to form a smaller ring.

It was rather like sitting on an invisible chair. Maintaining this posture for any amount of time appeared to put a great deal of pressure on one's lower half, but that was only how it looked from the side. A similar exercise was used for muscle training, but this one had another purpose that wasn't immediately obvious.

"Mm. It seems to be working well. I've gotten used to this," Zheng Motoku uttered, satisfied to see that the Neigong training Liu Daijin passed on to him was working effectively.

Emblazoned upon Zheng's flesh, from his back down to his flank, was a tattoo of nine dragons. A famous artisan had branded him with this tattoo after he left the People's Liberation Army and started working for the Hong Kong mafia as a professional assassin. It was fashioned after Shi Jin, one of the heroes of the *Water Margin*, who was said to have a similar tattoo.

The ink dragons undulated with every breath as he continued to practice. Countless beads of sweat glistened on his forehead, dripping down to the ground below and forming a large, visible stain. Despite holding this posture for

hours, Zheng had maintained his breathing. The sheer endurance required to retain this posture was quite staggering, yet he remained perfectly still. His face betrayed neither displeasure nor pain; he simply smiled.

Any resident of this estate would be surprised by this smile. Zheng was, as a matter of principle, a man of few words and little emotional expression. He was always clad in a perfectly tailored tailcoat, his hair styled to perfection. His eyes were always as clear and cold as a wintery lake.

A man as cold as ice and as firm as steel. A human embodiment of loyalty to one's master.

That was the impression most of the estate's residents held of Zheng. But this smile proved that he was by no means a doll, nor was he some kind of monster. For Zheng, this training was his sole pleasure in life—the one thing he could call a pastime. Practicing Chinese martial arts was, to him, the one calling he had outside of his duties.

Such training could be divided into two sorts: external and internal. External training focused on one's flesh and muscles. Internal training focused on one's internal organs, breathing, and consciousness. Zheng, sweating profusely, was currently practicing an extremely taxing and effective internal training technique known as Qigong.

Popular media in Rearth often portrayed Qigong as a way of developing supernatural power, but it was no such thing. It was the way the human body naturally and unconsciously regulated breathing, consciousness, and muscle movement. All of those were controlled at once to produce the appropriate strength at any given moment.

Imagine a person lifting a heavy object. They would momentarily hold their breath, close their mouths, and clench their teeth. If they didn't do this, their body would fail to muster the strength needed to complete the task.

The purpose of Qigong was to apply this proper, natural use of the body to Chinese martial arts. By employing a special breathing method, one could guide their consciousness to the inside of the body, allowing them to control and understand the tension directing their body's movements.

The common person might call it gathering the energy within one's body, but

it was nowhere near that simple. Muscle training took a great deal of effort to master, but internal training took even more.

And furthermore, one needed a skilled master to keep a cautious watch over their training. This wasn't to say self-taught training was a bad idea. The old masters who developed the martial arts had no teachers to rely on, after all, so a teacher wasn't absolutely necessary. But there was still a level that was difficult, if not impossible, to achieve without the aid of a teacher. The teachings of one's predecessors were an accumulation of history, and each individual life was short. Using one's limited time in this world on trial and error was inefficient. Standing on the shoulders of the giants who came before you was much more productive.

But depending on the wisdom of one's forerunners presented one clear problem. Could one truly find the right teacher to instruct them? If training was like mountain climbing, then a teacher was a guide. And if a pupil believed that guide would lead them to the summit, they could choose to become their apprentice.

And yet the question was always whether that teacher truly knew the way. Sadly, as these things often went, there were more teachers who were liars and frauds than there were true masters. An encounter with a true teacher was rare and precious.

Thankfully, Zheng was one of the precious few graced with such luck.

Learning under his tutelage is one of the few blessings this world has granted me...

Zheng smiled softly even as the sweat pouring from his face muddled his vision. He'd been summoned to a world akin to the dark ages, only to be subjected to a hell-like existence, sent onto the battlefield as a slave.

For a time, he'd lived in self-abandonment. He had drowned himself in alcohol, forced himself on women, and lived his days straddling the line between life and death. It was all escapism, though, an attempt to avert his gaze from a life where each day preceded an uncertain tomorrow.

But looking back on it now, coming to this world did bring some good into his life. For the several decades he had lived, he could say that some of his finest

days—the crowning jewel of his life, even—were spent in this world.

Nothing could be more impressive than a true master of the arts—or perhaps, a truly skilled warrior. Indeed, when Zheng lived in China, he'd seen a few martial artists of pedigree that called themselves masters of the martial arts. They were talented in their own ways, certainly, but not one of them felt like someone he couldn't slay. He'd been part of the People's Liberation Army's special forces and had the blood of countless many on his hands. To him, those martial artists were weaklings who lived nestled in a cocoon of sugar-coated safety.

True, in terms of mastery, they were without a doubt his superiors at the time. But most of them didn't learn martial arts for the sake of killing. Self-defense training didn't anticipate real combat. To some of them, this was only a profession to earn their daily bread. Only the more sophisticated might have learned it out of respect and adherence to the cultural importance of the arts. But most of them echoed slogans that had become accepted among the general public—maintaining one's health, relieving stress, furthering one's knowledge, *etc.* When Zheng had left mainland China for Hong Kong, someone even asked him if he, too, was aiming to become a kung fu movie star.

Was that the essence of martial arts? Zheng doubted it.

Be that as it may, Zheng knew better than to reject these reasons altogether. Some of those very same people might well have achieved true mastery. But in his eyes, they only learned the surface aspects of the art without trying to understand the essence of it. That was something he strongly rejected, and thus the slogans that promoted martial arts as a means to an unrelated end greatly disturbed him.

This feeling was not entirely misplaced. After being summoned to this world, Zheng witnessed the same such martial artists meeting gruesome ends. He'd seen world-famous mixed martial artists and boxers die unceremonious deaths. These were by no means weak people either. They were athletes in every sense of the word. But strength in the realm of sports was not what one would need to survive in this world. It was these experiences that taught Zheng why the heart was the first of the three qualities a warrior must possess.

Except, in this case, that heart must be capable of unflinchingly taking the life of another...

Liu Daijin knew what that heart meant. He knew the essence of martial arts. And studying under him was the greatest fortune Zheng had ever known. Any weapon, no matter how strong, was powerless, meaningless, if it wasn't put to use when push came to shove.

All right...

Convinced that his training had yielded its results, Zheng took a deep breath and undid his posture. He reached for a towel resting on the gazebo handrail to wipe the sweat off his body.

Now to practice some forms...

Just as that thought crossed his mind, Zheng sensed a fleeting gaze on him. His hands stopped. He focused his senses on his dark surroundings, adjusting his body so no one would notice he was looking around. But that momentary gaze was gone without a trace.

Did I imagine it? No...

Realistically speaking, the most likely possibility was that it was a figment of Zheng's imagination. Everyone working in Liu Daijin's estate knew he would be here at this hour, practicing his martial arts. They also knew that martial artists abhorred showing their techniques to others. The only time one could approach him during his training would be a state of emergency, like the one a few days ago, where they suspected they were under attack from another group. But if it was an emergency, a messenger wouldn't bother obfuscating their presence.

Which leaves...

The most probable option, then, was that an assailant was trying to make an attempt on Liu Daijin's life.

The Organization was greater in scope than any country, functioning similarly to an intergovernmental organization. It even had its own military. After all, in this world, violence resolved most issues. The rule of the law was limited to the cities and their surroundings. Most of the land was overrun with monsters, bandits, and thieves. It was similar to the lawlessness that had plagued the

American frontier, except this world's technological achievements were far below that of America at the time. As such, the Organization had to take up arms if it was to protect its authority and assets.

That wasn't the only reason the Organization had its own armed forces, however. While the stated reason was self-defense, they still boasted the strongest and largest military in the western continent. In fact, even compared to the O'ltormea Empire, the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, and the Holy Qwiltantia Empire—the three strongest powers on the continent—the Organization would still come out on top. And of course, they had the economic prowess to maintain that army.

But this strength and size only meant the Organization had more enemies to contend with. Many of them were bandits, thieves, and smugglers dealing with forbidden contraband. Criminals like them were common everywhere. However, some of those enemies were people with power and money, people who controlled well-known and influential firms. Their antagonism was proof that in this world, even the common man had to be familiar with using violence. Of course, most of them weren't even remotely a threat to the Organization. Indeed, their greatest opponent was a religious group called the Church of Meneos.

The problem was that by its very nature, the Organization couldn't operate openly in society. In fact, it couldn't even operate openly in the underworld. Its existence was a guarded secret. It approached its activities with secrecy no matter who or what it dealt with. That was how the Organization managed to extend across the continent, becoming as large as it had.

On the surface, all one could see was a large number of unconnected firms and mercenary groups. But the Organization kept its strength hidden from the masses. If the royalty and nobility were to learn of its existence, they would act to stop it. They might even form a union that exceeded the borders of any one country to fight against it.

The fact that the Organization masked its existence and hid its true strength was why even small crime organizations were willing to oppose it. They were ignorant. And only at the very last moment, when their groups were purged to the last of their members, would these petty criminals realize the enemy whose

wrath they had incurred.

Is that...?

Zheng silently steadied his breathing and focused his nerves. He tried to sense what lay hidden in the darkness. The gaze he'd felt was gone; that much was certain.

Either I imagined it... or perhaps it's someone skilled enough to completely cloak their presence...

Zheng's blood boiled with anticipation. It was ten days ago that several dozen enemies attacked this estate. The assailants were after Liu Daijin's life.

Liu held tremendous influence over the southern parts of Lentencia, a major port town in the Holy Qwiltantia Empire. But despite the importance of their target, the enemy's assassins were mere thugs. They were Level 2, perhaps Level 3, based on the guild's ranking. Most adventurers and mercenaries would see them as beginners who had only just graduated from being amateurs.

This meant their fighting style was mostly self-taught, and in the worst way possible. Most people in this world felt experience on the battlefield was more valuable than learning the art of combat from a teacher. This was perhaps unavoidable given the cutthroat nature of this world. Yet most of these people only used the physical strength afforded to them by martial thaumaturgy, thinking that alone put them above and beyond those who couldn't wield that power. But that meant nothing in terms of true combat.

In that regard, the attackers from the raid ten days ago were pathetically weak. In fact, most of them were dispatched by the estate's security force. Zheng only disposed of three of them, and that only happened because the security forces made the attackers panic and desperately charge into the estate, where they ran into Zheng.

To Zheng, killing invaders was like slaughtering livestock. But this time, things seemed different.

There it is again. Are they appraising me?

He could faintly feel that gaze, more gentle than a feather brushing against his skin. He definitely sensed someone within the grove stretching ahead of him.

Fascinating.

Zheng's usual cool-headed attitude slipped away, revealing the expression of a bloodthirsty demon. The next moment, he sprung forward and sprinted into the grove.

Where? Where is he?!

He only had a general idea of where his opponent was, but he knew they were there.

The gaze followed Zheng as he advanced through the grove, but it wasn't as faint as before. It was now a cold, sharp blade filled with bloodlust. Whoever it was, they gave up on trying to mask their presence.

I see. So you're raring to go too.

Given how they erased their presence earlier and only now revealed their bloodlust, Zheng could tell this was someone with an extremely rare level of skill, even by this world's standards. And therein lay the meaning in fighting him.

Zheng awakened the prana in his body, triggering the Vishuddi chakra in his throat. Of the seven chakras within the human body, the Vishuddi chakra was the fifth one and one of the highest. A very limited number of people in this world were capable of activating it, and those who could among the many kingdoms were those who had reached the rank of general or above.

Zheng wasn't one of the amateurs who relied on martial thaumaturgy to win battles. He was already as deadly as a dragon, which the guild ranked as the most dangerous of all monsters. He sprinted through the grove, zipping between the trees. The estate's lights didn't reach this area, so his surroundings were totally dark. Zheng's footwork, however, was confident and flawless. He had honed his night vision through years on the battlefield; the faint starlight was enough for him to see.

Found you!

Noticing a figure advancing about ten meters ahead of him, Zheng sped up. Of course, as good as his eyes were at seeing through the dark, he couldn't see as clearly as he would with, say, a pair of night vision goggles. He'd only seen what

looked like a human figure moving. But the only people there were Zheng and the mysterious assailant. Seeing that much was enough.

Without uttering so much as a word of warning, Zheng unleashed a blow with all the might his body could muster—an intense, powerful fist that had claimed the lives of countless opponents so far. The severity of his strike, reinforced by martial thaumaturgy and strengthened by accumulated training, was far greater than the size of his body might suggest. It could easily shatter a boulder to bits.

Eat this!

Zheng stomped down on the earth hard, and the recoil of that movement traveled up from his legs to his waist in a spiral-like motion. The force transmitted from his shoulder to his right fist and then slammed into the figure!

Zheng felt strength surge from his blood vessels, but he didn’t feel his fist hit its mark. The figure held up their palm in Zheng’s direction, softly catching his punch as if stopping a leaf fluttering in the wind.



They didn’t dodge the attack. The figure had caught Zheng’s fist head-on. It was akin to catching an egg without breaking it. Zheng realized just how impressive this feat was.

It can’t be. Was that Haujin?

The name of a certain martial arts technique surfaced in his mind. It was a defensive technique central to certain schools, such as the Tai Chi Chuan. It relied not on canceling out the attack with sheer force but on using a rotation or draining of force to stop or divert the blow.

The technique in and of itself wasn’t all that unusual. Tai Chi Chuan practiced it often, and other types of martial arts employed it as well. Even Japanese Aikido employed techniques similar to it. Despite not knowing of Haujin, many martial arts developed methods of avoiding attacks that were essentially identical to it.

But none of those martial arts would have been able to use Haujin to block a blow reinforced by martial thaumaturgy.

The principle behind it was simple: the attack was simply too powerful to reliably stop. For instance, a human being couldn’t hope to block a flying bullet with their bare hands. At most, a person could hope to dodge the shot successfully.

But that had nothing to do with martial arts. This wasn’t a gun’s bullet. It was Zheng’s fist, which was unleashed with more force and speed than any bullet. Even martial thaumaturgy wouldn’t be enough to divert this attack and remain unharmed. No, it would require a master-level technique. And this level of mastery wasn’t something Zheng could expect out of anyone in a world where strengthening one’s body through thaumaturgy to win battles was seen as the norm.

Faced with this unforeseen outcome, Zheng’s body froze with shock.

“I see. An impressive blow,” said a familiar voice.

At that moment, Zheng realized everything.

So that’s what’s going on...

Zheng knew the owner of this voice. He knew his name, a name lauded within the Organization as a hero. He'd first spoken to him a few days ago. This man served the Organization during its early days and was a sworn friend to Zheng's master, Liu Daijin. Liu had ordered that this man be treated as a guest of the highest honor.

Because of this, Zheng couldn't speak to him disrespectfully. Still, he was in charge of this estate's security, and there was something he had to say, no matter who he was speaking to.

"I apologize if this comes across as disrespectful, but as the one in charge of this estate, I find these games of yours to be quite bothersome, Master Koichiro."

Zheng bowed his head as the old man before him twirled his mustache with an amused smirk.

Chapter 1: Akimitsu Kuze

“I’m not sure if you will find it to your taste, but...”

Zheng and Koichiro had returned to the garden’s gazebo. Zheng picked up a thermos prepared especially for him and poured some tea into a cup. As steam rose from the cup, the distinct scent of mint filled the air. One of the maids cultivated mint leaves in the estate’s garden and used them to make this tea. It was mixed with honey, granting the tea a soft, natural sweetness that refreshed the heart.

Zheng always enjoyed a cup of this tea after a training session. Since the leaves were cultivated by one person, it wasn’t available in great amounts, but it was of fine quality. And yet perhaps it was a bit too plain for Liu Daijin’s guest of honor. Its quality was respectable, but it was still raised and brewed by the hands of an amateur.

Koichiro, however, didn’t seem to be concerned one bit by this. He took a pleasant sip of the tea and said, “I appreciate your concern, but I don’t mind. Tea of this quality is delicious in its own way.”

Koichiro had a fondness for unusual blends. He was especially weak to home-made brews like this one. He personally preferred Japanese tea with his Japanese sweets and black tea or coffee with his cakes, but this unfamiliar flavor was one he found quite interesting.

Herbal tea was only the tip of Koichiro’s unusual pursuits. He’d enjoyed sampling beverages the Japanese hardly ever tried, like the South American maté tea and the African rooibos tea. The same held true for his taste in alcohol. He had tried rare Japanese sake, as well as an assortment of rum, brandy, and liqueur.

By nature, Koichiro tended to adhere to very particular preferences, but he also knew not to limit his interests and seek out the homogenous. Of course, most of those drinks he’d only tried a sip of and then placed them back on his shelf, where they would gather dust for years. But overall, Koichiro was broad-

minded and unconstrained.

Zheng didn't know that, though, and as such was on tenterhooks. After all, hospitality depended on how much one could prepare beforehand.

Maybe I should've taken him back to the estate regardless...?

Zheng couldn't help but feel anxious. It wasn't that the gazebo was unfit for entertaining a guest; it was part of Liu Daijin's garden and was cleaned every day. The problem wasn't with the place but with Zheng himself. He was dripping with sweat, and while he'd wiped himself off with a towel, his clothes still clung his skin.

Thanks to his physical disposition, Zheng knew his body odor wasn't too strong, but self-appraisal wasn't enough to put him at ease in this particular instance. He wasn't in a state to be entertaining an honored guest. When Koichiro told Zheng he had something to tell him, he ought to have proposed that they return to the estate. But Koichiro said he just wanted to have a short talk at the gazebo, and given their positions, Zheng couldn't refuse a request from Liu Daijin's guest.

Still, I've heard of his prowess before, but seeing it myself...

Zheng glanced in Koichiro's direction as he brought the teacup to his lips. Only a few minutes ago, the two of them were locked in a battle to the death. Zheng had delivered his punch with the intent of killing his opponent. Yet there wasn't so much as a hint of bloodlust or fatigue from the man composedly sipping tea before him. He was as tranquil as the surface of a lake.

Calm and serene, indeed...

Even if their child were to swing a fist at them, no parent would seriously fight back. The difference in strength between them was too great. The power balance between Koichiro and Zheng was very much the same.

I suppose I'm no match for him. Not until I become an ascendent.

An ascendent. That was the name for those who had reached Level 7 in the guild—those who had opened the Sahasrara chakra, the seventh chakra located at the top of the head. In Yoga, those who unlocked this chakra were considered saints, men who had awakened to the light.

In this world, however, chakras were related to the flow of prana within the body. Though the idea may have been similar, it was fundamentally different from Rearth's interpretation. If nothing else, it had no relation to any religious practice. Still, the fact remained that breathing techniques and Yoga were effective methods for controlling the prana one absorbed.

Either way, there was no doubt that those who gained the title of ascendent were considered to be the most powerful humans alive. As proof, no person affiliated with the continent's assorted countries had achieved that title.

At least, that was what the Organization knew. And the Organization could gain information on any person, be they lowly peasant or sovereign king. Zheng trusted this intelligence. If any rumor of someone achieving Level 7 began spreading through the taverns, the Organization would spare no expense to confirm its authenticity.

After all, the Organization was made up of people from Rearth, people extremely efficient at absorbing prana. Even among them, only three of the elders—Liu Daijin being one of them—had become ascendents.

There was also the Organization's greatest enemy, the Church of Meneos. While the Organization didn't know the full scope of their forces and could only estimate how vast their ranks were, they most likely had only one or two ascendents in their ranks.

An ascendent was a truly powerful presence in this world, standing as strong and mighty as the greatest and most menacing of monsters. They were still human, of course. They would bleed when wounded, and they could die from hemorrhaging if not treated. They boasted greater physical strength and stamina than any ordinary human, but if the thread of their life were to be cut, they would die like anyone else.

But if they knew how to protect themselves, a single ascendent could match an entire country's army. The phrase "one-man army" didn't do justice to their power. Perhaps they couldn't kill every soldier in an army of ten thousand, but they could certainly scatter it. To that end, ascendents held the key to the military balance in this continent.

Zheng had assumed Koichiro Mikoshiba was an ascendent too. He was both

right and wrong at the same time.

Naturally... He's an ascendent, and at the same time, he's one of the precious few who have gone even beyond that. He's at the level only a mere handful of this world's most celebrated heroes have reached. A transcendent.

If an ascendent stood at the peak of human potential, a transcendent—as the name implied—went beyond human capability. Calling them gods was perhaps an exaggeration, but they were undoubtedly superhuman.

Just as that thought crossed Zheng's mind, Koichiro finished his tea and finally parted his lips to speak.

"It seems you're misunderstanding something, so let me say this. The attack you launched against me back there was a spectacular blow. You focused your strength well and transmitted the force smoothly. As a martial artist, you are already more than just an expert."

As he spoke, Koichiro regarded Zheng with his right eye closed. It wasn't often that Koichiro praised someone so openly. He was a harsh appraiser when it came to martial arts. Had his grandson Ryoma been present, he probably would've been rendered speechless, wondering if Koichiro had been struck with some kind of fever.

Zheng, however, simply forced a smile and shook his head. "But you blocked it all too easily..." he muttered, his voice heavy with disappointment and regret.

Zheng had trained under Liu Daijin in Bajiquan. Bajiquan was a school praised for its powerful punching techniques, and it was known for peerless strength when it came to close combat. Zheng saw himself as a successor to the same school practiced by Li Shuwen, the famous martial artist known as the God Spear.

Born in China during the final years of the Qing Dynasty, Li Shuwen was a master of Bajiquan who had carved his name into history and gained particular glory. Devoting his days to training, he decided to focus his efforts. Rather than mastering many techniques, he polished a single technique to the point of deadly precision.

One story told of how he deemed his master's spear techniques to be

pretentious and meaningless, nearly leading to his excommunication. It had happened more than a century ago, but it was similar to a child protesting their parents' words. At that point in time, a martial arts master was very much seen as a parent. It took a great deal of faith and resolve to contradict one's master.

Because of his singular focus, many stories of Li Shuwen's feats concentrated on how he slew other martial artists with a single punch—a blow that needed no second strike. He was an ambitious master martial artist who had devoted his life to developing that single blow.

It was only natural that Zheng would be so discouraged. He had used what was essentially the same blow, and it had been blocked all too easily. Even a transcendent couldn't escape such a strike unharmed.

Seeing this, however, Koichiro simply laughed, his voice echoing loudly around the gazebo.

"Why are you laughing?"

The words slipped from Zheng's lips, his voice as low and thick as steel. His fists shook and anger surged up from the pit of his stomach like raging magma. He had to actively suppress his emotions so they wouldn't reveal themselves openly. Even if this was an honored guest, Zheng couldn't let this insult stand. Had he not felt any anger at Koichiro's behavior here, he might as well have given up on his life as a martial artist and retired to the countryside.

Zheng glared indignantly at Koichiro. Koichiro simply laughed again.

After chucking for a few seconds, Koichiro bowed his head to Zheng. "My apologies. I didn't mean to insult you. Your reaction was just so similar to Zhong Jian's, and I found it too amusing."

"Similar to Liu Daijin?"

"Yes. Much like a parent and child, a teacher and apprentice seem to be quite alike."

Koichiro narrowed his eyes, as if thinking back fondly on some old memory. The days of his youth, which he had spent alongside Liu Zhong Jian, surfaced in his mind.

“You’re already quite strong, Zheng,” Koichiro suddenly said. “That’s not surprising since you’re the star pupil Zhong Jian entrusted with his teachings. I can see how you serve as the leader of the Organization’s Hunting Dogs.”

Koichiro looked at Zheng, his eyes crinkling. It gave him joy to see his sworn friend’s student mature into such a skilled martial artist. It was clear that the seed Liu had planted had budded and was maturing to full bloom.

“Still, there is room for improvement,” Koichiro said.

Zheng eyed him curiously. “Improvement, you say?”

“Your grasp of the basics, from your muscle strength to the transmission of force in your limbs is solid. Your body is developed well enough. And most importantly, you’re unusually talented in controlling how your martial thaumaturgy enhances your body. No one could take that punch and walk away from it.”

Koichiro picked up his cup and directed a sharp look at Zheng. He wasn’t lying. If nothing else, had that punch hit Koichiro directly, it definitely would have killed him. In terms of sheer mastery of the martial arts, Zheng’s attack was flawless. The problem, though, lay in its practicality in true combat. No matter how powerful a blow might be, it meant nothing if it couldn’t hit the target.

“But you were so fixated on the blow’s strength, you stopped at the first level of Xing Yi Quan. Those who do that typically tend to rely on a single powerful hit to beat their opponent down. On top of that, they tend to assume no one could ever block or evade their blows. As proof, the moment I blocked your attack, you froze in surprise. Though, I suppose I can’t blame you for thinking so. There’s hardly anyone in this world capable of blocking that punch of yours.”

Zheng wanted to curl up in shame. This was something Liu Daijin had told him, as well.

Force could be described as the relationship between the source of the attack’s kinetic energy—the fist in this case—and the surface it struck. For example, Chen-style Tai Ji Quan employed a technique known as silk-reeling. It focused on the body’s twisting movement to produce force. Xing Yi Quan, on the other hand, focused on the loss of gravity caused by exhaustion to produce force.

This might sound almost supernatural, but the kinetic energy produced by the muscles was called “force” by Chinese martial arts. It wasn’t a form of energy in and of itself but rather a method to regulate the flow and release of kinetic energy within one’s body. In other words, it was based on real physics and the laws of nature.

The first level of Xing Yi Quan focused on manifesting that force into a tangible form. It boosted the speed and impact of a blow, proportionate to the force behind it. The second level focused on the instantaneous gathering of the internal forces in the body—such as the heartbeat and breathing. It centered on acceleration based on the distance to the target.

The two levels were different in essence. The first momentarily boosted strength, making a blow sharper and heavier, while the second resulted in a duller but more unpredictable transmission of force. The fact that a blow’s speed was not influenced by its weight and strength allowed the user to confuse their opponent and catch them off guard. Chinese martial arts tended to focus on the first level over the second, but both had the same objective. So long as they could kill the opponent, both stages were equally valid.

Zheng has talent and plenty of combat experience. But that’s why he focuses on strength. Hopefully today will make him as cautious as he once was, when he was still a helpless apprentice.

Zheng’s greatest flaw was that he lacked equals to contend with. Being unrivaled was a wonderful thing in and of itself, but it could make one overconfident. Once such haughtiness overtook a person, it was difficult to fix that behavior. At worst, this conceit could lead Zheng to altogether forget the possibility that an unexpected opponent might snuff out his life in combat.

That said, people often ignored those kinds of warnings. Based on the personality of the person in question and how they worded it, it might even invite backlash. One only ever understood the importance of knowledge and technique through necessity.

A person pressured by their parents and teachers performed differently compared to when they voluntarily did so to enter a certain university or career. That wasn’t to say Zheng didn’t understand what Liu had taught him.

But he was so fixated on achieving a blow that needed no second strike that all he thought of was strength.

He wasn't altogether wrong, though. A blow that could instantly kill any opponent was the most efficient weapon imaginable. But now he was faced with an opponent he could not fell with that strike. It was a wall he'd have to overcome as a martial artist.

Liu Daijin had asked Koichiro to serve as that wall for Zheng.

"Perhaps you should reconsider your form. I'm sure you'll find the way if you do."

Koichiro's words triggered something in Zheng and he realized everything.

Could it be...?

"Did Liu send you?"

Koichiro scratched his chin awkwardly. "Let us simply say you are graced with a good teacher, Zheng."

Zheng felt something warm build up behind his eyes. At first he thought Koichiro was using his superior strength to toy with him, but as it turned out, that wasn't his intent. Zheng's vision clouded over and his shoulders started to shake. He wiped his face with his sleeve, fell to his knees, and banged his forehead against the flagstones.

He understood Liu Daijin's intentions now.

Seeing this, Koichiro nodded profoundly. *He should be fine from here on out. Now, it's time to advance my own business here...*

Having done what Liu Daijin asked him to do, Koichiro returned to his own objectives.

"Now, if it's all right, I would like to return to the main topic. Would you mind if we had a little chat?"

"A chat?" Zheng asked curiously, rising to his feet.

"Mm." Koichiro nodded. "I accepted Liu's request because I wanted to help my sworn friend's student, but I also had my own reasons to speak with you."

Seeing Koichiro's expression turn grim, Zheng felt his own features harden. "Well..." he muttered, seemingly at a loss for words.

"My apologies," Koichiro said, noticing the look on Zheng's face. "Zhong Jian has told me a little already, but there were a few things he wouldn't expand on. So in the interest of objectivity, I thought I would ask your opinion, as his future successor."

"I see," Zheng responded, his eyes narrowing like blades. "That kind of chat. However..."

Aside from being Liu Daijin's student and aide, Zheng Motoku wore another hat—that of his successor within the Organization. In other words, he was set to be one of the twelve bosses of the Organization that spanned the entire continent. The only ones who knew of it at this time, however, were Liu and Zheng. On the surface, Zheng served as Liu's bodyguard and assistant due to his advanced age.

The biggest reason they maintained this facade was because they dreaded antagonism within the Organization. Since they were all equally victims forcibly called to this world, they didn't want to consider this a possibility. But there were factions within the Organization, and a leader of one of those factions could be marked for assassination.

"Understood. Ask anything of me. But..." Zheng trailed off.

"I understand your position," Koichiro said, nodding. "I might have been part of the Organization once, but for half a century I was considered dead. You can't disclose your secrets to me. If I ask a question you can't answer, simply say so and I won't pursue it any further."

Koichiro was once a high-ranking member, but an absence of fifty years was simply too long. They could accept him into the Organization again, that much was for sure, but they wouldn't immediately reinstate him as one of the highest-ranking members.

Of course, with his achievements and past glory and his position as an honored guest of Liu's, Koichiro could probably force Zheng to answer. Doing so would likely force Zheng into a compromising position, though. As such, it was absolutely necessary that Koichiro made this statement.

“I appreciate that you’re so forthcoming with regards to this,” Zheng said, bowing his head.

Nodding, Koichiro began speaking of something that had bothered him during his exchange with Liu the other day.

“I felt something was off during my conversation with Zhong Jian. From the sound of things, the Organization is still divided.”

Zheng scowled. Koichiro’s first question was already one he was uncomfortable answering. But he realized there wasn’t much point in hiding things now.

“Yes. I hate to admit it, but...” Zheng said, his tone thick with shame and displeasure. It was as if an elder and senior of his was blaming him for his own personal inadequacy and incompetency.

Koichiro, however, simply shook his head slowly. “No. Even in my time, the Organization wasn’t unified. And given how much larger it is now, it must be that much harder to remain united.”

The Organization was formed to secure the well-being and rights of those summoned from Rearth. It was like a benefit society for otherworlders. But the more otherworlders joined the Organization, the harder it became for it to remain unified.

After all, the world from which they originated had 196 countries with a population of 7.3 billion people, though the exact number was uncertain as not all countries accurately managed their census. Those summoned to this world were chosen at random from that unfathomable number. Clearly, there would be differences of race, even if they were all united under the title of “otherworlders.”

There were caucasian otherworlders. Otherworlders that were people of color. Asian otherworlders. Arabic otherworlders. External appearance alone divided them into groups. Add to that factors like facial features, build, hair color... Appearance alone created several dozen groups already.

Dividing them by country separated them into almost two hundred groups, and every country differed in economic status, public order, and religion.

Environment would also play a role. Some countries were more developed than others, and some people were born to more affluent households. Some grew up and studied abroad. Meanwhile, others came from the opposite position altogether.

This heterogeneous class of people called otherworlders were all gathered under the framework called the Organization. Their ways of thinking naturally differed. They led different lives and experienced different things. And this created a great problem for those who led the Organization...

“Based on what Zhong Jian told me, the Organization has divided into a radical and a moderate faction?” Koichiro asked.

Zheng nodded silently.

There were currently three groups prevalent in the Organization. One group believed that the Organization ought to assertively interfere in this world’s strife and increase the group’s influence over the continent. They were considered the radicals. In their eyes, the Organization needed to reform this world to suit the otherworlders’ needs. The moderates, in contrast, believed the Organization should keep its interference with the continent’s wars to a minimum and seek peace and coexistence while maintaining the status quo. The third group were those who adhered to neither of those approaches.

In all honesty, no one could tell which of the three had the right answer. Not even Liu Daijin, leader of the moderate faction, could answer that question. A radical reform would do nothing but create opposition, which would cost the lives of many. But if the situation didn’t change soon, the warped nature of this world would plunge more innocents into this hellish environment. A quick, radical reform or a slow approach of reconciliation—only in hindsight would one be able to say which of the two was best. The problem was that even the twelve elders of the Organization were split in their opinions on the matter.

“I see... Assertively changing the social structure of this world. I suppose that would be the conclusion one comes to if they cannot return to our world...” Koichiro said pensively.

To someone from their world, this Earth was essentially hell. The social structure was simply too different—in a bad way. One could almost call it *too*

archaic. Someone from a feudal time period might have been able to adapt, but a person from a more modern society would struggle to do so.

Even accounting for how countries developed differently, this was true of almost all otherworlders, especially now in the twenty-first century. Most countries upheld ideals of freedom and equality, where human rights were at the forefront. But when faced with the reality that they couldn't go back home, the otherworlders would have to adapt to this world. They had little choice but to do so.

"I believe it was the radicals that helped with founding the O'ltormea Empire, yes?" Koichiro asked.

"Correct," Zheng replied. "We've lent them all the aid we could as an organization, but the radicals still hold the initiative. Even now they have a great deal of influence over the higher echelons in O'ltormea."

"My only memories of O'ltormea are of a small country in the center of the continent that repeatedly begged for assistance against invasions... No one saw them as important at the time."

Zheng nodded. Anyone who knew of O'ltormea's situation at the time would be shocked at how much it's grown.

"It's expanded to the point where it's considered one of this continent's big three. The radicals must have invested a great deal into helping them," Koichiro said, scoffing.

The O'ltormea Empire's predecessor, the old Kingdom of O'ltormea, was weak to the point of ridicule. It had little territory and no exports of note. Its only industries were the standard ones—farming crops, raising livestock, and mining a handful of iron mines. They had just enough to be self-sufficient, but nothing more than that. With no commodities to sell to other countries, they would lack the funds to import necessary supplies should a drought or natural disaster occur. Their national power was diminutive.

The only thing going for them, as it were, was that they were a mountainous kingdom with little economic prowess; they didn't need to dread invasions from their neighbors. To the surrounding countries, the kingdom would take some effort to topple but would yield little return. There were other, more lucrative

countries to prey upon.

But as poor as the country was, its ruling class still sought prosperity and pleasure. The nobles used their authority to rule as they pleased. And not only did the royals do nothing to stop them, they even egged them on so they would maintain hold over the throne.

All of this changed after Koichiro's disappearance, when the old Kingdom of O'ltormea invaded and occupied its neighbor, the Kingdom of Tenne. Like a disease that rapidly ravaged an unprepared patient, the Kingdom of O'ltormea spread through the center of the continent, expanding its borders.

The question of how Lionel Eisenheit—then only the third prince of the kingdom—won the war with the Kingdom of Tenne and began that rapid expansion was one of the greatest mysteries in the western continent's history. The truth behind it, however, was painfully anti-climactic.

The old Kingdom of O'ltormea had an ally backing it, an ally powerful enough to ensure victory. A rather disappointing explanation for such a grand feat, perhaps. But the Kingdom of O'ltormea was in a grave situation. It was like a jug with a hole, and the Organization continually fed it water—just enough to remain full.

Still, though the Organization at that time might have possessed vast financial prowess, its coffers weren't limitless. It was clear the Organization's leaders acted with a great deal of resolve and courage. Weakened by its faction disputes, the Organization as a whole attempted to recover its strength. And so they made a desperate gamble on an unlikely horse.

That's what Zhong Jian told me, at least...

Prior to the counter-summoning ritual's failure, the Organization was divided into two factions. The homecoming faction actively strove to use the ritual to return home despite fully realizing its flaws. Liu Daijin, by contrast, led the opposition faction. They were against the use of the counter-summoning ritual.

Those two factions were locked in a dispute. A military clash occurred when the homecoming faction tried to force the ritual's activation. Many of Koichiro and Liu's comrades fought against one another, each in the name of the justice they upheld. And it all ended in tragedy for Koichiro Mikoshiba and his

subordinates.

As a result, the homecoming faction sealed the counter-summoning ritual away and officially announced that its use was to be strictly forbidden. In other words, they gave up on returning home. The opposition faction accepted this decision, and so the schism was mended.

Truth be told, neither faction had a choice. They had to reconcile. Given the state of affairs at the time, any further infighting would have caused the Organization to fall apart. Some in the opposition faction did call for the execution of members of the homecoming faction, to set an example, but most of the opposition faction sympathized with the homecoming faction's motives. They were all equally victims, summoned to this world against their will. Of course they wished to return home.

However, at the same time, the counter-summoning ritual incident left the Organization with a bleeding wound, and so the call for execution was seriously considered. But even within the opposition faction, some asked that the homecoming faction be pardoned. Some requested it out of empathy; others feared that losing so many members would weaken the Organization further. Most importantly, they all feared the Church of Meneos's presence.

After much debate, Liu Zhong Jian and his opposition faction chose to reconcile with the homecoming faction, electing to rebuild the Organization—not knowing that this outcome would only spark more conflict.

Koichiro sighed. *It wasn't their best decision... They should have at least ensured that someone was in place to keep an eye on the other faction or to prepare a chance for both factions to exchange opinions.*

Liu Daijin—that was how Liu Zhong Jian came to be known. The title of Daijin meant "The Great and Wise." His tolerant, merciful nature, as well as his ability to lead the Organization for as long as he did, earned him this title.

However, that same tolerance could be exploited. He had a tendency to believe in the good in people. This wasn't a flaw in and of itself; if nothing else, a tolerant man was preferable to one who would only suspect and doubt others' intentions. But Liu was in charge of the Organization. He guided and commanded people.

When Koichiro was by his side, that wasn't a problem. He could always cover and compensate for what his friend lacked. But with Koichiro gone to the other side of the dimensional interstice, there was no one who realized Liu Daijin's flaws and could cover for them like he did. That gap led to the current divide between the moderate and radical factions.

"And? Who leads the radical faction now?" Koichiro asked, voicing his greatest doubt. This was something Liu Daijin would not tell him no matter how many times he asked.

Still, his face told the whole story, Koichiro thought*,* remembering the bitter, agonized expression on his old friend's face.

In truth, he didn't want to dishonor Liu's will by asking that question. But given his situation, he had to confirm what was going on.

"His name is Kuze..." Zheng said gravely. "Master Akimitsu Kuze."

Koichiro closed his eyes. It was as he'd suspected. He realized why Liu refused to speak of it.

It really is him...

All the pieces clicked into place.

Koichiro nodded. "I should have assumed he'd survived."

Akimitsu Kuze was once a friend of Koichiro—even closer than Liu Zhong Jian. They were close in age, they were both Japanese, and they both came from a family of traditional martial artists. Both were summoned at roughly the same time and entered into the Organization's protection by similar circumstances. Of course, Koichiro had many friends in his past. Kuze and Liu were only two of his old companions, and Koichiro would lay down his life for any of them. But if he had to choose just one of them, he wouldn't hesitate to choose Akimitsu Kuze.

Koichiro had fought many battles in his past, and Kuze was at his side for all of them. During the early days of the Organization, Koichiro was considered the spear that felled many of the Organization's foes, but he was always accompanied by Akimitsu Kuze—the shield of the Organization—who fought as his companion.

No, not a shield. He was a dagger, laced with poison.

Either way, the fact remained that Kuze had brought the Organization more spoils of war than any other member.

But their close friendship met with a critical break one day—the day Koichiro found himself thrown back into his home world, in the midst of a battle surrounding the use of the counter-summoning spell developed by the genius researcher Adelina Berezhnaya.

Akimitsu... You still can't forgive this world, can you...?

He could still remember the agony and hatred on Akimitsu Kuze's face. Out of all his comrades, Kuze was the one most adamant about returning home. Everyone in the Organization shared this objective, but in Kuze's case, his passion burned differently than the rest.

It wasn't simple hatred for this hellish world. Kuze had a clear, plain reason to return to Japan at all costs. He was the eldest son of wealthy parents who lived near the Kyoto prefecture. His father was stern but intellectual, and his mother was a devoted woman who supported his father at every turn. He also had a sister eight years his junior.

Since infancy, he had been instructed in the family's traditional martial arts. Though their training was taxing and severe, it was still an ideal household. But the more ideal something was, the more fragile it proved to be when the moment came for everything to shatter.

One day, a man went on a maddened frenzy under the influence of stimulant drugs, stabbing innocent pedestrians in broad daylight. Ten people died and seven were gravely injured in this gruesome incident. It went on to make headlines. Koichiro still remembered this crime, half a century later; the sheer cruelty left a vivid impression on him.

Kuze's parents were among those who died in that incident.

Kuze was a graduate student when he lost his parents in this shocking, terrible manner. Kuze lived with his sister, acting as her surrogate parent. The only silver lining was that their affluent status meant they could live together in relative financial stability.

But even without monetary problems, their lives were not peaceful. Their relatives sought to claim the fortune left by Kuze's parents. Distant relatives they only saw once a year suddenly began pestering them to no end. Having been a graduate student at the time, Kuze was old enough to understand the ways of the world. He was only a literature student, but he knew enough to rely on his acquaintances to hire a lawyer.

That was only a temporary solution, though. His greedy relatives weren't going to disappear. With Kuze gone, they would once again swarm around his sister, Akie, to snatch the inheritance from her like vultures. Kuze wasn't sure she'd have the power to fight them off. Even if she did, he couldn't simply overlook the situation and leave her to overcome this alone. His brotherly affection wouldn't allow it.

But what enraged Kuze more than his relatives' heartless greed were the hyenas from the mass media. They would continually rub salt into the wounded hearts of the bereaved families. They would visit their home day and night, demanding interviews. When the media coverage was at its most intense, the vast grounds of the Kuze estate were so surrounded by reporters one couldn't enter or leave. Their neighbors looked on with gazes of pity mixed with curiosity, treating them like lepers. Switching on the television also chipped away at their patience. All they'd see was commentators analyzing the incident that claimed their parents' lives despite knowing nothing about the situation.

The part that shocked Koichiro most about Kuze's story was that the media caught wind of the Kuze family's traditional martial arts and some people went on to paint the incident as if his father was somehow to blame for not subduing the culprit. The media hosts did have enough semblance of dignity to rebuke those accusations, but once Kuze heard of this slander, he couldn't pretend like he hadn't.

In this day and age, the horrible damage media attention could inflict on a person had drawn the public's eye and was being more closely examined. But the information society of that time was not quite as modern. The only outlets were television and the newspaper. An individual circulating information freely on their own was a distant dream. There were no computers, no online message boards, and no social networks. A single hashtag couldn't spread

information across the globe like it can today. Unless other reporters decided to make a scoop out of the damage the media caused, it wasn't seen as a problem. And so the only thing Kuze could do at the time was protect his sister and wait for the storm to pass.

Sadly, his attempts resulted in the worst possible conclusion.

Akie's physical disposition never was favorable, and the emotional strain caused by the terrible treatment she and her brother received weakened her health considerably. By the time Kuze was summoned to this world, two years had passed since the incident. He'd entered his third year in graduate school, and Akie had been hospitalized for six months. With his sister in that state, Kuze stopped at nothing to return home.

Since he had been recruited into the Organization, Kuze spent every spare moment he had seeking a way back to their world. Many people claimed they wanted to return home, but they had already given up on it as an unachievable dream. Kuze was the only one who actively sought to return at all costs. So when Adelina Berezhnaya unveiled the fundamental theory behind the counter-summoning ritual, it was Kuze who introduced her to the Organization. He also backed her research more adamantly than any other.

That was why, even after Koichiro pointed out the risks and problems involved, Kuze didn't back down. He had to try. When the ritual failed and his wish scattered like dust in the wind, Kuze was left with only enmity and hatred for this world. The question that remained was where he would direct those negative emotions.

Koichiro had something he needed to tell Akimitsu Kuze, a duty he had to complete by virtue of being the sole member to return to Japan—even if he didn't do so intentionally.

"I must meet with Kuze, as soon as possible," Koichiro said. "Can that be arranged?"

"You wish to see Master Kuze?" Zheng asked him, taken aback.

Koichiro nodded gravely, but to his surprise, Zheng simply shook his head.

"Why not?" Koichiro asked. "The radical and moderate factions might be at

odds, but they're still part of the same Organization. Liu's name would surely be enough to arrange a meeting. You're free to use my name as well, if you need to."

"True, despite our disagreements, we're all still part of the Organization. There is a chance I could arrange for correspondence through letters. But asking for a direct meeting between you two might prove difficult..."

"Even if it's urgent?"

"Lord Kuze rarely goes out into the open."

"The elder who leads the radical faction of the Organization refuses to appear in the open?" Koichiro asked dubiously.

"Yes," Zheng said, nodding solemnly. "Perhaps he fears for his life, or maybe he's crippled by illness. I do not know. But whenever he gives orders to his subordinates, he has his aide, Kikukawa, act as his proxy."

"So he refuses to appear in public." Koichiro tilted his head. "That is curious. Mm, Kikukawa... Where have I heard that name before?"

Koichiro closed his eyes and plunged into his memories.

Kikukawa... Yes, I remember someone by that name. Shinya Kikukawa. But even if he's still alive, he wouldn't be working as Kuze's aide. Their ranking within the Organization wouldn't allow it, and their personalities simply don't match. Did something happen, or have their positions switched in the last fifty years?

Kikukawa served as one of the high-ranking members of the Organization at the time Koichiro, Liu, and Kuze served together. His strength as a warrior was guaranteed, and he was the most talented wielder of martial thaumaturgy in the Organization at the time. But Kikukawa was even older than Koichiro was. The Organization was a meritocracy and wasn't based on seniority, but it still didn't make sense that someone like Kikukawa would be reduced to serving as Kuze's aid.

He should be in the same position as Liu. No, even higher.

Koichiro usually prided himself on his memory. It hadn't faded in his old age,

but now it seemed to fail him. He couldn't be faulted for this, though. Back then, one's age didn't matter much. The only time they might mention their ages was to tell quaint stories in what few respites they had in a life of near-constant battle.

But even then, Kikukawa's age didn't matter when it came to this. He was older than Koichiro but certainly not too old to serve. He shouldn't be working as an aide to Kuze.

"Zheng, when you speak of Kikukawa, do you mean Shinya Kikukawa?"

The young man shook his head in denial. "My apologies, I should have clarified. Lord Shinya Kikukawa passed away twenty years ago. The one I spoke of is his son, Atsuya Kikukawa."

The moment he heard those words, Koichiro realized the true weight of the time that had passed since he'd returned home. He heaved a long, despondent sigh.

"Ah, so that's what this is all about..."

Half a century. Fifty years. Time long enough for one to bear children and for those children to bear offspring of their own. It was almost unnatural that this didn't immediately occur to Koichiro.

I was ready for this until I met him...

Meeting an old friend in Liu Zhong Jian made Koichiro forget this, but he knew beforehand that it was highly unlikely all his old friends still lived.

My reunion with him was so uplifting I forgot something that simple...

"So the headship of Kikukawa's family fell to his son?" Koichiro asked, resolving to move things along.

"He's currently in the capital of the O'ltormea Empire, officially working as president of a trade firm run by the guild. His real role, though, is to single-handedly consolidate all the information and intelligence gathered from across the empire."

Koichiro's right eyebrow twitched. That came as a surprise to him. "Ooh. So Kikukawa's son manages information," he said with a hint of bemusement.

The Shinya Kikukawa he remembered was one of the greatest warriors in the Organization. The word “belligerent” didn’t do him justice—he happily charged to the frontlines. Much like one of the *Water Margin*’s characters, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, he wielded dual axes in battle. He would rattle the battlefield with animalistic war cries as he tore through enemy lines. His visage as he fought was the very image of a rampaging demon.

Of course, Shinya Kikukawa wasn’t entirely like Li Kui. He was not careless enough to strangle children to death. In fact, he had the clarity and wisdom to serve as general in a few battles, and he led his men to glorious victory. He did complain that his fingers itched to grip his beloved axes, though. But when he was allowed to run wild, Shinya Kikukawa was like a shredding machine with a will of its own. Either way, his personality wasn’t suited for working behind the scenes and dealing with intelligence.

I suppose a child doesn’t have to take after their parents. Still, his son being a manager of intelligence...

It was often believed that a child’s physiology and character were based somewhat on their mother and father, but people proving to be the opposite of their parents wasn’t unheard of. Sometimes even one’s physical features were a far cry from their parents. Life acted in such mysterious ways.

“Which means he serves as an aide to one of the Organization’s bosses, much like yourself?” Koichiro asked Zheng.

That was a reasonable conclusion. Kuze had grown quite old. Even with martial thaumaturgy extending his lifespan beyond that of the common man, he would still realize his life would eventually come to an end. That was especially important since Kuze had such a key position in an organization that pulled the continent’s strings from the shadows. It stood to reason that he would prepare a successor, and Atsuya Kikukawa, who acted under his name, was the most likely candidate.

However, what Zheng said next only deepened Koichiro’s confusion.

“Yes. At least, outwardly he does...”

Zheng had worded it quite vaguely, and bewilderment showed in his eyes. Seeing Zheng’s expression, Koichiro pursued this line of questioning further.

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After finishing his late-night meeting with Zheng, Koichiro made his way back into Liu Daijin's mansion. He then stopped on a whim near Liu's bedroom and knocked on the door. It was just after six in the morning, and the sun was beginning to rise. It was an odd time to pay someone a visit, but despite this, Liu opened the door and greeted his friend graciously.

"I see. So Zheng told you that much."

Koichiro had summed up what he'd heard from Zheng.

Liu heaved a hefty sigh. "Allow me to apologize deeply, my friend. I should have told you all of this myself when you asked me last time. As a boss charged with the Organization's leadership, it was irresponsible of me. Do forgive me."

Liu rose from his chair and bowed his head to Koichiro. This was the greatest apology he could extend to another, both as Liu Daijin the leader and as Liu Zhong Jian the man. One could only imagine the regret and pain behind this gesture, but Koichiro simply scoffed.

"Don't be absurd. After all this time, you say that?"

"Koichiro?" Liu raised his head, staring at his old friend with bewilderment.

"I realize what you're apologizing about, and I can also understand why you found it so hard to tell me about it. But that much concern is wasted on me. When all is said and done, I'm nothing more than a relic of the past. If nothing else, since the day I disappeared from this world, I stopped being a member of the Organization and became an outsider."

Koichiro placed a friendly hand on Liu's shoulder.

"And you needn't apologize to an outsider, Zhong Jian. You made the choice you believed was right. Pardoning Kuze's lot and rebuilding the Organization was not a mistake. Cutting away the homecoming faction would have left the Organization in shambles, and I'm sure many from our side also looked at them with sympathy. Insisting on executing them would have broken the Organization. And even if it hadn't, it would have taken years longer for the Organization to recover."

Liu closed his eyes, his vision clouding over with tears. “Koichiro...” he whispered.

For fifty long years, Liu Daijin carried fear and regret in his heart. He always doubted if the choice he made then was the correct one, and that anxiety seemed to rear its ugly head at every turn.

In the fifty years Liu Zhong Jian served as boss, he worked tirelessly to rebuild and develop the Organization. But throughout his tenure, the frivolous question of what became of his sworn friend, who vanished into the dimensional interstice, tormented him.

As a boss, he shouldn’t have let that concern him so much. In fact, the bosses of the time repeatedly told Liu they wanted him to serve as Koichiro’s successor. Given Koichiro’s many accomplishments, it only made sense they’d want to fill the void he left. The sheer number of battlefields he’d conquered was great, but even more than that, Koichiro Mikoshiba had a certain quality that drew people to him. Had the homecoming faction not rampaged the way it did, Koichiro would have undoubtedly become one of the top leaders of the Organization.

“So, you said you wish to meet Kuze?” His eyes still slightly swollen, Liu wiped his face with a handkerchief and looked at Koichiro sitting opposite of him.

“Yes,” Koichiro said, nodding. “Is it really that difficult?”

“I won’t...say it’s impossible, but it can’t be arranged immediately.”

While the two of them differed in their factions, Liu and Kuze were both leaders of the same organization. Sending him a letter was possible, but it would have to go through the hands of multiple Organization members before it reached Kuze. What’s more, with Kuze becoming essentially a recluse who rarely went out in public, Liu didn’t know where he was hiding. Any attempt to contact him would take days, and that wouldn’t change even if he were to mention Koichiro in the letter. If anything, writing about Koichiro would likely make things lag more.

Koichiro was a man of the past for the Organization, a dead man. In modern society, it wasn’t impossible for a person to be registered as dead only to show up alive later. But to change one’s status from dead to living, one had to go

through rather tedious legal procedures with the authorities. This situation was much the same, except the questionable authenticity of Koichiro's survival would make things go even slower. At worst, it might be viewed as some kind of plot aimed against the radical faction, which would just lead to needless bloodshed.

It was perfectly understandable that they'd have a hard time believing that someone who vanished into the dimensional interstice simply returned fifty years later. Things were different with Liu, since the information reached him directly and he knew Koichiro personally. That was mostly a stroke of luck, though. Things wouldn't be that simple in Kuze's case.

"So the only certain time I could meet him would be the yearly general meeting?" Koichiro asked.

Liu nodded. "I'm afraid that's the case..."

The general meeting was a yearly meeting for the bosses of the Organization ruling over the western continent's shadows. All the bosses and high-ranking members were required to attend unless they had a justified reason—perhaps an ongoing war in their region or failing health that prevented travel. This was one day where even Kuze, who refused to show himself in public, would have to reveal himself. Liu had, in fact, spoken to Kuze during last year's general meeting. They'd even shared drinks.

"There's still some time before that happens, though..." Koichiro said, frowning.

"Yes. But fortunately enough, this year the meeting will be held near the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Right in time for your grandniece's extraction and a reunion with your grandson, I'd say."

At present, twelve elders called bosses led the Organization. The meeting's location alternated between each boss's territory.

"Then that's all the more convenient..." Koichiro said.

"Indeed," Liu agreed, nodding. "However, there are a few problematic points I need to discuss with you before you meet Kuze." He directed a sharp gaze at Koichiro. "Zheng told you, yes?"

Liu didn’t specify what he meant, but Koichiro realized at once.

“You mean that man. Akitake Sudou.”

Liu Daijin nodded gravely. “His ranking in the Organization isn’t very high. He’s a high executive, but on the surface he hasn’t gotten that far. There are too many concerning aspects to him, though. Especially when it comes to his treatment of your grandson...”

“Yes, Zheng told me. But there are a few things that still don’t quite make sense.”

Based on what Zheng had said, Akitake Sudou was an overall mysterious man. He ranked much lower than Kuze’s aide, Kikukawa, but his influence was vast. Because he was able to mobilize the execution unit, he effectively had more power than Kikukawa did. This was quite impressive since any sortie of the Organization’s prided execution unit, the Hunting Dogs, had to be reported directly to Kuze.

What’s more, Sudou drafted most of the radical faction’s ploys and strategies. And while the Organization was currently focusing on manipulating the O’ltormea Empire, Sudou was in charge of those operations, as well.

Despite all that, Sudou had shown no desire to take credit for any of those achievements. It didn’t seem he had any inclination to be promoted.

The most striking aspect of Sudou, however, was his treatment of Ryoma Mikoshiba. Ryoma first interfered with his plans soon after he was summoned, by slaying the O’ltormean court thaumaturgist Gaius Valkland and fleeing the country. That in and of itself should have caused a number of problems for Sudou, who was involved in commanding the O’ltormea Empire’s intelligence unit at the time. But soon after that, Ryoma unexpectedly interfered with the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s civil war. That forced Sudou to conclude his attempts to throw the country into chaos in an unsatisfactory manner. And most recently, during the invasion of the Kingdom of Xarooda, he led a small force across the mountainous border of Xarooda, toppling Fort Notis and forcing the O’ltormean invasion force to retreat.

With so many dashed plots, one would imagine Sudou would be beside himself with anger by now. But the report he delivered a few days ago betrayed

no hint of such emotion.

Maybe he knows my name?

There were a few plausible possibilities. The first was that Akitake Sudou knew of Koichiro, suspected Ryoma might be related to him based on their common yet distinctive last name, and treated him leniently as a result.

That was one possibility. Koichiro was a warrior who had served the Organization during its early days, his name passed down as a legend even now. But would Sudou really tolerate this many obstructions to his plans just because Ryoma might be related to a famed person, especially given that he'd never truly confirmed a connection between the two? Had he truly been interested in finding out, he could have asked Ryoma when he met him directly during the Rhoadserian civil war. But he didn't. Why?

This brought Koichiro to the second possibility. What if Sudou believed Ryoma's interventions were actually beneficial?

That struck Koichiro as unrealistic. The damages Ryoma caused weren't vast enough to influence the higher echelons of the Organization or its overall influence. But at the same time, they weren't so meaningless that one could simply sweep them under the rug. Ryoma's interventions meant Sudou had to vastly change his plans. Thankfully, he was there to revise things on the spot at just about every step of the way, but there was no telling how long he could keep doing that. In that situation, it would be plausible to think he'd move to eliminate the problematic factor. After all, Sudou had the authority to deploy the Hunting Dogs. It might have seemed like an overreaction to send them against one whelp, but Ryoma had impeded the Organization several times too many.

Liu Daijin might have looked upon Ryoma's feats with a hint of a smile, but it was difficult to defend him in the eyes of the Organization. Should the radical faction order his assassination, the only way to prevent it would be to recruit him, having him offset his incurred losses with his service.

Ryoma Mikoshiba had simply done too much.

In practice, however, things were different. Sudou's reports didn't draw Ryoma out to be that dangerous. It almost felt like he was trying to downplay

the threat Ryoma posed. It even seemed like some of the things Sudou did were actively supporting and egging Ryoma on.

There's only two reasons he'd do that. He's either confident the Organization would be able to manipulate him as a pawn, or he just wants to kick up more chaos in the continent. But I can't confirm which one it is...

If it was the former, that wasn't much of an issue. But if it was the latter, this would cause a great deal of problems for the Organization. Launching the continent into chaotic war would be a bad play for them to make.

"I might need to speak to this Sudou," Koichiro said, sighing.

"Understood. I'll have Kikukawa speak to him about it. Sudou should be in the O'ltormean capital right now, delivering his report on the Xarooda expedition to the emperor. But since he's normally in charge of intelligence operations in Rhoadseria, we should be able to arrange a meeting between you two there."

"Between this and Asuka, I've asked one too many favors of you, Zhong Jian," Koichiro said apologetically.

"Don't let it concern you, Koichiro," Liu replied, smiling gently. "I've asked you to help me guide Zheng, and your grandniece is like family to me too. The same holds true for you grandson, and I don't see helping family as any sort of trouble."

Liu rose from his seat and opened the door to a shelf situated in front of his bed.

"Drinking this early in the morning?" Koichiro asked, cracking a bitter smile at the Chinese characters printed on the pot Liu took out. "Isn't breakfast only thirty minutes away?"

Ignoring Koichiro's question, Liu opened the seal on the pot. The scent of expensive alcohol filled the room.

"Ah, don't say that, Koichiro," Liu said as he silently filled a cup with alcohol. "Think of this as a fee for all the help I extend to you and play along."

That day, the two of them silently shared drinks until Zheng showed up to tell them breakfast was prepared. It was as if they were offering their toasts to the

fickle stars of fate that led to this reunion, fifty years later—as if to remember their many friends, swept away by the currents of time.

Chapter 2: Julianus I's Advice

That night, Ryoma Mikoshiba entered a room in the royal castle in Xarooda's capital, Peripheria. He'd been called there suddenly and with no explanation by King Julianus I himself for the purpose of a private meeting.

It was an especially empty corner of the castle. A maid led Ryoma to the room and soon made herself scarce. There were soldiers standing guard outside, and while he couldn't see them, he could feel by the tense atmosphere that there were also guards adept at stealth hiding in the shadows around the room.

The messenger who delivered the summons made it clear that Ryoma was to come alone. However, if Ryoma's suspicions as to why he was called were correct, there shouldn't have been a need for this much security. Julianus I must have really dreaded someone listening in on this meeting. But for how punctual he was said to be, he still hadn't shown himself despite it nearly being the appointed time.

What's going on? If he's being this cautious, this can only mean...

Ryoma poured a glass of water from a pitcher sitting on the desk and brought it to his lips. The most likely possibility was that he wanted to have Ryoma assassinated. Just like Queen Lupis feared Ryoma's resourcefulness after the civil war concluded, perhaps Julianus I also came to dread him. As the saying went, when the enemy was defeated, the victorious soldiers could be killed off. Ryoma doubted that was the case, though. For one, Lupis and Julianus I were in different positions.

Judging from this water, it doesn't look like he means me any harm.

Feeling the liquid pleasantly run down his throat, Ryoma narrowed his eyes in thought. It was plain water, but even an unassuming pitcher on a table could offer a great deal of information. There was some kind of lemon-like citrus fruit mixed in along with ice to keep it cold. Some attention and care had been put into it. But it was still just water. It was preferable to lukewarm water, but one wouldn't normally pay it any attention.

However, the standards in this world were different from Ryoma's. This world had no refrigerators, so ice was fairly rare and expensive. The only real cooling sources were snow, collected during the winter and stored in cold rooms, and ice produced by verbal thaumaturgy. And unlike martial thaumaturgy, verbal thaumaturgy required a great deal of education and intelligence, making practitioners few and far between.

Verbal thaumaturgy also required dedicated teachers, and they learned the craft through reading numerous texts. Naturally, they needed to know how to read and write, meaning only the affluent could master verbal thaumaturgy. It required more than simply absorbing the prana of defeated enemies and activating one's chakras, especially since defeating enemies from afar only granted half the normal amount of prana.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean ranged attacks were any less effective. As proof, many skilled mercenaries and adventurers went to the trouble of learning a few offensive spells. While they might not be called verbal thaumaturgists, they still saw the value in that power. And even knowing that little drew the attention of others.

For instance, Lione's mercenary group, the Crimson Lions, was recognized as quite skilled, and a lot of that reputation could be attributed to the fact that many of them could use verbal thaumaturgy. This was why, even though most knights on the continent saw ranged attacks as cowardly, many countries still proactively encouraged them to learn verbal thaumaturgy to some extent. In the face of the lofty purpose of defending a nation, the knights' petty quibbles meant little.

And the reputation of verbal thaumaturgy was well-earned. Some of the more famous verbal thaumaturgists in the history of this world were said to be capable of wiping out entire armies. And so the Kingdom of Xarooda, for example, employed multiple court thaumaturgists. They were all nobles, but even if one of them happened to be a commoner, it wouldn't have mattered. Once one became skilled enough to serve as court thaumaturgist, be they a commoner or even a slave, they would still be given a noble title to match their role. Verbal thaumaturgy was that highly sought after. Of course, no commoner would normally be skilled enough to reach that level of mastery over the art...

The ice is in large, uniform cubes, so from the looks of it I'd say a verbal thaumaturgist made it, Ryoma thought to himself as he eyed the ice cubes floating inside his glass.

He then took a baked sweet from the bowl sitting next to the pitcher and bit into it.

It's too sweet.

It was, in all honesty, like a lump of sugar. Ryoma had tasted some confections from famous stores in his world, and to him, this had the crude, unrefined taste one might find in the countryside. One bite was enough to make him sick of the sweetness.

Still, he could say that because he was Japanese and not from here. In this world, most sweets were either fruit—both fresh and dried—or honey. Candy made of sugar was expensive. A commoner would probably never taste sugar in their entire life.

This was something Ryoma knew from when he motivated his young soldiers during training by giving them gumdrops. The price of sugar sweets was high, and there weren't a lot in circulation. The gumdrops Ryoma gave the children were the cheapest sweet available in Japan, but a handful of them would probably cost a thousand gold coins in this world.

And so the meaning behind the sugar confections before him differed from Ryoma's culinary impression of them. The lord of this castle was making a show of his power and wealth, for sure, but as a host he was greeting Ryoma with the greatest hospitality he could. But even based on what Ryoma knew of this world, this struck him as odd. Unless it was a tea party, hospitality in this world meant food and alcohol.

Since they went to the trouble of serving this, I'm guessing they want to avoid drinking here. But I've never heard anything about Julianus being a weak drinker. I guess he wants me to stay sober and clearheaded.

Just as Ryoma considered that explanation, he heard a knock on the door.

"Are you ready to see us, Sir Ryoma?" a familiar voice asked him, muffled by the door. It was probably Grahalt, who'd come as an escort and bodyguard.

He brings his own bodyguard after forbidding me from bringing my guards? Whatever this is about, it must be a delicate issue.

Ryoma was only a general dispatched by Rhoadseria, while Julianus I was the king of Xarooda. It was only natural he brought bodyguards, but Ryoma suspected there was more to this than just that.

"Come in," Ryoma said.

The door gently swung open and Julianus I entered the room, accompanied by Grahalt.

"Pardon my tardiness, especially since I'm the one who called you here," Julianus I said. "Some matters I couldn't put off cropped up, and dealing with them took some time. Do forgive me."

Ryoma nodded but remained silent. This reaction would normally be seen as quite rude and impudent, but everyone present overlooked it. Grahalt, who stood at the king's side, didn't seem to blame Ryoma for it.

"Now then, Grahalt... I'll have to ask that you leave."

At Julianus I's orders, Grahalt simply bowed and left the room.

"Are you sure you should have done that?" Ryoma asked. Julianus was the king of Xarooda. Even if it was his own castle, his position meant that dismissing his bodyguards was unthinkable.

Julianus I, however, simply shook his head. "I do not mind. After all, I called you here without any of your guards. It's only fair I do the same."

Since he'd asked Ryoma to do something, he would return in kind. But given his position as king, it went without saying that this was an act of impressive resolve.

This old man has guts.

The surrounding countries called Julianus I "the mediocre king," but as far as Ryoma could see, he was one sly old fox. Despite the rebellious tendencies of his nobles, he'd somehow kept Xarooda unified under his rule. This was probably due to his skills as a king.

"Now, I do believe speaking while standing would be rude..." Julianus I said as

he sat on the sofa opposite Ryoma. “First, I must apologize and thank you.”

He bowed his head to Ryoma. This was likely why he asked Grahalt to leave. This certainly wasn’t a sight he could let others see.

“Thanks to you, our country survived this war, so first allow me to thank you on behalf of Xarooda and all its people. We’re eternally grateful to you. And...I must also apologize. Your daring attack and conquest of Fort Notis severed the O’ltormean army’s line of supply, and despite that, I ended this war with a cease-fire. Forgive me.”

This was the greatest gratitude and apology a king could direct at a general.

“Your Majesty...” Ryoma was speechless, flustered even, and he gestured for the king to raise his head. Even Ryoma, for all his boldness, couldn’t remain composed with a king as old as his grandfather apologizing to him like that.

“I can relate to your feelings, Your Majesty. At least, I can understand why you allowed for the cease-fire, but...”

Julianus I raised his head. “I know. All this does is buy us time.”

Ryoma looked at Julianus I, his eyes grave. “If you understand that, I’m in no position to say anything more. But if I could say just one thing, however discourteous it might be, it’s that your country is very much on borrowed time...”

“I see... Does it seem short by your estimate too?”

“Yes.”

“How many years would you say we have?”

“It greatly depends on how skillfully you negotiate things, but the next war will come within ten years, at the latest.”

Julianus I regarded Ryoma with a nasty smile. “Kehehe... Lying is no good, Sir Ryoma. No matter how much you try to space things out, I have five years at most, don’t I?”

Julianus I then smiled softly again. That was the exact figure Ryoma came to, as well.

“Then you knew...” he muttered.

Julianus I nodded.

“I may be foolish enough to be mockingly called a mediocre king by my neighbors, but I have still reigned for decades. I take pride in the fact that I’ve defended and built up this country for as long as I have.”

His words were charged with resolve and determination. Even as those around him mocked him and called him mediocre, this wise ruler had always kept a careful watch on the state of affairs. True, he didn’t make any achievements that would draw attention. Julianus I would likely go down in the annals of history as a mediocre, unimpressive king of Xarooda. But his firm will to defend and develop his country was by no means inferior to any other ruler.

In the end, this old man... He was a cheat.

Ryoma’s lips curled into a smile. He believed this mediocrity was a facade this crafty old man used to hide his fangs. He couldn’t help but like him.

For a short moment, Ryoma and Julianus I looked upon each other wordlessly before breaking into smiles. Those smiles eventually gave way to rolling laughter.



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After laughing for some time, the two finally quieted down.

“It’s been a while since I’ve enjoyed myself like that. I can’t remember the last time I laughed aloud...”

Julianus I poured himself a glass from the pitcher before Ryoma could stop him. He emptied the cup in one gulp. He must have been quite thirsty, as he drank it with a vigor one wouldn’t expect of his age.

“Nice and cold...” he muttered as he tipped the pitcher toward his glass again. He then turned his eyes to the sweets sitting on the desk and smiled whimsically. “Lady Helena mentioned you hail from Rearth? She told me your people served her a treat called macarons at a recent tea party. Your world’s culinary culture is far beyond our own, it seems.”

Ryoma couldn’t help but crack a sardonic smile.

Right... So now we’re getting to the main topic.

Ryoma never outright told Helena of his origins—that he was what the people of this world called an otherworlder. But Helena was a perceptive woman, and Ryoma didn’t exactly try to hide it, so she probably learned of it from some source.

I did serve her macarons a few days ago...

The truth of the matter was that Ryoma didn’t exactly go to great lengths to hide the fact he was an otherworlder. But why did Helena see fit to tell Julianus I about this?

I suppose Helena could have let it slip on accident, but...I find it hard to believe.

Helena Steiner was the Kingdom of Rhoadseria’s general, the person in charge of the country’s military affairs. She was an accomplished commander and a skilled politician too. Would a woman like her really let something like that slip?

She must have told him intentionally. This old man and Helena must be very close.

Ryoma knew the two of them were connected, but he didn't know how deep that connection went.

"You two must be awfully close," Ryoma said.

"Is that sarcasm I spy in your voice, Sir Ryoma?" the old king asked, smiling sardonically.

"No, I'm just a little curious."

Julianus I's expression tightened a bit. "Well, you needn't worry so much. I simply consulted Lady Helena on some matters, and as we spoke, I heard a bit about you."

"Like what?"

Julianus I fell silent for a long moment before he spoke again.

"What is your opinion of this world, Sir Ryoma?"

"I'm not sure I understand your question, Your Majesty?" Ryoma said, his head cocked. Was he asking if this world was pleasant or convenient to live in compared to Ryoma's? Was he asking him about the level of culture? No. Ryoma's intuition told him Julianus was asking about something else.

"I see..." Julianus I shook his head. "I suppose my wording was faulty. Sir Mikoshiba, you are not native to this western continent. With that in mind, I ask you. Does this land, with its constant wars, not strike you as odd?"

"Odd, Your Majesty?"

Julianus I nodded. "I did not simply call you here today just to thank you and apologize."

"What was your reason, then?"

"I wanted to speak of this with you, Sir Mikoshiba."

With that said, Julianus I hesitantly parted his lips. And as he spoke, little by little, Ryoma's expression gradually hardened.

Several hours had passed since Ryoma's conversation with Julianus I. It was nearly midnight, and the residents of the castle were fast asleep. For several

days now, thick gray clouds had darkened the sky, so the only lights illuminating the area were the bonfires set up around the premises.

It was during this time that a figure stood in the castle's shadowy courtyard. The figure stood still, maintaining their posture. In front of them was a mannequin clad in steel armor. The figure remained in this position for some time.

Eventually, the curtain of clouds shifted and a ray of moonlight shone down on the earth. And at that moment, a silvery spark flashed in the figure's hands as they delivered a slash from the mannequin's left flank to its right shoulder. It was a drawing technique dispatched at godspeed—a draw so quick one couldn't even see the figure's hands move.

Despite the blow, the mannequin seemed to remain intact. Yet the figure nodded in satisfaction, as if pleased with the slash they delivered.

"Hm... I think I'm getting used to it," Ryoma whispered, tapping on the mannequin. The next moment, the top half of the mannequin, which had remained still until then, slid off diagonally. It fell to the ground, along with the armor it wore, and landed with a clangorous thud.

"Kikoku..."

Ryoma whispered the katana's name as he held it up against the bonfire's light. It was a thick blade with a clamshell-shaped edge, a battlefield katana made explicitly for cutting people down—a well-crafted sword the Igasaki clan gifted to Ryoma as proof of his lordship over them.

"Not a single nick on the blade. Impressive stuff. But..."

Ryoma's tone conveyed a dissatisfaction that stood in contrast to his words as he gazed at the unblemished surface of the blade. During the attack on Fort Notis, Ryoma dueled against the captain of the guard, Greg Moore. During that battle, his sword had been nicked and chipped. But looking at it now, there wasn't so much as a mark on the blade's surface.

Kikoku was made to be hard to break, but apparently it recognized Ryoma as its owner to some small extent because of the duel with Greg Moore. Ryoma was still far from becoming its master, though. He was perhaps a temporary

wielder of it at present. Still, even that was great progress.

The sword really does repair itself. They told me it can do that, but seeing it in action really makes it settle in. Endowed thaumaturgy is impressive.

There were three types of thaumaturgy in this world. Martial thaumaturgy strengthened one's body, while verbal thaumaturgy used words to offer up prana to gods and nature spirits to invoke natural phenomena at the caster's whim. But the third type of thaumaturgy, endowed thaumaturgy, was different from the other two. By applying specific crests onto weapons and tools, those items would be endowed with unique spells that could be activated by the wielder feeding them their prana.

This allowed for the production of what the people of this world called martial tools. The most famous type of endowed thaumaturgy, however, was the crest of obedience, which slaves were branded with. It was a chilling example of how not just tools but even humans could be endowed with thaumaturgical crests.

Crests could be applied to saddles to lighten the weight of a rider or to recover stamina. There were also sigils that gave weapons the ability to feed on the wielder's prana and remain in prime condition, like Kikoku. Mere nicks and chips in the blade could be repaired within the hour.

Most weapons also had enchantments that strengthened their durability, so it was unlikely a thaumaturgical blade would break. On the off chance it did, one only needed to store the blade in its scabbard and it would repair itself within the day. For those who live on the battlefield, this was an exceptionally valuable weapon to have. A weapon one had grown used to wielding was hard to replace, after all. But of course, even such a marvelous sword required constant maintenance to exhibit its full strength.

Kikoku was a warrior's weapon if there ever was one.

That's still nowhere near the things Gennou promised, though.

Ryoma let out an exaggerated sigh as he watched Kikoku, a blade that had not yet acknowledged him as its true master.

"Seriously, though... It wasn't just Moore; you drank that Eagle Lord's prana too. And still, it's not enough for you?"

According to Gennou, once Kikoku acknowledged someone as its true master, there was nothing it couldn't cut. It would truly become a demon sword capable of severing everything in creation. An impressive statement, albeit a problematic one, given that Gennou himself had never seen Kikoku's full prowess either.

Kikoku was made during the early days of the Igasaki clan, when its first leader had it smithed at the cost of his own life. Ever since, the Igasaki clan protected it like a sacred treasure, awaiting a worthy master that would wield it properly.

Still, I suppose a sword that doesn't require repairs is valuable enough.

Having a katana repaired and serviced was a problematic affair. Since the culture on this continent wasn't familiar with them, finding someone who could service one was time-consuming and expensive. In fact, when Gennou gave Ryoma a katana during their first meeting in Rhoadseria, he gave him a few spare ones for this exact reason.

Of course, constantly changing weapons was far from optimal. It was said a good craftsman didn't blame their tools, but the truth of the matter was that the more skilled someone became, the more particular they got about their tools.

Katanas, in particular, were made by hand and not manufactured mechanically. This meant individual katanas inevitably had differences in weight or shape. Certainly, katanas from the same smith could be quite similar, if not almost indistinguishable from each other. Even so, no two katanas were perfectly identical—not even those made by the same smith. Things like the amount of material used, the temperature and timing of the heat treatment, and the strike of the hammer all influenced the final product. Even the weather that day was important, since the moisture in the air could affect the process.

No man alive could produce two perfectly identical blades, so each katana had small but ever so distinct differences. But once a wielder reached a certain level of skill, even those minute, miniscule differences could influence how they wielded that sword. However, weapons enchanted with endowed thaumaturgy like Kikoku were unlike the rest. So long as their wielder supplied them with

prana, they could always regenerate and repair themselves. In that regard, they could be called perfect weapons.

But if what Gennou said is true, this sword still has plenty of things to show, Ryoma thought, his smile spreading like a child relishing a new toy.

But the next moment, Ryoma's expression suddenly changed. He sensed something.

Ice-cold blood lust... I'm surrounded. Ryoma clicked his tongue. *There are multiple opponents, and I'm here alone. I must have let down my guard since I'm in an ally's castle.*

Normally, the Malfist sisters would have been nearby, guarding Ryoma. But tonight was an exception. He wanted to ruminate on Julianus I's warning alone.

Did the old man do this? No, I doubt that.

This suspicion surfaced in his mind for a second, but Ryoma soon denied it. Julianus's warning certainly was a secret he couldn't let other people know about—so much so that the idea of him silencing anyone who knew of it was plausible. But Julianus had been the one to share that secret with Ryoma to begin with. Ryoma had a hard time believing he would change his mind within a few hours.

So is this some kind of coincidence? Yeah, fat chance of that. This can't be a coincidence...

There was no shortage of people who wanted Ryoma dead, especially people from the O'ltormea Empire. Between the grief Ryoma gave them during this war and the past grudges they had with him, they would probably do anything to put his head on a pike. But what Julianus I told him not a few hours ago narrowed down the list of candidates quite a bit.

"Oh, come on... What he said was true? What is this, one of those war record stories I read once?"

Truth be told, Ryoma didn't take what Julianus told him seriously. How could he? The king had told him that a force greater than any one country was manipulating the wars that embroiled this continent. To be more exact, he told him he *suspected* that such a force might be pulling the strings. But regardless

of how confident the old king might have been, Ryoma wasn't more inclined to believe it. It didn't matter what world he was in, a story about a worldwide conspiracy was hard to swallow. Concepts like that only worked within the pages of a novel.

But as it turned out, maybe truth was stranger than fiction after all.

Suddenly, an arrow tore through the darkness, whizzing toward Ryoma. The next moment, Ryoma drew the katana from its scabbard and delivered a slash into the air.

"Whoa there..." Ryoma muttered. "Just shooting at me, no questions asked? Scary stuff."

Apparently, this was the doing of professional assassins. These weren't people who would engage Ryoma with needless conversation.

The arrowhead looked wet. Must have been a poisoned arrow.

It seemed these assassins were undeniably fixated on killing Ryoma efficiently.

Interesting... This should make for a decent workout. Ryoma smiled, excitement bubbling up in his heart.

At that moment, Kikoku shivered in his hands.

Huh, so you're feeling thirsty for blood too. All right, then. I'll let you drink your fill.

Kikoku's blade let out a faint screech, as if to answer his thoughts.

"Let's go!"

With that battle cry, Ryoma broke into a run, rushing toward the darkness where his assassins hid. His heart beat fast with excitement and elation. He began operating his chakras, forcing prana to circulate through his body.

Second chakra, open!

Superhuman agility and muscle strength filled Ryoma's body. However, the assassins weren't amateurs either. As Ryoma sprinted toward them, they fired arrows at him from the surrounding foliage.

So the first one was a decoy. They wanted me to rush toward them so they could shoot at me from the sides.

This was a highly lethal tactic, assuming they didn't mind discarding the assassin who served as bait like a sacrificial pawn. No... The first arrow would have already done most targets in. The mere fact that Ryoma survived the first shot meant he'd already gone beyond what the assassins expected.

Even so, this didn't change what Ryoma needed to do in this position. He let out an animalistic howl, sending a needle of fear through his assassins that pinned them in place. It only lasted for a second or two, but that was more than enough time for Ryoma, strengthened as he was by martial thaumaturgy.

He swiftly closed the distance. His blade flashed as two figures intersected, and the moment they parted, one figure's head took to the air. Ryoma didn't even glance at his opponent as their headless body crumpled to the ground.



“Next!” Ryoma shouted as he dived into the thicket, seeking his next prey.

It wasn’t long before moans of pain rang out and the rusty scent of blood filled the air. Soon after, silence once again filled the courtyard.

Looks like the rest retreated...

Sensing the tides were turning against them, his assassins chose to flee. The bloodlust that filled the air disappeared without a trace.

“Satisfied now?” Ryoma whispered to Kikoku, which he’d gripped in his right hand.

It let out a low screech, as if asking for more.

“No, huh? Gluttonous, aren’t you?”

Kikoku let out another dissatisfied shriek.

“Fine, fine. They’ll come attack me again before long. I’ll let you feed on all of them then.”

Ryoma settled Kikoku’s bloodstained blade into its scabbard. Normally, sheathing a sword without wiping the blood off would be a foolish act that would only result in the blade rusting. This wasn’t an issue with Kikoku, though.

“Still, this is something of a problem...”

The courtyard of this beautiful castle had transformed into a sickening scene of bloodshed and gore. The scent of blood and viscera hung in the air, and Ryoma’s body and clothes were stained red. He wouldn’t be able to sleep without taking a hot bath.

“Now I have to come up with an excuse...”

As the commotion and screaming finally gained the attention of the castle’s occupants, the image of the Malfist twins’ tearful expressions filled Ryoma’s mind. Looking around, Ryoma heaved a deep sigh.

†

In one estate in Peripheria’s castle town...

“I see. You failed...”

A man sighed, having received this report from a shadowy figure cloaked in darkness.

“My apologies, Your Excellency. I swear, we shall rectify this failure,” the figure responded, their voice thick with shame and humiliation. Their attempted assault was nothing but a shameful display. Failing to fulfill a direct order from their master was a painful blot on their pride.

Despite this, the man simply nodded. A trusted agent had failed him and betrayed his trust, but blaming the shadow for it would do nothing to change the situation. The man knew this. It was he, after all, who insisted they go on this attack as immediately as tonight.

“Understood. You may leave.”

At the man’s words, the shadow faded into the darkness.

“So that whelp is as skilled as they say” the man muttered as he took a bottle of alcohol and a glass from a shelf by the wall.

When I heard that fool Julianus told that whelp things he didn’t need to hear, I figured we should eliminate him as soon as possible. But maybe that was a bad idea...

As a member of the Organization, this man had been informed that he should be wary of Ryoma. Of the eight traitors who attempted to sell Xarooda out to O’ltormea, this man was the only one to receive this warning. Taking that to heart, he prepared to assassinate Ryoma. Seeing that he’d stopped the O’ltormean invasion, he believed Ryoma might end up becoming a major obstacle for the Organization in the future.

Initially, the plan was to assassinate Ryoma near the Xaroodian-Rhoadserian border. What moved the assassination forward was news of a secret exchange between Ryoma and Julianus I. This man certainly looked down on Julianus I as a fool. Despite having talents worthy of a wise ruler, Julianus chose to hide his fangs in the name of the country’s stability. This man, however, believed it was the role of the talented and wise to rule over the foolish masses. In his eyes, Julianus I’s choice was the height of stupidity. But at the same time, he didn’t doubt Julianus’s prudence and abilities. That was why this man suspected that Julianus I was likely the only one to have potentially noticed that the

Organization existed behind the scenes of this war with O'ltormea. And the man's intuition proved correct this time.

Yet the assassins he sent to eliminate Ryoma failed spectacularly. It was probably too late now to have him assassinated on the Rhoadserian border as originally planned. Ryoma was bound to be more vigilant after tonight's attack.

"I wanted that whelp's head, if only so I could offer it to Princess Shardina as a sign of loyalty. But I suppose there isn't much to be done now..." the man whispered as he took a swig of alcohol from his glass.

Chapter 3: The Hero's Homecoming

That day, a banner of a two-headed serpent coiled around a sword, its scales silvery and golden, flew over Rhoadseria's capital city of Pireas. A shower of petals fluttered down on a group of soldiers covered in black armor. They advanced down the main street of the city in uniform, organized lines as the citizens around them cheered enthusiastically.

"All hail Lord Mikoshiba!"

"Bless your safe return!"

"The elite armies of Rhoadseria march through our streets!"

The citizens in the streets raised their voices as they sang out praises.

"Ooh, talk about a warm welcome," Ryoma said, the words escaping his lips. He was somewhat overwhelmed by the vigorous cheering.

The Malfist sisters, who rode next to him, seemed to be taken aback by his surprise.

"This much is obvious, Master Ryoma," Sara said. "You're a national hero who abided by the Kingdom of Rhoadseria's orders and saved Xarooda." She beat a fist against her chest for emphasis. Her face was flushed, as if she was overtaken by the excitement in the air.

"Sara is correct," Laura added. "Your feats are just as grand as Lady Helena's! Of course, I understand how you feel, Master Ryoma, but for now..."

Ryoma regarded the Malfist twins with a forced smile. The sisters wanted to take pride in their master's achievements, even if the events unfolding before their eyes were the result of a third party's plot...

Ryoma sighed. "Fine, fine... You wave at them too, then."

The Malfist sisters weren't wrong. A hero who returned from war shouldn't greet the masses with a listless expression. He was, when all was said and done, a military commander. No matter what emotions might swirl within his heart of

hearts, he had to keep up appearances as a Rhoadserian noble.

Still, Ryoma couldn't help but feel a sense of futility. His spirits were very much dampened.

I understand wanting to rejoice, but...

Ryoma did save the kingdom of Xarooda, but it hadn't curbed the O'ltormea Empire's ambitions. All he really did was hold a wound closed until the bleeding stopped. It was first aid at best, and all he did was minimize the amount of blood lost. Everything else depended on the treatment to come. Even if everyone else praised him for saving this "patient," Ryoma would need to be incredibly brazen to not feel bad about being celebrated like this. The only thing he could do was hold back the urge to shout that said patient needed to be carried to the hospital.

What's more, Julianus I's warning made Ryoma even less inclined to rejoice, and the attempt on his life only made him more suspicious. Ryoma's heart had grown too cold to be receptive to praise, especially since he knew this crowd wasn't truly here of its own will.

There are soldiers stationed everywhere. Given how decorated their armor is, they must be the palace's guard. I suppose their excuse would be that they're here for security reasons, but would you really go this far?

Recalling the report Sakuya delivered from the intelligence unit they sent ahead, Ryoma sank even deeper into his thoughts.

This crowd was here for two purposes. The first was purely for the sake of celebration. Ryoma had nothing in particular to say about that. The people of this Earth lived in the present and only focused on the events unfolding before their eyes. He couldn't expect people utterly incapable of seeing the bigger picture to grasp the reality of the situation. The problem was that they had another purpose. They were there because someone wanted to distract everyone from the shadow settling over Rhoadseria.

I was right to have Sakuya send that intelligence unit ahead...

The report he received last night matched his expectations. This was one case where he wasn't happy to see his predictions come true.

They sure put in effort, but getting the masses riled up like this won't change the situation any.

Ever since his audience with Queen Lupis, when she ordered him to deploy to Xarooda, Ryoma got the impression that there was a shadow behind the capital city of Pireas. On the surface it was full of passionate cheering, but Ryoma aptly noticed how fabricated this whole affair felt.

Queen Lupis's reforms must be going poorly. Not that it comes as any surprise...

He'd predicted that much from the beginning. Lupis Rhoadserians wasn't very fit to be a leader to begin with. It was perhaps hard to notice that at first sight, but upon closer inspection, her flaws seemed to drown out any merits she had.

As a noble in a world with low standards of education, she was indeed relatively knowledgeable and cultivated. And unlike nobles and royals from other countries, she exhibited very little prejudice against commoners. After all, as cornered as she was at the time, a royal wouldn't normally accept the aid of someone as suspicious and unknown as Ryoma. The fact she was willing to put her trust in him was part of why Ryoma was willing to gamble on helping her out of such a hopeless situation. Though, that was before he'd realized Lupis Rhoadserians's most fatal flaw...

Noticing it at that point would have been hard, though, Ryoma thought with a self-deprecating smile.

At the time, Ryoma found himself caught up in an international plot operated by Wallace Heinkel, the guildmaster of the trade city of Pherzaad. From his perspective at that point in time, nothing mattered more than defending himself and the Malfist sisters. And the whims of fate brought him and Lione, who was in the same plight, together. Placed in that precarious position, even Ryoma, with his discerning eye for people, would have been hard-pressed to perfectly realize everything about Lupis.

Her flaws only started manifesting that strongly when she became queen. If I knew what she was all about to begin with, I'd never have...

Lupis Rhoadserians was too emotional by nature. Depending on who was asking, she could even be called impulsive. Both of those appraisals were

correct, and as a matter of fact, Lupis Rhoadserians was reputed to be a tenderhearted, merciful woman. There could be no doubt she devoted every day of her life to her kingdom and its people. This was a wonderful trait for a sovereign. That was why her close associates, Meltina Lecter and Mikhail Vanash, never left her side even as the former Duke Gelhart and his noble allies gained de facto control of the country.

But when taken too far, this virtue of hers became a flaw—her greatest flaw, indeed. She was extremely indecisive, particularly when it came to Mikhail and Meltina, who had shared years of friendship and intimacy with her.

Lupis's naivete was starkly evident when it came to Mikhail. As far as Ryoma knew, Mikhail had committed at least two major blunders in his career as a knight. The first was when the nobles' faction plotted to ferry Lupis's illegitimate sister, Radine, from Myest to Rhoadseria. Mikhail had unknowingly attacked Ryoma's caravan when it was en route to Pireas, not realizing they were unwitting standins for the real princess. That was the nobles' faction's plot and not an intentional mistake on his part. But he had been fooled by false information and lost many knights faithful to Lupis's cause because of it. This was a blot on his honor as commander, and normally he would be ordered to pay for such a blunder with his life.

His second blunder occurred when Ryoma crossed the river Thebes and formed a bridgehead there. Ryoma had ordered him to lead a scouting party, but Mikhail disregarded his orders and attacked an opposing army. There were some extenuating circumstances in that case. The army was led by Kael Iruna, an old friend of Mikhail's who had defected from Lupis's side to the nobles' faction. One could imagine Mikhail struggled to remain composed in that situation.

After his first blunder, Lupis pardoned him on the condition that he would compensate for his initial failure with his achievements in the civil war. This undoubtedly influenced his decisions as well. But the biggest reason Mikhail disobeyed orders was his grudge against Ryoma, who from his perspective appeared out of nowhere and quickly curried favor with Lupis. And indeed, Kael's plot duped Mikhail and he fell captive.

He had made multiple blunders in quick succession. One might expect Lupis to

run out of patience with him. A ruler would even be expected to do away with such an incompetent subordinate. But Lupis didn't abandon Mikhail. She *couldn't* abandon him.

Lupis just doesn't understand. Letting emotion control her decisions so many times makes other people look down on her. And now she's seeing the results of that.

Forgiving a subordinate for his failures could be seen as magnanimous. But there was a difference between patience and lack of judgment, especially considering that Lupis's reign was still in its early days and she was trying to reform the country. There were likely multiple occasions since she assumed the throne where she faced painful decisions and made poor choices.

Lupis Rhoadserians was incapable of making cold, calculated decisions. She easily gave in to emotion and tended to believe in the good in people. The nobles who left Gelhart's side after he'd lost much of his territory and title saw this and began conspiring once again. The result was the state of the capital city of Pireas, as Ryoma saw it at that very moment.

It's ironic. This capital's situation and the state of the Wortenia Peninsula are both the result of me failing to judge Lupis's character correctly.

After the civil war instigated by the former Duke Gelhart ended, Ryoma was forced to accept a reward—lordship over the Wortenia Peninsula, a no-man's-land. No one could have suspected such an outcome. But the result of these errors in judgment produced two results that stood in stark contrast to one another.

Just goes to show that even a land no one lives in has its advantages.

An unpopulated land generated no tax revenue. But in exchange, this peninsula held the potential to produce anything and everything Ryoma would need. True, the peninsula initially had no human population and was overrun by monsters. Cutting down forests to build a city was tiring work. But had Ryoma received lordship over an existing city, though he may have had a steady stream of revenue, it would have whittled down any potential the place had for development.

There was a plan in Japan to tear down electric poles and instead run the

electric lines underground. Removing the poles would do little to harm the scenery and would allow for wider roads. It was a wonderful plan. But for how beautiful it was, realizing this plan would be difficult. There were multiple reasons, but ignoring the legal problems, the biggest concern was that people already lived on that land. The plan would require large-scale construction, which would influence the lives of the people living there. There would be road closures, deafening noise, and temporary power outages. All of this required a great deal of funds.

The idea of removing the power poles was admirable in and of itself, but the difficulties it would force upon the people meant it had to be done little by little. The mere fact that people lived in a land made developing it that much harder. For that reason, the Wortenia Peninsula being empty of people meant Ryoma was free to pursue any large-scale construction he might please.

Everything seems fine, given the periodic reports I got. I'll just have to see it for myself.

Before leaving on the expedition to Xarooda, Ryoma entrusted management of his domain on the Wortenia Peninsula to Boltz and Gennou. Their role was not only to drive back any external threats but to also develop and maintain the city of Sirius, the heart of the Mikoshiba Barony. Even in the absence of its lord, the lands of Wortenia were gradually developing.

"Master Ryoma?"

A voice pulled Ryoma out of his sea of thoughts. Turning to face the voice, Ryoma found Laura gazing at him.

"Oh, it's nothing... Let's get this job done," Ryoma said, fixing his gaze on the ivory castle standing imposingly in the distance.

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That night, after her audience with Ryoma, Lupis Rhoadserians returned to her room. She sank into her sofa, looking up into the air as a long, despondent sigh escaped her shapely lips.

Seeing her mistress so dejected, Meltina Lecter was rendered speechless.

"I didn't think this would be the result..."

Lupis’s faint whisper slithered through the air. Meltina, being the faithful and astute servant she was, heard those words clearly.

“There was nothing else you could have done differently,” said Meltina. “In my humble opinion, Your Majesty, you have done the best you could in this situation.”

Lupis turned to look at her. “You really...think so?” she asked, her eyes filled with a mixture of anxiety and relief.

“I do,” Meltina said, nodding.

I can’t let her waver now. If she’s overcome by doubts, she will surely...



All of Lupis's choices ended up backfiring. The thick shadow hanging over Epirus made that quite clear. The reform she led was meant to consolidate power in the sovereign's hands, but it was met with resistance. The public officers and nobles, wishing to protect their vested interests, sabotaged the reform's progress. As such, little to no progress had been made.

During the civil war, even the defensive military units situated within each region were mobilized, and the injuries they suffered still hadn't fully healed. As such, the public order within the kingdom had severely worsened. The nobles who continually looked down on Lupis increased the taxation in their territories, forcing the farmers who couldn't withstand the extortion to leave their lands and drift to the capital instead.

On the surface, there weren't many visible changes in the capital. But the alleys were full of refugees who left their lands behind. There were constant disputes between the citizens of the capital and the refugees, and Meltina received daily reports of arguments devolving into bloodshed. From a political standpoint, there was only one word to describe this: misgovernment.

But that's just the end result. No one is more devoted to this country and its people than Her Majesty is.

Meltina couldn't imagine anyone more fitting to rule this country than the queen standing before her, her eyes full of sorrow and mourning for her kingdom. Sadly, politics were often judged by the end result. It was hard to dispute that no matter how lofty one's ideals and beliefs might be, if their regime couldn't implement them properly, a kind ruler was as good as a vile one. But Meltina had spent so much time at Lupis's side that she couldn't bring herself to say anything that would deny her feelings.

The other problem was that they couldn't afford to let the former king's illegitimate child, Radine Rhoadserians, become queen. Even now, the nobles' tyranny showed no signs of stopping. If they were allowed to continue, Rhoadseria would be eaten from the inside out by these treacherous aristocrats.

The other royals, excluding Radine, weren't a problem. Most of them were members of branch families that had splintered off from the main royal house

two or three generations ago. They had succession rights on paper, but their royal blood was so thin that even a bastard child like Radine had more legitimacy than they did. Most of them possessed no real authority or power to speak of. They were considered royals in terms of standing, and were promised a comfortable life, but they were harmless presences that simply spent their days living on a pension granted to them by the kingdom.

And he returned from the war at a time like this...

That man's face surfaced in Meltina's mind. The smug, confident face of a young man who looked older than he really was. He was once a reliable ally that helped Queen Lupis, but she banished him to the Wortenia Peninsula for fear of his intellect and talent.

At first, Meltina thought Ryoma was just some unknown man. The only things she felt toward him were suspicion, loathing, and derision. After all, he appeared out of nowhere and confidently declared he would bring victory to Lupis. She thought he was a foolish commoner who didn't know his place. The class system was quite strict in Rhoadseria, and Meltina was the child of a long-running line of high-ranking knights, so it was only natural she would initially feel this way.

However, Ryoma proved himself right and brought Lupis the crown, as promised. And when he did, her impression of him changed. The same could be said of Lupis, as well. That was why she sent him to Wortenia, hoping he would die there. But not only did he surmount that adversity, it only made him stronger. And now, Meltina's heart was constricted by inexplicable terror toward this man.

The question is, what is he going to do next...?

Normally, Ryoma Mikoshiba's homecoming would be cause for celebration. He had overcome overwhelming odds and beaten back the O'ltormean invasion force. He was returning as a national hero. Helena Steiner was still stationed in Xarooda, so even considering the way other countries viewed Rhoadseria, things finally seemed to be calming down. However, this was just how things might have seemed to someone who didn't understand how things worked behind the scenes.

If nothing else, Her Majesty can no longer force him to cooperate...

No matter how other nobles saw him, the commoners now held Ryoma in high regard. He was the hero who led the legitimate heir from the brink of defeat to rightful victory. True, when he received the Wortenia Peninsula, he asked Queen Lupis for significant financial support. When he was sent to Xarooda, he also asked for more money under the pretense of war funds, as well as making the queen promise she would send engineers to his land. But all of those requests and negotiations were reasonable considering Ryoma's position as a rising, developing noble. Many people even agreed it was surprising he was willing to swallow Lupis's challenging requests given how relatively small his recompense was.

Anyone who knew the truth would scoff at the prospect, but by all appearances, Ryoma looked like Queen Lupis's most trustworthy and dependable vassal—especially now, when he had only just returned from Xarooda. Making any more unreasonable demands of him would look like Queen Lupis was exploiting him. In any event, it was very possible Ryoma might try to create that perception if Queen Lupis were to try.

Considering Queen Lupis essentially twisted his arm into accepting the Wortenia Peninsula, and considering she demanded he join the expedition to Xarooda, it was clear to anyone who knew anything of the situation that Ryoma likely held intense enmity toward Queen Lupis. Not even Lupis herself was foolish enough to think he might still be on her side after everything that had happened between them.

This left her with two choices: either welcome him warmly enough to make up for their past disputes or attempt to physically dispose of him—even if it meant resorting to assassination.

Do we try to win him over to our side? Now, after everything that's happened?

Reconciling with Ryoma would require many sacrifices. Firstly, they'd need to reward him handsomely for his service in Xarooda. Secondly, they'd need to explain the acts of espionage they had Count Salzberg commit in the Wortenia Peninsula during Ryoma's time in expedition. The peninsula was already under a state of intense counter-espionage, and they gained no useful information, so

Ryoma was not harmed in any way by this. But no one would be comfortable with someone investigating their home while they were absent.

On top of all that, Queen Lupis would have to apologize for what amounted to personal treachery. If she went that far, even Ryoma would be inclined to hear her out. A personal apology from the ruler of a country was very meaningful.

But the problem was what came next. They might convince him to negotiate, but whether they'd be able to successfully broker a reconciliation with him was honestly unknown. Even if he accepted their apology, he might still choose to keep them at arm's length.

Another issue was that placating Ryoma would leave most of the other nobles —with the exception of Count Bergstone and his brother-in-law, Count Zeleph —quite displeased. The other nobles accepted the founding of the Mikoshiba Barony, but that was mostly because he was given an inhospitable territory. They did not truly welcome him as a fellow noble.

With all that in mind, the idea of winning Ryoma over seemed like a poor option. With interior affairs being as feeble as they were, they couldn't risk introducing this kind of volatile dispute.

Which leaves killing him. Can we really do that, though?

The thought hung heavily in her mind. If they could have chosen to assassinate or execute Ryoma, they would have done so by now. But they couldn't, which was why they gave Ryoma his barony, hoping he would die before he became a problem.

Unfortunately, his aptitude for commanding an army is much greater than mine. I can't hope to match him in battlefield tactics. Our only way of slaying him would be in one-on-one combat.

Meltina wasn't a prudent woman. She was impulsive and militaristic, so much so that people called her a meatheaded idiot behind her back. But she wasn't foolish enough to overlook the overwhelming difference between Ryoma and herself. It wasn't for nothing that she'd served at Queen Lupis's side for as long as she did.

Meltina was no match for Ryoma when it came to commanding an army, but

when it came to actual, live combat, things were different. Meltina's skill with the blade matched Mikhail's, who was considered the greatest swordsman in Rhoadseria. In Rhoadseria's martial tournaments, everyone could participate regardless of gender. Meltina and Mikhail had locked blades several times during these occasions. While Meltina failed to ever beat Mikhail, she could still boast that none of his victories were easy ones. As such, she was clearly seen as the strongest female knight in Rhoadseria. She owed that reputation to the transcendent strength martial thaumaturgy afforded her and to her talent at controlling it.

Meltina certainly had a chance of beating Ryoma in one-on-one combat. But an emotion bubbled up from her heart, stifling her confidence.

This is...regret.

Meltina founded her entire identity on the basis of her martial prowess. She devoted her life to being a knight in service to the kingdom of Rhoadseria. So even if Ryoma were to exceed her in every other way, she did not want to be seen as inferior to him on the field of battle.

Yet Ryoma single-handedly slew Kael Iruna, a knight said to be Mikhail's equal. And during the battle for Fort Notis, he claimed the head of the base's captain in charge of defenses, Greg Moore. Moore was a well-known warrior, feared across the continent as the Water God's Blade. Meltina might have been able to get the better of him in a match, but in a battle to the death, she doubted she could beat him. Meltina had her share of real combat experience, but Ryoma had a distinct edge over her in that regard.

But then, what do we do?

They couldn't afford to win him over, and killing him was too difficult. They were out of options.

I suppose we'll have to use Count Salzberg...

Meltina wasn't keen on this solution. Rhoadseria's northern regions were ruled by ten allied noble houses. The leader of that alliance was House Salzberg, which was charged with defending the border. Be that as it may, the count hadn't visited the capital in recent years, instead choosing to shut himself off in his domain where rumor had it he governed however he pleased. During the

civil war, Count Salzberg didn't join the nobles' faction, as he was on bad terms with many of its members, including Gelhart himself. Still, he was without a doubt one of the vermin eating away at Rhoadseria at present.

The reality of things, however, was that his domain bordered the Wortenia Peninsula. Without his help, Meltina and Lupis would be powerless to do anything about Ryoma. When Ryoma first departed to the Wortenia Peninsula, Lupis had sent Count Salzberg a message in secret, ordering him to keep a close watch on what the Mikoshiba Barony was doing.

He hasn't achieved much so far, but we might want to order him to gather information on what goes on within the peninsula again. The tides might eventually shift, giving us a chance to strike.

In truth, there wasn't much else they could do.

I can only do so much alone...

Lupis currently had many vassals serving under her, but very few of them were actually loyal to her. Most of the nobles flouted her influence and did as they pleased. Her relationship with Count Bergstone had been shaky at best since the dispute regarding Ryoma's dispatch to Xarooda. Her relationship with his brother-in-law, Count Zeleph, was also estranged. Most of the knights had swung under Helena's influence, who was currently stationed in Xarooda.

Both politically and in terms of her military, Lupis was isolated. Knowing this, Meltina desperately tried to assist her to the best of her ability, but there was only so much she could do alone. Truly, Lupis was at her limits. Her situation was so fragile that any bit of force could send her shattering to the floor like glasswork.

Sir Mikhail... Her Majesty needs you, after all...

Meltina heaved a deep sigh, thinking of her colleague who had remained shut up in his estate without visiting the castle.

Chapter 4: The Shadow's Presence

The sound of labored breathing boomed in the young man's ears—his own breathing. He knew gasping for air like this would only reveal his position to any potential enemies, but his body unforgivingly ignored his will.

He'd survived countless battlefields. His body was tempered like steel and made stronger thanks to martial thaumaturgy. But even with his muscles and endurance augmented to extraordinary levels, his body still had human limitations. His lungs still required oxygen, burning sugars and fat to produce energy. His muscles then consumed that energy, converting the oxygen to carbon dioxide that would be expelled from his lungs.

This was a principal shared by all human beings. It would hold true no matter what level of experience this young man had, regardless of his status as a Rank C adventurer.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead in one rough motion, the young man brought the leather sack hanging from his waist to his lips and drank. The water was lukewarm and had the aftertaste of leather. It wasn't pleasant in the slightest, but to his parched throat, it tasted like the finest wine.

"That's all?"

Drinking up the last drop of water, the man threw away the sack in annoyance. If he were to reach the watering hole in the heart of the forest, he could refill it. The young man had inspected the map of the Wortenia Peninsula the guild supplied him with. It wasn't as accurate as maps in Ryoma's world, but it did detail where the water sources were.

While water was imperative to staying alive, carrying it around weighed one down. Compared to food, extra weapons, and gear, water could be procured locally, meaning one didn't usually carry large amounts of it. But that only meant the task of reaching the watering hole was that much more imperative. And at this rate, it was unlikely he'd ever reach the watering hole anyway.

Those bastards are driving me in the opposite direction of the watering hole. They probably want to exhaust me before hunting me down.

Spitting in frustration, the man glared in the opposite direction. Had it been a paved, level road, he probably could have ran along it for miles without fatigue. But right now, he was in a no-man's-land. The woods grew freely and the vegetation was thick. Having to run from both the monsters infesting these lands and his own invisible pursuers sapped his physical and mental fortitude. Honestly, he wished he could stop and take a break.

To hell with them...

The friends that recommended he take this job were presumably already dead. They were horrible when it came to handling money, but he got along with them surprisingly well. Whenever he'd finish a job and find his financial position wasn't as good as he'd like, they'd take him out for a drink or a trip to the brothel.

But right now, the young man wasn't thinking back on those memories. He could only curse those now-deceased friends of his and lament ever having taken this accursed job. The pay was good, that much was for sure. It paid five times as much as other jobs, and in advance, at that. One could even earn a bonus, depending on how good the results of their investigation were. It was a shady job that wasn't done through the guild, though. The employer was a noble who paid exceedingly well for a mere investigation. It looked too good to be true, but he took it.

However...

Just an investigation? Goddamn bastards got me caught up in this shitty job.

The Wortenia Peninsula. Anyone who made their living doing difficult jobs for the guild had heard of the place. The young man himself had heard a few rumors about it in the past. One rumor said it was an abandoned land that became a hideout for pirates and housed a hidden village of filthy demi-humans. Another said it was a roost for dangerous, lethal monsters, whose skins and fangs could be sold for a pretty sum—a mountain of treasure for those in that business.

Whenever he'd heard it mentioned, the man would brag to his friends that

he'd try going there once he got stronger. It might have been a cursed, blasted hellhole, but if one could successfully make a round trip, the guild and other adventurers would acknowledge their skill and prowess. That kind of prestige could land one a government position. And so this young, up-and-coming adventurer eyed this place with both dread and aspiration.

About two years ago, things changed in Wortenia. A noble no one had heard of before popped out of nowhere, receiving the right to govern the Wortenia Peninsula from the Queen of Rhoadseria. It was a bolt from the blue. Most people couldn't believe a nameless mercenary would be promoted like that. But soon enough, shock turned to mockery once they realized that the noble had been forced to accept the Wortenia Peninsula.

It was an honor in name only. No one could see it as anything but a thinly-veiled attempt at harassment. The Wortenia Peninsula was a very large strip of land, larger than what any one noble would usually govern. But any land, no matter how large it might be, was worthless without people living in it. He would just be a naked king...or rather, a naked lord, with an infertile land that produced nothing and had no people to govern.

Either way, the general opinion of the western continent was that Baron Mikoshiba was a foolish, gullible noble who had been misled by the size of his territory to pull the shortest straw. However, this young man now realized from painful experience just how wrong that perception was.

"He's a monster... Any man who made *that* has to be a monster."

The sight he'd seen from atop a hill flashed in his mind as he spoke, his words both praise and insult. This young man, who was born in a small village in Rhoadseria, had never seen a city of that scale and size in his life. True, he'd been to Pireas once to register at the guild, and this city paled in comparison to Rhoadseria's capital. His friends also told him of O'ltormea's capital, which was similar in size.

But the tall, imposing walls, and the large port that seemed to fill the entire shoreline... No one who saw that could remain composed. In addition, at the center of the bay was a construction site, where work on a massive castle was underway. The sight of this large yet functional fortification had overwhelmed

the hearts of the young man and his comrades.

“I have to let them know. They have to know about that place...”

No one knew the full extent of what was going on in the Wortenia Peninsula. Baron Mikoshiba refused to have a branch of the guild established in his domain. There was also a checkpoint built on the border of Count Salzberg’s territory, which hardly let anyone pass through.

As a result, the guild received more requests for resources native to the Wortenia Peninsula, and the nearby nobles began recruiting for jobs outside of the guild, asking mercenaries and adventurers to investigate the goings-on within the peninsula.

That was how this young man got this job, but reality was cruel and ruthless.

“That place is a nest of monsters. They killed everyone so they wouldn’t talk.”

Soon after Baron Mikoshiba began governing Wortenia, mercenaries and adventurers sent there began to go missing. At first, people believed they had simply overestimated their power like fools and fell victim to the monsters. This young man knew the real reason behind their disappearances, however. The giant fortress city he’d seen over that hill told him all he needed to know. A man skilled enough to build something like that in such a blasted land in the span of a couple of years had to be a monster. And anyone that talented wouldn’t show their hand easily.

These observations led to this young adventurer’s current predicament. The sense of purpose that drove him to return to his employer and report what he saw spurred him forward. This was the only recompense he could offer his dead comrades as the sole survivor.

Eventually, the road ahead of him opened. That was proof he’d escaped the forest growing along the mountainside and was close to Count Salzberg’s territory. The young man’s body, which had been overcome with fatigue and exhaustion, was filled with one more burst of strength.

Just a little longer. I’m almost there...

Just as he was about to cross the border, a black shadow descended on him from the trees.

“Huh?”

A light flashed through the air, and the young man felt something cold skim along his throat. He stopped in his tracks, his hand jumping to his neck. His eyes froze in fear. He felt a moistness between his fingers. Something too viscous and thick to be sweat flowed down his throat.

As he felt the clock that ticked his life away grow duller and slower with each second, he raised his hand, gazing at it with a sinking sense of realization.

“It’s...blood...”

Blood gushed from his wound with each beat of his heart. As he gazed at his red-stained hands, he felt something warm build up in his throat. Before long he crumbled to the ground. At some point, a black shadow appeared next to him.

“You came this far. You should consider yourself lucky.”

Wiping their dagger clean with a cloth, the shadow gazed at the adventurer’s corpse with cold, emotionless eyes.

“I know they’re training as hard as they can, but it’s not enough. We should tell Gennou to train them harder.”

The shadow had whispered this, but it was still loud enough for the figure behind them to hear.

“No need to say that, Ryusai. For just a few months’ training, the young ones are quite skilled. If we were to push them too hard, it might just break them instead. And the lord did firmly instruct us not to train them too harshly before he departed, did he not? There’s no need to hurry.”

Heeding the voice of the wrinkled old woman behind him, the shadow turned around. “So you say, O-Ume, but I’d like for them to improve more visibly before the lord returns.” He had used the affectionate prefix with her name, but his voice clearly sounded discontent.

As one of the elders of the Igasaki clan, Ryusai felt exceedingly responsible for the clan’s successes and failures, so he wanted to make the clan seem all the more useful to Ryoma. A shinobi was, effectively, a living tool. And tools only

had meaning when there was someone to use them. Conversely, a tool couldn't even be seen as a tool if no one used it. All it would ever be was an object left to rot. Ryusai knew this, and so he tried to make a show of the Igasaki clan's value.

"I do understand why you might feel that way, though," Ume said empathetically. "But of the five intruders, the young ones disposed of four all on their own. I think that alone is worth acknowledging."

"So you're saying his skill was surprisingly good?" Ryusai asked, kicking the corpse. From his perspective, he would rank the man lying dead at his feet quite poorly, even if he were to be generous with his assessment. But then again, he did have decades of experience as a ninja.

"I am," Ume said. "He mingled in with the others, going unnoticed. As a matter of fact, you had to personally dispatch him."

Ryusai nodded, his expression bitter. The elders were among the most powerful members of the Igasaki clan. Two of them wouldn't be standing in such a place for no reason.

"True... You might be right, O-Ume."

"I do think the lord's training regimen is quite effective. After all, these mere children are already proving themselves as quite skilled ninja."

"At first I didn't understand why he told us to allow the spies to cross the border and only eliminate them after," Ryusai admitted, a resentful smile on his lips.

They couldn't let outsiders know about how developed the city of Sirius was at this point. One day, it would become a prosperous port known across the continent. But now, with its governor away on the expedition to Xarooda, there was no telling what might happen if news of it were to leak to the outside world. That was why the Igasaki clan worked tirelessly, engaging in counterintelligence and keeping the border closed. The problem, however, was that Ryoma gave them one more order.

"I feel the same way. Allowing spies to encroach on Sirius so they young ones can eliminate them... No one else could come up with such a reckless training

method. But letting them experience real combat does make their skills grow more rapidly."

He ordered the Igasaki clan not to prevent the spies from crossing the border but rather only to eliminate them once they got close enough to Sirius. At first, it didn't seem like a reasonable order. It skirted a very dangerous line, after all. But the results ended up being quite the opposite.

Had he been at war, Ryoma wouldn't have issued such a lax order in his absence. But when it came to espionage, this gesture was very significant. A spy's job was to gather information and return alive to report it. Discovering information only to never share it was meaningless.

Ryoma took advantage of this, electing to make as much use of those spies as possible. By allowing them to journey deep into his land, he made them into prey for his ninja in training. It was a truly cold, cruel, and utilitarian approach that saw human life as a resource to exploit—an almost economical use of other people's lives. But, as a matter of fact, the idea produced results. The slave children he'd gathered were quickly becoming capable ninja.

"I hear lions teach their young to hunt by weakening their prey. This is much the same," Ryusai pondered aloud.

"It's a fine method to get the little ones to acquire the nerve they'll need," Ume agreed.

"But I do think we're approaching the point where this training method is becoming too risky," Ryusai said.

Ume nodded. "Indeed. We needn't do away with it right this instant, but... I haven't told you yet, but there are more spies who successfully gave the little ones the slip and reached close to the border. I have dispatched them myself so far, but I'm beginning to fear I may not be enough."

"Hmph. Hence why you called me."

Ryusai heaved a deep sigh. Sure enough, unless their enemies were complete and utter fools, they wouldn't send in spies continually without adopting some kind of countermeasure.

"Yes, I believe we'll manage to hold on, but we'll have to do something about

this situation soon.”

If none of their spies returned, the clients and the guild would begin sending more skilled people in. At first, they had employed Rank F and Rank E adventurers, but now they were using more skilled people, some as strong as Rank B. Given time, the Igasaki ninjas would have to contend with Rank A adventurers. At that point, despite their locational advantage, they wouldn’t be able to continuously and consistently dispatch every single person who encroached on their territory—even if they tried to enclose the peninsula entirely.

“We’ll still be fine if they keep sending people of this level... But we can’t assume that they will,” Ryusai warned.

“Well, we can consult the lord about that when he returns.”

Ryusai nodded, looking up to the southern sky. His thoughts wandered to his lord, who was likely reporting the results of his ventures to Queen Lupis Rhoadserians in the capital city of Pireas.

“Incidentally, what of the elves?” Ume asked. She hadn’t been to Sirius in some time, so she wasn’t aware of the state of the city.

“Lord Boltz handles the matter of the elves. As far as I’ve heard, everything is going smoothly?”

“Hm? I thought the elves hated humans, though?”

“That hasn’t changed; they still hate humans,” Ryusai said, a wry smirk on his lips. “But whether they hate the things we produce is another matter.”

Ume’s lips curled up. “Food and alcohol, yes? I suppose elves aren’t that different from humans after all.”

“Some of them even show interest in cigarettes. Yes, I’d say there isn’t as big a difference between us and the elves as we thought. I hear humans and elves can even produce children together.”

Ume nodded. “The results of the trade the lord ordered us to make, yes?”

“I believe so. Be it alcohol or cigarettes, one can easily ignore the temptation as long as they don’t know how sweet those luxuries can be. But once they

taste them, it's hard to resist."

"Ah, I see..." Ume sighed with amazement.

At Ryoma's orders, the people of Sirius periodically sent Nelcius small shipments of assorted luxuries. In exchange, the elves would give them surplus ingredients for medicine.

"But eventually... You see?"

"Ah, yes..."

The ingredients the elves gave them did have value. Using Simone's connections, those ingredients could be circulated to the market, where they'd fetch a good price. But sooner or later, the elves would run out of ways to pay Ryoma. These ingredients were collected from the bodies of powerful monsters that were difficult to hunt down. Others came from plants that could only be collected at certain seasons. For now, they had a surplus to share. But they were bound to run out, at which point the elves would be faced with a choice. They could either do away with the luxuries Ryoma provided them with and return to the lives they led before, or they could come up with another way of paying for them.

And once one knew the sweet taste of such luxuries, they didn't easily forget it. Being ignorant of them was a blessing, in a way. Much like narcotics, it was hard to resist the taste after the fact. And so, when that time came, the elves would choose to share their knowledge of thaumaturgy as the price.

Ryoma had guided things so this would happen. That was why, in all his past conversations with Nelcius, he never mentioned the secrets of thaumaturgy the elves guarded.

"But that too will have to wait until the lord returns. The last message said he should arrive two days from now, yes?" Ryusai asked.

"Mm. If I recall correctly," Ume said, nodding.

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The curtain of night settled over the city of Sirius. At its center stood an estate, its lights lit even at this late hour.

With the celebrations in Pireas concluded, Ryoma had returned to his domain that afternoon after a year of absence. Once he arrived, he immediately shut himself up in his office and began catching up on his paperwork. As he was now, Ryoma didn't have a moment to rest.

The very image of a noble, aren't I? Ryoma thought to himself in self-deprecation.

Ryoma rested his elbows on his desk and leafed through the thick reports piled there. These reports detailed the counterintelligence measures Gennou Igasaki had implemented across the peninsula.

They're specifically resolving the problematic points one after another, and they're properly setting priorities. I guess Gennou and Boltz have lived as long as they have for a reason.

Seeing that the results were even better than he expected, Ryoma smiled in satisfaction. Of course, the two of them weren't civil officials or anything of the sort, so they weren't particularly good at paperwork. Their reports were by no means well written. Their writing style was the crude, sloppy sort of text of those unused to writing documents. If any of the civil officials working in Rhoadseria's palace were to see these reports, they would call them scribbles penned by uncultured barbarians. Then they'd nitpick the countless errors and throw them away without a second look.

While there was certainly value in organized, easy-to-read documents, Ryoma didn't feel it was absolutely essential. What the Wortenia Peninsula needed more than anything right now were people who could build an outline for an ideal organization and form an itinerary that would produce it.

Though Ryoma didn't have anyone else he could entrust with his domain, Boltz and Gennou were accomplished in their own right. They were familiar with managing and leading a group, and in that regard they were both qualified. They knew how to distinguish between short-term objectives and medium-to long-term goals, how to assign degrees of priority to each one, and how to calculate and manage risks and merits.

These ideas were just as viable in modern society, and indeed, at any point in time. At the higher echelons of society, they were running enterprises as grand

as entire countries. On the lower rungs, they applied to units as small as a commoner's household. Different cultures and time periods might have given it different names, but those ideas were the same no matter the place or time. However, people who understood and knew how to implement those ideas and properly manage an organization were surprisingly hard to come by.

I was right to leave those two in charge.

Both of them had overwhelming life experience as leaders—the wisdom that came with age, as it was often called. And that wisdom was incredibly valuable to Ryoma right now. Gennou had led the Igasaki clan for years, giving him a firm but precise outlook on things. Boltz had supported Lione as her second-in-command in the Crimson Lions mercenary group. Seeing their results, Ryoma was confident he'd made the right choice. If he had to nitpick, he'd simply comment that he wished their handwriting was a bit less crude.

But that's nothing. Besides, if someone were to tell me to write a report like this, I don't think I'd have the first idea about how to do it.

Imagining the two of them desperately trying to write a document they weren't familiar with, a vicious smile overtook Ryoma's lips—a smile that overlooked the fact he wasn't any more capable of it than they were.



“Phew, almost done.”

Reading through the last page, Ryoma let out a sigh and stretched. He then handed the report over to Laura, who stood at his side.

“Very well, all that’s left is Simone’s last report,” she said.

“Understood...” Ryoma mumbled, visibly fed-up with the work. Despite this, he accepted Simone’s report without any resistance and began reading it.

A year of absence meant Ryoma had a lot of catching up to do. Now that he’d returned to Wortenia, he knew he’d be spending a good deal of time just dealing with paperwork. Though, he was already growing tired of it. He did understand the importance of that work, however. Ryoma believed in Boltz, Gennou, and his other confidants, but he didn’t unconditionally trust them. There was a difference between faith and blind trust, and he wasn’t going to trust they’d do his job for him.

That’s the difficult part, though...

There was a delicate balance to maintain. Speaking about it too much might make his confidants think he didn’t trust them, resulting in backlash. Then again, neglecting his duty would just make it seem like it didn’t concern him, and that would make the others lose faith in him. This was true in all circles of life, be it family, work, or even society at large. However...

“Once you understand the essence of it, you can implement it. Yeah, I see it now.”

That was something Ryoma’s grandfather, Koichiro, would often say. So often, in fact, that Ryoma had once grown sick and tired of hearing those words. At the time, they’d only struck him as fussy nonsense. But ever since he’d come to this world, Ryoma lost count of the amount of times his grandfather’s ‘nonsense’ had saved his life. Thinking back on it now, Ryoma could only smile sardonically. Life, as it turned out, had an ironic edge to it.

Who would have thought the things Grandpa taught me would be useful here.

As bothersome as it was, this kind of paperwork was a fundamental part of leadership. Shirking it would make one a poor leader. It was a bit like martial

arts in the sense that the most advanced and secret feats were built upon the foundation of the basics.

Especially with my wish ahead of me...

As he thought of his final objective, Ryoma felt a jolt of electricity rush down his spine. His objective was so grandiose that a man who had only lived in the peaceful environment of modern Japan would probably never consider it. Though, on the other hand, this was a dream most men harbored at one point or another. Still, everyone knew to treat it as a mere fantasy that would never come to fruition.

And even that wasn't Ryoma's end goal. It was only a means for achieving his true wish.

Anyway, let's do it without getting impatient. I've got a long way to go.

Ryoma took a deep breath, calming his billowing emotions. His heart still burned with fires of hatred and ambition, but letting those flames overcome him would only lead to ruin.

"You must be exhausted. I'll prepare some tea," Sara suggested.

"Yeah, thanks. I'll take a break."

Ryoma nodded and rotated his neck a few times. He was beginning to feel his concentration slip. He fixed his eyes on the papers bundled up on his desk. Parchment was more commonly used in this world, as paper was expensive. Still, given Ryoma's current finances, he could afford to use paper.

Securing a constant supply of paper was one of the few instructions Ryoma gave Simone, alongside gathering funds for the development of his domain. The fact she was able to successfully secure him that paper was something Ryoma was very grateful for.

But as his eyes scanned over the bottom half of the report's summary, his expression began to darken.

This isn't exactly surprising, but I can't say I like it... I guess everything can't always go the way I want it to.

In truth, things seemed to go against Ryoma's wishes more often than not.

The fact he was summoned to this world to begin with was a pretty glaring example of this. The problem was that even if things went against his expectations, he could either leave them be or try to adjust the situation so it suited his ends. In that regard, slaying O'ltormea's court thaumaturgist as soon as he was summoned was an act of rebellion against this world's indifference and his own bad luck. And killing Gaius Valkland was what essentially led Ryoma to the position he was now in.

While he thought back to his past, Ryoma finished reading the report. But as he put it aside, he furrowed his brows. He'd tasked Simone with supplying his domain with required resources in the form of paper, iron, and lumber, and she had completed this task well. The intelligence agency organized in her company was developing steadily, successfully establishing an intricate intelligence network that gathered information from across the three great countries of the western continent. In other words, Simone's accomplishments were also satisfactory. Perfect, even...with the exception of one matter.

Taking a sip from the cup on his desk, Ryoma submerged himself in his thoughts.

That's only half the estimated sum. Well, I wasn't going to use it any time soon, and the merchant deals are going well, so we'll probably cover for it, but...

This was one thing he'd ordered Simone to prioritize—gathering funds for his domain's development. But the amount didn't meet his requests. The sum in the report was 30,000 gold coins. That was only half of what Ryoma requested from Simone when they met before he left for Xarooda. The real problem, however, was that the document didn't have an explanation for this discrepancy.

I doubt there was a problem with Simone's management skills.

Simone had already proven that her business management skills were superb. While at first the Simone Company only had two galleons, that number had increased to eight ships, all sailing the northern shores of the continent, loaded with merchandise to sell.

With the pact forged between Helnesgoula and the three kingdoms of the east, their trading sphere had increased substantially. It wasn't free trade yet,

but business had increased greatly and prices had fallen. The environment had become much more conducive to business.

But that also meant competition with other companies had grown more fierce. Helnesgoula and Myest had proven to be quite quick-witted, forming state-sanctioned unions among their most influential merchants. This had increased the production, export, and import of local products. At the sight of this lucrative business opportunity, everyone was keen to make a profit. The only ones not riding this wave were Xarooda and Rhoadseria, which lacked influential ports along the coastline. The merchants of those countries gave up on sea trade and instead scrambled to find good land routes.

Even in that situation, the Simone Company made reliable and consistent profit, so one couldn't claim that Simone was a poor merchant. This only made the insufficient funds all the more baffling. The warning Julianus I gave him in Xarooda once again surfaced in his mind.

I have a bad feeling about this.

There was nothing to guarantee that warning was somehow related to this case. There wasn't even anything to support Julianus I's words to begin with. But Ryoma's intuition was trying to alert him.

There was probably a reason Simone didn't list an explanation for the missing sum.

The question is whether she didn't write it because she didn't want to or because she couldn't. I have to ask her about this...

The clock on the wall displayed the time—1 in the morning. Not the most appropriate time to beckon a young woman over, but Ryoma didn't have much of a choice. Something was telling him he was on the verge of a turning point, one that would greatly influence future events for him.

†

It must be about that matter...

Despite receiving a sudden summons late at night, Simone's expression didn't betray any signs of confusion. She'd offered explanations and details for every matter she'd reported, with the exception of one. Given Ryoma's personality,

she could easily imagine he'd be intent on asking her what happened.

I'll admit I didn't expect him to call me at this time of night, though. I suppose I misjudged him. But this works out well. There was something I wanted to ask him too.

Simone had assumed he would call for her during the day, but apparently that matter drew Ryoma's full attention. Even if some part of her did anticipate this possibility, she was still a woman who had been woken up and ordered to prepare for a meeting. Her hand jumped to her hair, which wasn't quite set to her liking since she had been rushed.

A sentinel at the door to Ryoma's office announced her arrival. "Miss Simone Christof is here to see you. Shall I let her through?"

The sentinel watching his office today was a young soldier, his face still visibly boyish. His conduct, however, was that of a skilled, trained soldier.

He's even taught those children etiquette. I'm impressed.

Their quality didn't quite match that of a trueborn servant in service to a high-ranking noble house, but the gap wasn't significant. By the very nature of her work, Simone often visited nobles, and from her perspective, the guards and servants of Ryoma's estates greeted her in a manner that was acceptable enough.

What's more, despite his age, this soldier was undoubtedly quite skilled. Of all the soldiers in the Wortenia Peninsula, who had all learned to wield martial thaumaturgy, he had been selected to guard the ruler's office. Anyone handpicked for this position must have been both loyal and qualified.

"Yes, let her through," a feminine, chime-like voice responded from the inside.

The sentinel gently opened the door, and Simone stepped inside. There was a large desk set in front of the room's window. A towering heap of papers was sitting on top of it, filling her field of vision. But what truly drew the most attention was the room's owner.

It'd been some time since she'd last seen him, but Ryoma's face was as serene and calm as ever. Standing at his back, like shadows stretching behind him,

were two twins—one with silver hair, the other blonde.

Always by his side, like guard dogs...



Something akin to envy bubbled up in Simone's heart. She cracked a smile, but it was forced. She was perhaps displeased that Ryoma had never once tried to woo her the same way he did them.

"My apologies for calling you so late," Ryoma said, motioning for her to take a seat on a nearby sofa.

"Oh, I don't mind," Simone replied as she settled into her seat. It was a rather luxurious piece of furniture and quite comfortable to sit on.

No good... I have to focus on work.

She stifled her feminine disgruntlement, straightened out her skirt, and then turned a serious gaze at the young man sitting opposite her.

"I know I was the one who called you here, and you did arrive surprisingly fast, but...judging by things, it doesn't look like you knew I'd call you tonight." Simone was dressed well enough to appear in public, but Ryoma could tell she had done only the bare minimum. He noticed her hair was still slightly disheveled. "I see, looks like asking you directly was the right idea."

"Yes, I thought it'd be for the best if I made time for you as soon as possible. But I didn't think you'd call for me so soon after returning." Despite the unusual time, her words didn't contain any displeasure. In fact, Simone very much praised Ryoma's quick thinking and decisiveness.

"Again, sorry about that. I wasn't sure if I should call you this soon either, but Xarooda's king warned me about something."

"Warned you?"

"Yes. And I had a feeling whatever you're going to tell me now might just be related to it."

Simone's expression turned quizzical. He was being oddly evasive. Why was he beating around the bush?

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Xarooda's king, Julianus I—the Mediocre King. What had he told Ryoma? Rhoadseria eyed the decisions he'd made during this war quite coldly. Simone herself had her doubts about him too.

I'm surprised he really accepted that truce and backed off. For starters, ending the war at that point would make the initial plans fall apart...

Something about that decision felt off, as if something didn't quite fit. At least, that was Simone's impression of the war. But Ryoma's next words made it clear he had no intention of answering those doubts.

"I think I know what you're going to ask, Simone. Lione's been pestering me about it the whole time, actually. I'm sorry, but I can't answer that right now. It'll have to wait. I'll need to explain it to Boltz and Gennou later down the line, anyway."

With the lord of the land telling her that, Simone had no choice but to nod wordlessly, albeit reluctantly.

"Anyway, the hour being as late as it is, let's get started..."

Simone calmly answered Ryoma's questions. Their conversation lasted until morning.

†

Money.

In almost every society that had advanced past a certain cultural level, money was essentially a weapon and a tool of unlimited power and utility. No... Money was more than just a weapon. Money could be converted into anything—food, clothing, knowledge, time...and even a person's very life. Some things couldn't be obtained with money, however. That much was true. But without money, one couldn't obtain anything. It was, in many ways, the ultimate power.

That doesn't change in any world. Well, assuming that world invented the concept of currency. It's a good thing this one has done so.

Ryoma couldn't deny the hypothetical existence of some world where culture didn't have any idea of money or its value. After all, his very presence in this world was absurd enough as it was.

Resting his chin on his hands, Ryoma listened to the meeting while rolling the golden, shining coins in his hands.

Now that's a good feeling. Nothing else quite like it.

Gold had a distinctive sort of weight to it, and the coldness unique to metal made Ryoma's lips naturally curl into a smile. Unlike paper money, coins were heavy and hard to carry around, but they had a satisfying sense of presence and importance that bills couldn't hope to emulate.

"So let me get this straight... What yer saying is that the whole time, ya were after money?" Lione's voice echoed through the room designated as their meeting room.

A round table was set up on a black carpet, where the ruler of the Wortenia Peninsula and his subordinates were gathered. As one of them, Lione spent most of the meeting slouched over her chair, listening silently. But when Ryoma finished telling about his exchange with Simone, she was the first to speak up.

She looks like she's in a bad mood. That's to be expected, I suppose... It feels like something she'd do.

The problem was the reason behind her disgruntled reaction. As a mercenary, Lione's anger was justified. As a commander on the battlefield, she was also justified. But what Ryoma expected out of her wasn't that shallow of a perspective. And truly, he expected the same out of everyone else.

Though, I think Lione might actually have an inkling...

Otherwise, she absolutely would have gotten angry with him. And with her short temper, if she'd been honestly angry, she would have stormed out of the room by now. The fact that she had the sense and discretion to not do so proved she was willing to listen.

Simone, on the other hand, regarded Lione's words with apprehension. Collecting funds was indeed a means to an end, and Ryoma didn't go on the expedition to Xarooda solely for that reason.

"Miss Lione, I think what you just said was a touch faulty. My role is to secure funds and supplies, but that's not everything to Sir Ryoma," Simone explained.

Lione frowned at Simone's calm reasoning. She likely understood what Simone had meant to at least some extent.

I didn't lie to anyone, though, Ryoma thought. If nothing else, he'd never lied to Lione. Maybe he'd neglected to explain everything, but she couldn't claim

he'd outright deceived her. If there was a reason to blame Ryoma, it was for one thing: that he didn't disclose all of his plans.

"I think I see. Like the lad said back then, it was to make a show of our power to the surrounding countries and buy time for Xarooda," said Boltz, who had been sitting next to Lione silently with his arms crossed.

"Yes, Sir Ryoma wasn't lying when he said that," Simone added. "It was imperative he go on the expedition for those reasons."

"But he didn't tell us the full story, did he?" Boltz asked.

Simone nodded. "Put concisely, that's what it comes down to..."

"I see... So who's to say there aren't any more secret reasons?" Boltz said, casting a gaze of profound significance in Ryoma's direction.

"Oh no, don't worry, there are no more secrets," Ryoma said.

Sensing the meaning behind his words, Boltz smiled. "Well, I see... It's like Miss Simone said, then. I suppose we never did ask," he said. Then he laughed grandly, shaking his head in an exaggerated manner. He undoubtedly did it out of consideration for Lione, who looked primed to get mad.

"Fine, fine," Lione eventually said with a sigh. "I don't much like it, but I suppose I didn't ask..."

Seeing her second-in-command acting like that convinced her to back down. Boltz was right; they didn't ask him for his reasons, so he wasn't obligated to answer. He hadn't told any lies. Lione probably knew Ryoma would say that, so she reluctantly decided to agree.

"Then let's return to the subject at hand. Ya didn't gather us here early in the mornin' just to talk about that, did ya? And honestly, I've got some questions for ya, boy. All sorts of questions."

Feeling Lione's gaze on him, Ryoma lightly shrugged. He'd imagined she would have a lot to ask. He knew he'd neglected to explain things properly to them, and he felt a pang of guilt about that.

Ryoma nodded. "You want to ask about Julianus I?" This was a question Lione had persistently asked him about at every turn—something he'd avoided

answering.

“Aye. What did that old man tell ya the night before we left Xarooda?”

“What are you talking about...?” Boltz looked at Lione incredulously.

Several other people seated at the round table looked at her the same way, and every gaze in the room was fixed on her. Lione, however, kept her eyes fixed on Ryoma, silently pressuring him.

“Don’t try to tell me nothin’ happened. I could tell something was wrong from the way ya looked that night.” Her tone demanded an answer. It was clear she’d had enough of putting up with Ryoma’s evasive attitude.

I suppose it’s as good a chance as any... It was a long story, and a complicated one at that. Ryoma honestly wasn’t sure where to start.

“Well...I figure this would be a good chance to explain.”

Ryoma heaved a deep sigh and parted his lips to speak.

“King Julianus told me this war...or rather, most if not all of the wars taking place on this continent are being influenced by the intentions of a certain group.”

The silence that followed was as loud as a bomb dropping.

Lione gazed at him with a stupefied expression. “Huh? What the hell...?”

She wasn’t the only one to react like this either. Everyone else looked at Ryoma with shock. The only ones not visibly surprised were the Malfist sisters, who sat to Ryoma’s left and right, and Simone.



“I mean, I don’t expect you to believe something like this when I just drop it out of the blue,” Ryoma said.

Their reactions were natural for such a revelation. In fact, Ryoma wouldn’t want to associate with anyone who’d blindly believe such a statement without any previous information.

Heavy, suffocating silence settled over the room. From their perspective, Ryoma’s words were lunacy.

“W-Well, I say we hear the lad out, yes?” Boltz managed to suggest, albeit with some difficulty.

Despite his misgivings, Boltz was giving Ryoma the benefit of the doubt. However, apprehension and suspicion were still clear in his eyes. Ryoma did understand where he was coming from, though.

“Thanks, Boltz. Then, back to what I was saying,” Ryoma continued, looking around and confirming that everyone had calmed down. “Let me start off with this. I’m not swallowing the king’s story blindly here. Honestly speaking, calling it absurd would be an understatement.”

Everyone sitting around the table nodded firmly at those words. Sara and Laura, who had already heard all this from Ryoma, were among them.

“That’s why, after he’d told me about this, I didn’t share it with anyone. I’ll be real here. I was asking myself if the old man had lost his marbles. But on the way back from Xarooda, I thought things through. Maybe what he said wasn’t completely crazy. I mean, if nothing else, someone on O’ltormea’s side definitely wanted to draw out this conflict.”

“Meaning?” Boltz asked.

Ryoma gave a quick nod. “The first point is how Joshua Belares prolonged O’ltormea’s invasion for almost a year.”

Joshua was definitely a skilled tactician—Ryoma would go so far as to vouch for that. His father had formed the privateer unit, consisting of villains and knaves, but they all regarded Joshua with respect and admiration. His capacity as a leader and commander was great, and his knowledge of the border’s

mountain terrain was comprehensive.

But after hearing Julianus I's warning and thinking things through more carefully, Ryoma noticed a few suspicious points. Blocking the enemy's supply chain was a basic, rudimentary strategy. O'ltormea's side had to have known that just as well as Ryoma and Joshua did. So would they have acted without precaution? No, they would have taken suitable measures to counter Joshua's raiding tactics. Even so, most of Joshua's raids were successful—not all of them, perhaps, but enough of them to slow the invasion army's charge. Ryoma did believe Joshua's excellent capabilities were what afforded him this achievement. But on closer inspection, he realized this reason couldn't explain everything.

"So yer thinking someone on O'ltormea's side was feedin' Xarooda information?" Lione asked.

"Well, creating allies within the enemy's ranks is as basic a strategy as they come," Ryoma said, nodding. Then he turned his gaze toward Gennou. "Though I'd figure you and Ryusai would be experts on that."

"I see... Your words are not without merit, milord. But based on what Sakuya tells me, I doubt anyone in Xarooda is that skilled at subterfuge."

The members of the Igasaki clan nodded, their expressions clearly unconvinced. If Xarooda had a good enough spymaster or an intelligence organization working for them, perhaps they wouldn't have been cornered as badly as they were. The fact they did nothing in the face of the coming danger implied they lacked any such intelligence agency. If they did have that kind of spy network, it must have been quite diminutive and weak.

Ryoma's analysis brought him to the same conclusion. "Yes, that's why I thought Joshua's talent was how they managed to hang on."

Schemes were a fundamental part of war, but it was difficult to use them effectively. One would need to build a vast, intricate intelligence network, operated by multiple skilled individuals. Most important of all, one's operatives would need to be both loyal and devoted. But Xarooda exhausted much of its national power due to internal strife, meaning it didn't have the strength to create such a force. The only way to compensate for that was to admit the

disproportionate gap between the two countries' strength and embark on unconventional warfare—which is what General Belares once did, with Joshua subsequently following in his footsteps.

"But I think that's the wrong answer," Ryoma admitted.

Ryoma had spoken to Joshua after the war ended and learned that the extent of his espionage efforts was to send spies into the enemy's ranks to sniff out information. Other than that, he didn't have anyone planted within O'ltormea's inner circle. Of course, Ryoma had no definitive proof Joshua wasn't lying to him. But he did realize that planting someone that deeply into O'ltormea's ranks would have been difficult, given how backed against the wall they were. Xarooda had nothing to offer to a potential traitor anyway, which narrowed things to one conclusion.

"Yer sayin' someone on O'ltormea's side—and someone involved in the invasion force's command, at that—leaked information on purpose?" Lione asked.

Ryoma nodded. "I mean, think about it. The way their army was stalled for so long feels off. It's unnatural."

By comparison, the skilled display of strategy that claimed the life of General Belares, revered as Xarooda's Guardian Deity, during the first battle was much more impressive. It felt as if O'ltormea had completely changed its direction for the remainder of the war.

"At first, I thought someone inside the empire might be trying to sabotage Shardina's efforts. You know, a political struggle over the throne. Stuff like that feels like it's par for the course with them."

Shardina Eisenheit was the emperor's eldest daughter as well as his favored child. He'd likely trusted her more than her brother, the crown prince. It was perfectly possible someone within the O'ltormean court might have resented Shardina over that and attempted to make her fail. This was only speculation on Ryoma's part, but everyone present agreed it was plausible.

"Wait just a minute though, lad. What you just said is your theory about the inner workings in O'ltormea. How did what King Julianus say fit into this?" Boltz asked, trying to put the facts together. He was clearly doubtful.

“Yes, I understand why you’d ask that. It’s merely a possibility given the antagonism within O’ltormea’s regime. But let me finish, and I think you’ll understand what I mean.”

“And that’s related to you orderin’ Simone to gather funds?” Lione asked.

“Yeah. I set Simone a goal of one hundred thousand gold coins. We’ll be putting it to use for the coming war.”

“One hundred thousand golds...?” Lione, who hadn’t heard of this before, stood agape. “That’s, well... That’s freakin’ crazy...”

When converted to yen, that sum would be roughly one hundred billion yen—more than most people would ever achieve in a lifetime. Ryoma, however, stated it unflinchingly.

“There’s nothing to be shocked about. Given my final objective, that kind of loose change isn’t enough to cover the costs.”

As a practical matter, Ryoma needed all the money he could get right now. One hundred thousand gold coins would only cover the development and maintenance of the Wortenia Peninsula. That wouldn’t be enough to move forward.

Lione eyed him skeptically. “And you two seriously think you can scrounge up that kind of money?”

Everyone else seemingly felt the same way. Having an objective to strive for was fine, but an unrealistic goal would get them nowhere. Speaking reasonably, collecting one hundred thousand gold coins would be difficult for Ryoma right now.

As if waiting for someone to voice those doubts, Simone finally spoke up. “Yes, if all goes as planned, gathering those kinds of funds should be well within the realm of possibility.”

“All goes as planned? What plan?”

“Yes, Xarooda and O’ltormea... If we use the war between those two countries, it should be perfectly feasible.”

Lione eyed Simone quizzically.

Yeah, makes sense she'd react that way. Profiteering off a war isn't something people in this world tend to consider. But that means...

The fact that Lione and everyone else reacted that way proved to Ryoma that his suspicions were correct. There was a good chance people with the *same kind of knowledge as he had* might be instigating this.

"I'll have to make a move..." Ryoma whispered to himself as Simone's explanation echoed through the meeting room.

Chapter 5: Incessant Plots

The capital of O'ltormea—the heart of the western continent's greatest hegemony, a mighty country ablaze with the aspiration of unifying the continent under its rule. However, over the last couple of years, with the death of Gaius Valkland as the apparent trigger, its aspirations seemed to have halted somewhat. Still, this meant little to the commoners. O'ltormea's very name carried power with it. And the commoners favored those with power. They might grumble and complain, but in the end, they fawned over those stronger than them. In no place in any country was that more clear than in this capital city.

The number of subjects flowing into this city continually rose on a daily basis. Despite this, owing to O'ltormea's status as a strong, militaristic powerhouse, many soldiers patrolled the streets and the capital's public order was ranked high among the cities of this world.

People brought forth money, and money beckoned people—a synergy. If nothing else, the capital of O'ltormea could confidently be called the most prosperous city on the continent.

Business around here is booming as always, even though it's been declared that the expedition to conquer Xarooda failed.

Despite the empire's failed campaign to conquer Xarooda, internal affairs had remained calm. The commoners seemed to understand which country was truly the strongest.

But my, it's gotten late.

It was still early evening. Drunkards shambled about, and prostitutes sought to profit off of them. Since his work in the palace had taken longer than expected, he had left later than the appointed time. He walked along the moonlit flagstones to the pleasure district at the north of town.

"My, mister. Would you like to have some fun? I can offer you a good price."

“No, you should have me. I can offer you a little something.”

Catching the scent of money from his tailored clothes, the prostitutes flocked around him. Nonetheless, he hastened his steps and ignored their solicitations.

How sad does one have to be to look for a woman in a place like this.

Only the prostitutes of the rundown district would tug on the sleeves of men for business. Put simply, they were middle-aged, unlicensed prostitutes who had grown too old for their contracts. They were what remained of women who once aspired to be registered prostitutes. True, they were relatively cheaper than those registered with the state. But the risk of them carrying some kind of disease was higher, and as one might expect, their performance matched their price.

He didn’t deny that some of them might be an unexpectedly good bargain, but he didn’t struggle for female company if he needed it. He wasn’t one to brag, but he was quite affluent. Perhaps not like a royal, but he did better for himself than most nobles.

But more importantly, he had somewhere to be. He’d sent a message ahead that he might be slightly late, so he wasn’t in that big of a rush. Still, being a hard worker by nature, his legs hurried him along.

Perhaps irritated by his curt approach, one of the women pulled hard on his mantle. The man scowled, the odor of cigarettes and cheap perfume soured by sweat filling his nostrils. This woman perhaps took a bit more care of her grooming than most commoners who sold their bodies, but unlike people in Japan, the people here didn’t see bathing as an everyday occurrence. This made him even less keen to get involved with her. In short, he wasn’t so inconvenienced so as to settle on any woman.

Forcibly shaking off the prostitute’s hold on him, he hurried onward without looking back. She saw him off with a torrent of shouts and curses. Apparently, when he shook her off, she lost her balance and skinned her knees. To avoid a commotion, he flicked a silver coin behind him. He could hear her swearing, but he didn’t bother to stop.

I hate not having a horse to get around. Though I did send a missive that I’d be late.

A horse or a carriage would solve most of these issues, but sadly vehicles of any kind were forbidden in this pleasure district. Anyone who crossed through this place would have to do so on foot, no matter how heavy their pockets or how noble their origins were. This was similar to Yoshiwara, a pleasure district from the Edo period, where only doctors were allowed to pass through in vehicles. Still, this didn't mean he could afford to use martial thaumaturgy to hurry his steps. With the crowd being as thick as it was, doing so would result in an accident.

I swear, I cross this place every day and I can't get used to it...

He didn't dislike the lively hustle and bustle of a city, but everything had its limits. This was an annoyance he had unfortunately felt countless times already. But he understood that this place was perfect for a secret meeting, so he never showed his displeasure to his superior in either speech or conduct. After all, their meetings had to be clandestine.

Finally, large gates that looked like they'd belong to a high-ranking noble's estate came into view. The grounds were protected by a tall fence, and burly gatekeepers stood guard at the entrance. This was in fact a brothel, and one that catered to the highest echelons of society by offering the finest grade of women.

One of the gatekeepers noticed him approaching and referred to him respectfully. "My apologies, sir, but could you kindly present your member's certificate? Or did one of the members refer you to us?"

The guard was a middle-aged man, but even through his clothes one could see the tense, well-built muscles of a warrior. His facial features were those of a man who seemed accustomed to fighting and violence. Despite that, he was well-dressed, clad in a tailored tailcoat, and his hair was swept back. This was how one might expect a person in the night entertainment business to look, though. Rumor had it that not just nobles but even royalty frequented this establishment incognito. The gatekeepers of this place were appropriately disciplined.

"Will this do?" he said, producing a card from his pocket. This was a procedure he'd gone through countless times already.

Always sticklers for regulations...

This gatekeeper wasn't a stranger to him. They knew each other and would even drink together on days when he was off-duty. Besides, this guard was a member of the Organization, just like he was. The guard would never mistake him for anyone else, even if remembering the guests' faces wasn't part of a gatekeeper's duty.

In some ways, he couldn't help but grumble. Wasn't it about time he'd be allowed in without showing his card every single time? But given this estate's importance, he understood the heavy emphasis on security. Should this place be attacked by a rival faction, the intelligence activities they'd been working on for a good while now would be paralyzed for a time. That would place the lives of operatives working across many regions at risk. So as annoyed as he might have been by the security, he had to admit the guard was right to adhere to regulations.

"Yes, everything looks to be in order. Please, come in."

After confirming the name and numbers printed on the card, he inserted it into a slot in a pedestal sitting within his station. A crystal on the pedestal displayed some information, to which he nodded, signaling another gatekeeper to open the gate. The gate slowly opened with a long, metallic grating.

"Everyone's already waiting for you, Sir Saito."

This man's name was Hideaki Saito, aide to the O'ltormea Empire's first princess, Shardina Eisenheit, and vice-captain of the Succubus Knights.

Saito nodded briefly and crossed the gate. After he entered the estate, a maid greeted him and led him up the staircase of a large reception hall lit by a chandelier. Each time he passed by a room's door, the sounds of a woman's coquettish voice or vulgar laughter reached his ears.

This place is as prosperous as ever. That's good, I suppose.

This brothel's profits made for a significant chunk of the Organization's income. This wasn't very pertinent to the situation, but the sex industry in this world was a massive market compared to Saito's home world. Some dry part of his mind remarked that a world with no television or computers would leave

one with little in the way of pastimes. Books existed, but the literacy rate was incredibly low. Even fewer people knew basic arithmetic. In this kind of world, prostitution proved to be a line of work where, regardless of sexual discrimination or lack of education, the rich came to pass their time. The guild knew this, which was why it was left largely unregulated. Or more precisely, such careless regulation would undermine the Organization's radical faction, since this was a significant part of the framework that allowed them to operate in O'ltormea. This was also why the pleasure districts in the empire were so well-managed.

Needless to say, they cared little for anything as lofty as the country's public order or welfare. Their reason was as simple as it gets: prostitution meant easy money in this world. It was the same reasoning adventurers and mercenaries picked those professions. With nothing more than physical might and luck, they could earn enough to make a living. If they lacked either or both, they'd die. But for a commoner who didn't know how to write their own name, this was one of the few ways to earn money quickly.

And indeed, every year countless young people joined the guild to seek their fortune. Most of them died or spent their days earning a small income as low-ranking adventures. But those blessed by talent, wits, and luck had a way of popping up everywhere. And those lucky souls earned more in a year than a regular commoner would earn in a lifetime.

What's more, though they possessed such rare luck and talent, people like this weren't uncommon. Even if only one out of one thousand people were to be that lucky, if a million people registered in the guild every year, it would still leave a thousand fortunate adventurers. And the number of people who came to the guild every year exceeded one million.

But the problem was that most of those lucky souls didn't know how to put their fortune to use. It was said that winning the lottery could ruin one's life. Be it true or false, when one went to the bank to draw on that money, clerks would often lecture them, telling them not to quit their jobs. That was because when people happened upon large sums, they tended to lose their capacity for calm reasoning. That said, things were a bit different for adventurers and mercenaries, since the dangerous nature of their work meant they couldn't

assume they'd live long. So they would sink their money into alcohol, gambling, and women.

For the Organization's radical faction, prostitution was a goose that laid golden eggs. As such, they had their front organization—the guild—negotiate things with O'ltormea so that management and regulation of the brothels would lie with them. In fact, most of the brothels within the empire's territories were managed by the guild and operated with registered prostitutes. More precisely, the owner of a brothel had to apply to the guild, and the women who pursued this profession worked under the responsibility and liability of the guild.

Normally, prostitution contracts forced the contractor to work until a certain age, and they received a hefty advance payment that was to be paid off during their tenure. Fundamentally speaking, it was no different than being a slave—the only advantage being they could eventually buy back their freedom. They led lives like the sex slaves one heard of in stories, living chained up in filthy rooms. This meant that most pleasure districts in this world were a hell on earth—dirty, cold beds set with filthy sheets. Most slaves weren't allowed to bathe and only ate scraps. They were nothing more than birds in cages.

But things were different within O'ltormea's territories. They couldn't quit of their own will, that much was the same. They did receive a generous down payment for their future services, and that still had to be recouped. But they were allowed to take leave and consult if they became sick. Their employers provided them with their life necessities, and based on their brothel's rank, they might be taught not only how to write and do basic math, but how to sing, play instruments, and appreciate arts like the theater. More importantly, since their entertainment often culminated in passionate lovemaking, they were required to bathe often and maintain their personal hygiene and appearance. A normal commoner would never get that treatment.

Everything the guild managed, brothels included, usually catered to the rich and the affluent. While prostitutes engaged in a profession that was seen as overall lowly and promiscuous, they were often a part of high society events, where they served delicious cuisine and expensive alcohol to important clients. Assuming those clients didn't have any depraved preferences, most people

preferred the company of clean, beautiful women. And more often than not, they wanted their partners to be of a similar intellectual standard as themselves. Pretending to be ignorant and shallow could, on occasion, come across as charming. But a woman that was entirely unintelligent was a woman not worth talking to.

The same held true for matters of etiquette and manners. Some rules could be overlooked if they were broken because of ignorance, and perhaps it would even come across as charming naivete. But if a woman was too ignorant, she would come across as an uncultured savage. It was ignorance in both cases, but people's reactions to one was strikingly different than the other.

The same could be said of bathing as well. Any woman, no matter how beautiful, would be undesirable if she was covered in grime and her hair was unkempt. A man who found traces of another man on the woman they were about to bed would soon lose interest. And not just that. A customer paying for a woman to share the night with would not want to be met with a morose, dejected doll, but someone who would visibly enjoy their time together. At least, most reasonable customers would align with that logic.

All of this affected how the women were treated. Since the women were merchandise, the brothel managers knew to keep them groomed and presentable. Licensed prostitutes were given contracts with a clearly stated service period, and unlike slaves they couldn't be killed for no reason. And based on their performance, they could refuse clients they didn't like, or they could even cut their period by half by earning the money to buy their freedom.

Of course, very few prostitutes earned that kind of freedom. But then again, that wasn't to say any woman could become a prostitute. It was said that every stone could shine if it's polished, but polishing took effort. Those who shone on their own were preferred. A diamond was a precious gemstone, but not every lump of diamond was prized as a jewel.

That was how unlicensed prostitutes came to be. About half of them were women who tried to become licensed prostitutes to escape the hard life of this world and failed—like pop stars who failed to make it big in Saito's world, flunking auditions and eventually becoming trapped in dead end jobs. The other half were licensed prostitutes who'd concluded their contract and couldn't find

any other way to make a living. Technically speaking, unlicensed prostitution was illegal in O'ltormea territories, but their appearance and skills were seen as decent.

People from Rearth—and the Japanese in particular—were insistent on cleanliness and quite demanding. They tended to care about their appearance and personal grooming, more so than people in this world. In that regard, if a licensed prostitute was like French cuisine, an unlicensed prostitute was like fast food. Their respective costs and qualities meant they were in demand by different people.

But the sad truth was that while the guild's objective was to protect the rights of adventurers, they still had a hand in this industry.

In the end, ideals only go so far, I suppose.

A hint of pity bubbled up in Saito's heart. The system the Organization assembled in O'ltormea's territory wasn't perfect. In terms of their modern world, this could only be called pre-modern vice. But even this anachronistic system was a groundbreaking reform in this world's standards. There were countless prostitutes outside O'ltormea who were much worse off than the ones within it.

Even knowing this, Saito couldn't do anything to change it. The Organization wasn't a charity group. That didn't mean he didn't want to make this world a bit more comfortable for women, but there were things the Organization wouldn't budge on, and it would stop at nothing to achieve its goals.

People within the Organization held a deep-seated, powerful grudge toward this Earth, and some of them wouldn't hesitate to massacre its people if it would suit their needs. However, most of the Organization's members were nothing more than run-of-the-mill civilians before being summoned—for better and for worse. So long as they were confident it wouldn't hinder their goals, they wouldn't mind acting for the benefit of others.

Even so, whatever benefits the Organization could offer didn't extend to anyone and everyone—especially now when the overall goals of the Organization differed based on the factions scattered about the continent. That led to the pained conclusion that sometimes one couldn't even do good in

whatever limited capacity they did have. One might be able to extend a helping hand to one person, but fail to save another.

As that thought crossed Saito's mind, the maid leading him stopped in front of a door to a room—the room on the brothel's top floor furthest from the stairs.

"Right this way," the maid prompted, opening the door.

"Thank you," Saito responded. He nodded and entered the room. But the moment he took a single step inside, he stopped in place.

Seeing two men seated on the sofa, Saito bowed his head reflexively. "O-Oh. Erm... My apologies for being late."

One of the men was someone Saito expected to see here, so he didn't feel as inclined to apologize to him. Saito had already sent him a message that he'd be late, and he came here specifically to meet him. The other person, though, was someone he didn't expect, and seeing him sent a cold sensation slithering down his spine.

"Aah, you can do away with the pleasantries," said the unexpected man. "Now that everyone's here, I say we get these talks started, shall we?"

He was relatively young, somewhere between his late twenties to mid-thirties. He had an oriental appearance; his skin was tanned and his black hair was cut short. Despite this, his physique was quite large. He was easily twice Saito's size.

The man regarded Saito with a jovial smile, revealing a row of white, well-maintained teeth as he urged him to take a seat.

What's Kikukawa doing here...?

Saito was visibly confused by Kikukawa's presence. Still, a superior had told him to sit. He couldn't refuse.

"M-Mr. Carter... What is this...?" Saito whispered to the blond Caucasian man as he took a seat.

Contrary to Saito's expectations, the man responded with an icy, blade-like glare. "Saito. Please..." His eyes delivered a clear, strict instruction: shut up and sit down.

James Carter was the master of this estate and the man in charge of the intelligence network spread throughout the capital. It was rumored he was once affiliated with British intelligence. Normally, he struck Saito as a bearded man with a fondness for the pipe and a penchant for witty humor. But nothing felt humorous about him now.

With Carter's gaze on him, Saito had no choice but to comply.

What is this all about? Is it about the invasion on Xarooda? But why would Kikukawa get involved?

Seeing this change in attitude from his British gentleman of a superior left Saito even more confused and uncertain than before. He directed a downcast gaze at Kikukawa.

Don't tell me they're...cutting me off? No...

Saito was beside himself. He could imagine being reprimanded, but this felt excessive. Even if they were banishing him from the Organization, why would Kikukawa come personally to do it? All he'd have to do is send a piece of paper. This made Kikukawa's intention all the more unclear, which filled Saito with inexplicable dread—a sense of terror greater than anything he'd felt even in the presence of O'ltormea's emperor, Lionel Eisenheit.

"I think introductions are in order, first," Kikukawa said, extending his hand for a shake. "Nice to meet you. I'm Atsuya Kikukawa. As young as I may be, I'm honored to work with you."

Saito shakily took his hand and shook it.

Kikukawa winked at him in good humor. "No need to be so stiff, Saito. I'm not here to scold you or anything," he said with a smile.

"No, but, erm... Why, then?" Saito stammered.

No matter what Kikukawa might say, Saito couldn't simply accept it at face value. They might be close in age, but in terms of ranking, Kikukawa was among the highest members in the Organization. He was also aide to Kuze, one of the Elders and the leader of the radical faction. By comparison, Saito was the leader of an intelligence operations unit. He had his share of authority, but his standing within the Organization was that of a middle manager, as it were.

Kikukawa was like the undersecretary of a government office, while Saito was a section manager under his jurisdiction.

What's more, serving as an aide to Kuze meant Kikukawa was an exceedingly busy man. True, he was based in the capital, but his duties made it so he often went from one edge of the continent to another. The fact of the matter was that ever since he'd entered the Organization, Saito had never really seen Kikukawa. His presence here today, as a man of his position, was alarming.

Contrary to Saito's anxiety, however, Kikukawa spoke with a serene expression. "Oh, don't think much of it. I've been here in the capital ever since the invasion of Xarooda was decided, as a negotiations contact with the empire and transaction supervisor," he said, smiling. Then he added, "We've made quite the profit, you see."

That resolved one of Saito's doubts.

Right... On the surface, he's the president of a company run by the guild. Him being in the capital at a time like this makes sense.

Kikukawa's public face was that of a merchant with political ties. Remembering this eased some of Saito's anxiety. But if this was true, it would mean Kikukawa had been in the capital for over a year now. If he was here for some trifling matter, he could have come at any time.

Then why this, all of a sudden...?

Kikukawa seemed to sense the question on Saito's mind, since he simply shrugged. "Oh, it's not much. It's just that, since I'm here in the capital, Sir Kuze ordered me to give you his regards, as well as deliver a message. After all, there's been a lull in business, and you've returned from Xarooda."

"Well..." Saito managed to utter. This felt like a roundabout way of pointing out his lacking performance, and he was unsure as to how to reply.

Kikukawa continued, seemingly enjoying the subtle changes in Saito's expression. "Firstly, we'd like to thank Mr. Carter's unit for their hard work. Especially you, Saito. Your capacity for skillfully controlling Lady Shardina was imperative for this plan's success!" Kikukawa finished by laughing out loud.

In truth, the profits Kikukawa had gained from the O'ltormean invasion of

Xarooda were high enough to match nearly half of the empire's yearly budget. War was a major expense, after all. They needed not only food and supplies, but swords, armor, equipment, medical supplies...even women.

Everything flew off the shelves during wartime. Prices skyrocketed. The members of the Organization were outsiders, and to them, the longer the war lasted, the more they profited. But if the empire were to win or lose a war too easily, things would end too soon. And so they had but one resort. The Organization would have to control both sides of the war—rig it so the O'ltormea Empire didn't win or lose too quickly.

That kind of manipulation was easier said than done, though. Besides, Xarooda was the victim in the war and O'ltormea was the attacker. One side was desperately defending itself, while the other had no intention of going easy on its prey.

Saito could have made an intentional error in his command and thrown the battle, and he could have double-crossed O'ltormea and moved to Xarooda's side. But once he'd done either of those, he wouldn't be able to go back. Placing O'ltormea in a temporary state of weakness was one thing, but controlling the battlefield to an extent where he had control over every victory and defeat would be impossible. As such, Saito picked a different tactic. He indirectly leaked the route of the supply caravans leaving from Fort Notis to Xarooda's spies. By obstructing the delivery of military supplies gathered from around O'ltormea, they were able to slow the speed of the empire's invasion.

Considering that Saito was at the core of the invasion, pulling that off wasn't easy. Had Shardina or his colleagues suspected anything, his head would have been on the chopping block. But the danger he braved reaped favorable rewards.

"I'm being quite serious here. Managing that fastidious shrew of a princess must be quite the bother. That initial blitz was her idea, I hear?" Kikukawa said with a smirk.

Saito nodded in affirmation. Lionel Eisenheit was known as the Lion Emperor by their neighboring countries, and as his daughter, the Imperial Princess Shardina was no fool. Perhaps it wasn't as obvious in recent years, given how

poorly things had been going for her, but her strategy did claim Arios Belares's life in the battle for the Notis Plains. No one could look down on that achievement.

By removing the general from the equation, she was able to turn major nobles within Xarooda to her side. Having seen her do it first hand, Saito was quite impressed with her abilities. Had he not skilfully and secretly halted O'ltormea's invasion efforts, Shardina's endeavors may well have wiped Xarooda off the face of the map by now.

"No, it's... They just don't know the sigil on me was undone," Saito said.

"I see. That would be a major factor."

The sigil of slavery was a thaumaturgical sigil applied to those summoned from Rearth. It had forced countless otherworlders into dying in wars they had no desire to participate in.

"Yes, if they don't know your sigil of slavery was undone, O'ltormea's people have no reason to suspect you. That's exactly what we want, of course."

Saito regarded Kikukawa with a thin smile. Normally, there was no way of undoing this sort of sigil once someone had been branded with it. When Saito was first brought to this world, he was treated like an animal in human form. He wasn't seen as a fellow human being. Certainly, there were some people who were more open-minded and civilized, like Shardina. But for the grand majority of the ruling class, people from Rearth were nothing more than human-shaped pawns that happened to be capable of speech. The very idea of them being freed simply didn't exist.

Unlike the typical sigil applied to slaves, the sigils applied to otherworlders used precious and rare catalysts that made the spell incredibly powerful and difficult to break. This spell was very much the summoner's lifeline, a mark of absolute safety that protected them from whomever they summoned. It was because of this spell's existence that people like Saito and Sudou were given degrees of freedom and authority. The empire was confident that they wouldn't—or rather, couldn't—betray their masters. That was why they could adopt a carrot-and-stick policy with them.

But that absolute guarantee could be turned against their would-be masters.

“Still, the fact of the matter is that if you’d gone too far, people would begin to suspect. Besides, I’d imagine you’d like nothing more than to slay those people and satisfy your grudges. But you mask your hatred well. No one suspects your intentions. I can only praise your self-restraint. You’ve done very well, Saito. In more ways than one.”

An animal unchained would want to bare its fangs at once. Even if it would cost them their lives, people sought revenge. This was why people like Saito were necessary for the Organization’s cause. Revenge was a sweet temptation few could resist. The fact that he was able to leak inside information to Xarooda without drawing anyone’s attention was proof of his superior skills.

Saito, however, regarded Kikukawa’s praise with dark eyes. “Killing one or two of them at this point won’t change anything.”

There was no shortage of people Saito wanted to lash out at and kill. Some part of him wanted to mercilessly kill every man, woman, and child of this blasted world. Every single aspect that made up this distorted hell was something Saito would crush to bits if given the chance. More importantly, he wanted to ensure that no one else would have to live through the things he did.

Saito’s eyes were full of both blazing hatred and stern resolve. A sliver of the darkness hidden in his heart came to the forefront. Kikukawa himself had seen many battles, and even he couldn’t help but feel a shudder run through him at the sight of it.

Dark eyes, burning with madness. The grit to unflinchingly bare his fangs before me. Yes, I can see why he *favors him so much.*

With a dry cough, Kikukawa bowed his head. “My apologies, Saito. I may have spoken rashly. I know of what happened to your sweetheart. You have my condolences. But you need only be patient a while longer. Thanks to the invasion of Xarooda, we’ve come significantly closer to the sum we need.”

Saito simply bowed his head. A stranger’s words of comfort would never be enough to bring back what he’d lost.

Patience, he says. How much longer am I going to have to wait...?

For the last decade, Saito had known only suffering. He’d both shed and

spilled blood. He'd been made into Shardina's aide, forced into setting up more summoning rituals against his will. He'd forced other people from his world into the same situation. He did try to minimize the amount of victims, but even that was just to curb his guilt. Saito knew this better than anyone. He'd become the very thing he loathed. If it wasn't so tragic, it would have been funny for how ironic it was. But he still had one wish to make a reality, and everything he did up to now led to its fruition.

Sensing Saito's emotions, Kikukawa leaned forward. "The success of this plan has earned us a large amount of money. And as such, the Organization has decided to set forth on a new strategy."

Kikukawa trailed off and gazed right into Saito's eyes. This was a crucial transition period for Kikukawa, and indeed, everyone in the Organization looked forward to this.

"To that end, we need to ask you to take up a new assignment."

His voice was low, as if he'd spoken from the depth of his stomach. The sound echoed heavily in Saito's ears.

"An assignment?" he repeated.

"Yes," Kikukawa said softly. "We want you to pit the crown prince and Shardina against each other."

Hearing Kikukawa's instructions, Saito's expression contorted in joy.

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Darkness settled over the city, and as the prostitutes shared sweet dreams with their clients, one man awaited his guest in a furnished brothel room.

"Hm. It seems the talks are taking longer than expected."

Crossing his legs, he examined the clock on the wall with a smile. He then took up the glass resting near the sofa and brought the red liquid to his lips. As the rich aroma filled his mouth, he swallowed it with a satisfied smile. For one moment, one that lingered long enough to feel eternal yet ended quickly enough to make him wistful, he was filled with bliss.



This man lived a life of plotting, scheming, and bloodshed. Moments like these were his sole respite. And yet it seemed the gods didn't favor him that night. A knock on the door yanked him out of his reveries, eliciting a sharp click of the tongue. But it took no longer than a second for him to regain his composure and beckon the visitor to enter. His attitude was now that of a superior addressing his subordinate.

The door opened and Kikukawa entered the room. Sudou regarded him with a glance, his usual arrogant smile taking over his lips.

"Mr. Sudou. I've spoken to Saito about it," Kikukawa said.

"Good work. It took you a while, though. Did something happen?"

Kikukawa glanced at the clock on the wall and let out a small sigh. It was now an hour past the appointed time.

"My apologies. It took a bit longer than expected. Not unreasonable, given his position."

Losing one's family brought a great deal of pain and sorrow. If that loss was to illness or accident, the heart could come to terms with it. It was easier to think that death was unavoidable. But when another stole the life of a loved one, things were quite different. A vengeful flame was alight in the hearts of many of the Organization's members, and despite his calm, collected demeanor, the same was true for Saito. No, in his case, he was forced to hide that anger and serve his hated foe. He couldn't be expected to remain calm when told that the long-awaited day of retribution was fast approaching.

"I see. Well, I'm sure it was big news for him."

"Yes," Kikukawa replied, forcing a smile and nodding.

"Very good work, then," Sudou said, motioning for him to approach. "Now, Kikukawa, no need to stand there. Take a seat. I'll pour you a drink."

Even when faced with one of the highest ranking members of the Organization, Sudou's attitude was the same as ever. True, Sudou was ranked quite high in the Organization as well, but his standing was still lower than Kikukawa's. Despite that, Sudou's conduct was natural and relaxed—brazen,

even. The most surprising part, however, was that Kikukawa seemed to accept this naturally. In fact, their exchange made it seem as though their positions were reversed and Kikukawa was working under Sudou.

“Yes. Excuse me, then.”

Kikukawa sat opposite of Sudou, who was reclining on the sofa and sipping his drink, and took the glass resting on the table. It was a silver goblet, fashioned with delicate engravings. After taking a moment to appreciate the craftsmanship, Kikukawa took a slow sip.

“This is fine wine. Sharing it with a man feels like a waste,” he said as he took in its thick aroma. The wine was certainly made from high quality grapes and had been allowed to ferment anywhere from several years to over a decade.

“Yes, apparently this one was purchased from a warehouse in the south. Hm, and I’m inclined to agree that sharing it with a beautiful woman would have been perfect.”

Relishing fine cuisine and alcohol while surrounded by the finest women was a dream most men had presumably fantasized about at some point. This world had little by way of distractions as it was, and love affairs were among the few things that did count as a worthy pastime.

“A fine idea. James did tell me to contact him because he’d gotten his hands on a few good girls... But first we should take care of our work, I think.” With that said, Kikukawa handed him the documents he was carrying.

Sudou shrugged, like a parent entertaining his child’s whim. “Why, aren’t you the hard worker. Though, I suppose that’s how you climbed to your rank at such a young age.”

Kikukawa simply slid the documents over. “This time’s report.”

Sudou skimmed through it before cocking an eyebrow. “Hm, hm. I see. Given his personality, that is how he’d act.”

The report detailed Simone Christof’s intentions and movements, along with her partner Ryoma Mikoshiba.

“I was able to impede them thanks to what you told me,” Kikukawa explained.

“But this Ryoma Mikoshiba. He’s a fairly troublesome one.”

With the recent war between the two countries, prices had skyrocketed across the continent. This was the natural course of events. War consumed a great deal of materials and resources, making it the perfect marketplace for a merchant. Demand increased. Supply couldn’t keep up with it and prices rose. It was the basic logic of economics; just about anyone could wrap their minds around it, and the history books displayed countless examples of it happening. But just because one understood this knowledge, it didn’t mean they necessarily had the decisiveness to act on it.

Sudou nodded. “Yes, he is. He’s wiser than most people his age.”

Indeed, how many people could act the way Ryoma Mikoshiba did? Most wouldn’t capitalize on that kind of chance even if it did happen upon them.

“It makes sense he’d draw on Xarooda’s market. He did go there as part of the expedition, after all. But I didn’t imagine he’d take a bite out of O’ltormea’s market. They’re his enemies. And he used a defunct local trade firm like the Christof Company to form connections with rival businessmen in the capital...”

Ryoma had engaged both his allies and his rivals in business—albeit, not directly. This was frowned upon among merchants, and if this were to be exposed, he’d be in a great deal of trouble. But if he could keep it hidden, few trade methods could prove to be as lucrative.

In that regard, the way the Christof Company operated was thorough and appropriate. Even if the Organization were to leak this information to Xarooda and O’ltormea, they wouldn’t be able to blame Ryoma for it. Assuming they’d try to denounce him for his business dealings, they’d have to prove a cooperation existed between Baron Mikoshiba and the Christof Company, and there wasn’t enough evidence to establish that at present.

“I’m sure that from his perspective, whatever happens to anyone else is honestly none of his business,” Sudou said, laughing in amusement.

His analysis was quite close to Ryoma’s true feelings.

“He has good luck on his side, and on top of that, the ability and decisiveness to take advantage of it. He is a young man with a promising future, isn’t he?

Though, he can be a bit naive... But no. This time I suppose he's proven himself to be quite ruthless?"

Sudou shrugged, visibly hiding his honest thoughts on the matter. Kikukawa shook his head in exasperation. Still, he could handily pick up on what Sudou was trying to say.

Kikukawa had no intention of denying Sudou's analysis of the boy. The goddess of fortune did seem to bless him with good luck, and he did prove capable of capitalizing on it. His conquest of Fort Notis was striking proof of this. In order to draw the guards outside of the fortress, he burned down the nearby villages. Most people from Rearth would see this as callous and atrocious. And while the knights under his command weren't quite as guilty as he was, they did conveniently look the other way as he led the assaults. One couldn't claim they weren't at all responsible.

However, Simone Christof and her company did try to help with the recovery efforts. They gave low-interest loans or introduced convenient jobs to those who had been driven out of their homes by fire, which was quite unusual by this world's standards.

Not that he did it entirely out of good will, Sudou thought as he took another sip of wine.

As far as Sudou knew, Ryoma was compassionate on one hand but brutal toward his foes on the other. In that regard, his actions made through Simone were acts of atonement toward those victims. But a more apt way of putting it would be that he used this aid as bait to create pawns within O'ltormea's territory.

This didn't mean he had any intention of making the villagers his spies. Those villagers were nothing more than uneducated country hicks. But even they had their uses. They had eyes, ears, and mouths. They were certainly handy for gathering information about the goings-on in the Notis Plains region and spreading rumors into the empire.

However, all of this meant Ryoma had the potential to become an obstacle the Organization couldn't ignore.

"Please, Mr. Sudou. This is no laughing matter. I was able to pressure their

client into declining this time, but if I hadn't, there's no telling how much money they would have made. And if they did..."

"Well, it's a good thing you were there to stop it before the prices fell," Sudou said.

Raising prices was akin to filling a balloon with air. However, one could simply poke a balloon and make it pop. Just like how no stock could go up too much without falling, increased prices eventually dropped. Kikukawa knew this very well and intended to eventually pop this war's raised prices. It was similar to short selling in stocks, and by doing so, he would calculatingly crush his business rivals. However, the Organization had to be the one to dictate the timing of that decision. And until that time came, he'd have to delicately balance the high prices, making a profit as he did.

And yet outside interference threw a wrench into his calculations and disturbed that balance. From where Kikukawa was standing, he could neither smile nor laugh at this situation.

"I swear, you are quite the character," Kikukawa said, sighing softly.

Sudou regarded things as if none of this was his problem. But if they didn't take care of this in time, the Organization might fault them for failing to meet the required sum. This was a meticulous plan, carefully laid out by the radical faction over many years. The mere thought of delay sent shivers down Kikukawa's spine. It would mean the wishes of not just the radical faction but the Organization as a whole would be swept further out of reach.

Kikukawa glared at Sudou, but Sudou merely tipped his glass to Kikukawa with an unaffected air. "Oh, I resent that. I've told you from the very beginning that we ought to be cautious of him."

"Yes, I know that. But if you felt he was this dangerous, couldn't you have done a little more?"

Sudou did report to the Organization about Ryoma, highlighting the threat he might pose. It was only a warning for caution's sake, though, and his report wasn't regarded with much weight. If one were to truly point fingers, the blame lay with the Organization's upper brass, who didn't take his report seriously.

This time, responsibility would lie with Kikukawa, who had drafted and directed this particular project. Kikukawa understood this, which was why he couldn't help but question Sudou.

Sudou, however, was unfazed by his suggestion. "Well, if you ask me, things would have ended all the same," he said cheerily, filling his empty glass. "Even if I'd predicted exactly what he'd do and told you of it, things wouldn't have changed. Even I don't hold that kind of sway over Sir Kuze and his cohorts, I'm afraid. They wouldn't have believed me. And even if they had increased their watch over young Mr. Mikoshiba, that would have only created difficulties somewhere else."

Kikukawa found it hard to press any further. No one would have thought to take precautions from that position. Yes, it was possible Ryoma Mikoshiba could prove to be an obstacle, but he'd need luck and power to do that. Based on the information Kikukawa had, it seemed very unlikely he'd have been able to achieve what he did.

Besides, even if Sudou's report had been taken seriously, the Organization currently lacked the power to both keep a cautious eye on Ryoma's movements and step in to prevent them at every turn. The Organization had vast power that spanned multiple nations, but that power was still finite. Since it was faced with a mighty enemy in the form of the Holy Qwiltantia Empire and its patron, the Church of Meneos, the Organization had no choice but to split its power between dealing with that and handling other matters. Accounting for every possible contingency and completely preventing such developments was impossible.

"Well, either way, I think it'd be wise to keep a close eye on him going forward," Sudou said.

"That's what I and the others intend on doing," Kikukawa replied. "But that said, we hardly have any information to work with. The other day, we approached the people he left in charge to set up a guild branch in his domain. They turned us down firmly, saying they had their hands full with handling the monsters."

Sudou narrowed his eyes. "Oh. So you still don't have any information on

what's going on inside Wortenia?"

"No. Since they refused the offer to set up a branch, we handpicked skilled people from the eastern regions to infiltrate and investigate the peninsula. But we haven't heard from them since. Technically, the fortress at the peninsula's entrance is the window for negotiations, but when we asked them about what happened, they just said those people were likely done in by monsters. It's a rumor among the adventurers recently, and it seems they're all actively avoiding any work that deals with Wortenia. There are signs that the surrounding nobles tried to investigate Wortenia as well, but their efforts were in vain too."

"Is that right...? I think we can see this as an intelligence lockdown."

In most cases, when a region struggled with monster attacks, they tended to rely on the guild for help. Some influential nobles had their own loyal retainers form armies to handle those kinds of problems, but Ryoma was an upstart noble, so there was no apparent reason for him to reject the guild's help. If there was a reason, it was that he wanted to prevent any and all information from leaking outside the Wortenia Peninsula.

"What are you going to do?" Kikukawa asked. "Mobilizing some of the Hunting Dogs to raid Wortenia is an option."

"Hm. You're saying we should mobilize S-rank warriors?"

On the surface, they were the guild's most experienced warriors, those who had achieved Rank S. They were all monsters—quite literally one-man armies—and the most powerful military unit the Organization possessed. If a mere twenty of them were deployed into Wortenia, the place would be reduced to ashes before long.

If all we want is to remove him from the equation, that'd be fine...

It would be a simple, certain, and easy way of killing Ryoma, but neither the Organization nor Sudou felt like that would be a satisfying conclusion.

And besides, it wouldn't be any fun.

Sudou, who had remained silent for a time, shook his head. "I think we should refrain from doing that. Mobilizing the Hunting Dogs now would present an

opening for the Temple Knights. It wouldn't be wise."

If the Hunting Dogs were the Organization's trump card, the Temple Knights were the Church of Meneos's equivalent. Both forces were equally matched. While they weren't in a state of open hostilities right now, there was no telling when and where a single spark might ignite. Moving their forces while the situation was strained would be a dangerous choice.

"What are we supposed to do, then?" Kikukawa snapped, his voice filling with anger at his idea being turned down. What Sudou said next, though, made his eyes open wide with shock.

"Well, how about we leave him alone?"

It was such an unexpected suggestion that Kikukawa was speechless. "That's...insane. You understand how dangerous he is, yet you're saying we should leave him be?"

"Well, yes, he is a dangerous man, but so long as we use him well, he can be a fine shield. After all, he gives off much the *same scent as we do*."

Sudou stared at him with a look of great significance, but Kikukawa cocked his head. After a moment of silence, however, he realized what Sudou meant.

"A shield... You mean bait to distract Qwiltantia and the Church?"

"Yes. The harder he tries to keep information from leaking out, the more Qwiltantia and the Church will suspect he's connected to us. Not knowing what he's doing will overstimulate their imaginations. They'll assume he's more dangerous than he really is. And anyone looking in from the outside might think that the events of this war were a coordinated effort between us and him. I'm sure they wouldn't be able to shake off that suspicion, in which case there's no way they'd quietly stand by. Qwiltantia will try to strike at Ryoma Mikoshiba, for certain. Don't you think he'll make the perfect shield for us, then?"

"But will everything really go exactly the way you're saying?" Kikukawa asked.

"That's exactly why I think we should refrain from interfering and leave him to his own devices."

It was unlikely Ryoma knew the full details of the Organization, but he

probably suspected that a group was using the same tactics he was. But that was all he knew. If another faction were to face him and forcefully impede him, he would prioritize them. And from the Church of Meneos's perspective, lack of evidence that he fought their rival faction would only reinforce their false suspicions that Ryoma was affiliated with the Organization.

"Put simply, we'll be taking advantage of his order of priorities," Kikukawa concluded.

"Yes, in all likelihood, he'd make that calculation quite easily."

If one's house was on fire, they wouldn't worry about the possibility of an earthquake ruining their relatives' house.

"I see... Not a bad plan," Kikukawa said, clearly impressed with Sudou's idea.

Even the most miraculous medicine in the world could be a lethal poison when administered incorrectly. And a poison could be as good as medicine when used the right way. It all depended on the person using them. Kikukawa thought to expel the poison, but Sudou planned the opposite—to use Ryoma Mikoshiba like a silver bullet. This was a stark example of the difference in abilities between Kikukawa and Sudou.

"Very well. I'll inform Sir Kuze of your plan. This is just my assumption, but I don't think he'll object to it."

"Really? Well, either way, I leave it in your capable hands, Mr. Kikukawa."

Kikukawa nodded. "Anyway, the time is quite late, so I'll excuse myself. Good night, Consultant Sudou."

That was Sudou's position within Kuze's radical faction. There was no clear, agreed upon term for how the elders and high-ranking members in the faction referred to him. It was much like how firefighters and police officers were on the same side as government officials but they belonged to different organizations.

Each organization had different ranks and positions that, while called different names, were similar in responsibility and authority. In much the same way, the Organization Kikukawa and Sudou belonged to was basically split into twelve different groups. For example, Liu Daijin, also known as Liu Zhong Jian,

came from Chinese origins. He formed a group patterned after the Chinese Heaven and Earth Society, probably because he'd been a part of that organization back in his old world. The Organization's prior use of the old Chawanjin cyphers could be attributed to his influence. Similarly, Kuze was Japanese, and his radical faction's use of an imperial trade company as a public front could perhaps be attributed to prior experience in running a company.

With that in mind, Kikukawa referring to Sudou as a consultant was quite the unusual gesture.

"Consultant, you say... I can't say I like that title. It makes me feel older than I am," Sudou said, a smile on his lips but a bitter expression in his eyes. The only reason he wasn't truly telling Kikukawa off was because there was indisputable truth to that name. "But well, let us ignore that. Yes, thank you for your time. If anything else happens, do contact me."

Sudou acted as if he'd said his piece and Kikukawa was free to do as he wished now, so Kikukawa bowed once and left. Now alone in the room, Sudou sank more deeply into the sofa and looked up to the ceiling.

"Keheheh. Things are sure to be interesting..."

To Sudou, any wish or ideal the Organization had was by now entirely meaningless. He still felt a modicum of duty to the Organization, and he certainly saw it as a tool to be exploited, so he'd retained his ties with the group. But that was all there ever was.

Blood. Blood. Crimson, red blood... The lust for that was the only thing that drove Sudou forward. Living in this world had, at some point, fundamentally broken any semblance of humanity that resided in him.

"So, what will young Ryoma Mikoshiba do next?"

Sudou's jubilant voice echoed through the room. He was filled with an emotion, one similar to the strong looking down upon the weak.

"Now, I should find an outlet for this heat swirling inside me. Kikukawa did mention James had a few good women prepared, didn't he?" Sudou whispered, reaching for the bell sitting on the table.

But even Sudou couldn't have known that Ryoma Mikoshiba had already set

his own next plot into motion.

Epilogue

Peripheria, Xarooda's capital city, was the heart of a country blessed with vast reserves of iron ore. But its mountainous topography meant it was inevitably cursed when it came to transportation.

Despite being the capital, Peripheria wasn't as alive with activity as one might expect. The expressions on the faces of the people walking through the streets were dark. Just a few months ago, its streets were buzzing with activity. They had beaten back O'ltormea's assault on the country. As one might imagine, the commoners celebrated the peace they regained, however temporary it was. But that enthusiasm faded as time went on. Joy was a powerful emotion, but not a long lasting one. One gradually grew used to it, taking it for granted. But now, all that joy had disappeared, leaving the people of Peripheria enveloped in despondency.

After all, to push back the O'ltormean invasion, Xarooda had to pool all of its resources and national power. With the return of peacetime, the commoners began noticing the aftereffects of that effort. Naturally, the feelings of the people reached the king's castle, which loomed over Peripheria.

One reason for their concern was Ryoma Mikoshiba's departure from the country. That wasn't the only reason, though. The troops he led weren't large enough in number to have that much of a serious impact. But two weeks ago, Ecclesia Marinelle and her forces departed back to Myest, and that was a huge blow to the country's morale.

True, with the truce between Xarooda and O'ltormea, there was no reason for Myest's soldiers to remain in the capital. However, the truce didn't list their retreat as a condition—nor did it list one for Rhoadseria's forces, for that matter. They could have remained there, had they wished to do so.

But while it wasn't written in the agreement, if Myest's army were to remain stationed within Xarooda, O'ltormea could find fault with that and use it as an excuse to launch a second invasion. With that in mind, Myest didn't want to

potentially create the sparks for the next conflict. Another factor was that for both Myest and Rhoadseria, a prolonged expedition would create a heavy economic strain on their countries. Neither of them wanted to deal with that.

On the other hand, should O'ltormea invade again, Xarooda would need to be able to hold back its advances for a time. Taking that into account, even though Xarooda had made an official truce with O'ltormea, that didn't mean they shouldn't be cautious. Anyone could understand that much, and that was why the air over the capital was so dark—with the exception of a military training room within the castle.

The time was already past midnight. Heavy clouds hung over the sky, hiding the moon and the stars. Most of the castle's people were already fast asleep by now. Those who were awake were sentries or pages on night duty.

But the lights remained on in that training room, where the repeated whooshing of something slashing through the air could be heard.

He's still at it...

Helena let out a small, silent sigh. She didn't need to look into the room to check. No soldier in Xarooda, or within the Rhoadserian soldiers stationed here, was this devoted to his training.

I suppose I should be glad that bringing this wasn't a waste of time.

She'd brought some tea in a canteen, cooled with well water. But despite going to the trouble of preparing it, some part of Helena truly hoped she wouldn't need to use it.

"Chris... That's enough. You can stop for today."

At that moment, the slashing sounds died down.

"Oh, Lady Helena..." Chris answered, regarding her with a sheepish expression as she tossed him the canteen. "This is... Thank you. Much appreciated."

Catching the canteen with his left hand, Chris bowed in gratitude.



“I swear, you are such a stubborn child,” Helena said, regarding him with another exaggerated sigh.

I should probably talk to him again...

Being a knight meant that everything came down to running through the battlefield and slaying your lord’s foes. To that end, honing one’s martial skills was expected. Helena did consciously teach Chris strategy, with an emphasis on group tactics, but she never told him that he should neglect his individual strength. Which was to say, she wasn’t fundamentally against him training.

But right now, Chris was going beyond what one might consider normal. He’d been at work since dawn. Almost all the free time he had between meetings, official training sessions, and meals was spent here in this training room. At first, he trained alongside the Xaroodian knights, but they were soon overwhelmed by his daunting regimen. No one approached him anymore.

At this point, Chris had been spending every moment he could practicing the spear. Thrusting, mowing, and sweeping. He repeated the three basic swings silently and meticulously. He was apparently taking care to keep himself hydrated, but it was still unusual.

“Look at all that sweat,” Helena said, handing him a towel. “It’s like you’re standing in a pond. Wipe it off, for now.”

Chris wasn’t in a position to talk back. Obediently combing back the locks of hair that had clung to his forehead, he started wiping the sweat off his body.

“Tell me, what makes you so impatient?” she asked.

Chris’s hands froze. “What do you mean, ma’am?” Chris responded, answering her question with one of his own.

“Are you going to pretend like nothing’s wrong when you’re acting like this?” Helena shrugged. “I won’t tell you not to lie, but if you’re going to do it, you could at least come up with something more convincing, dear.”

Chris didn’t have a response. No one would believe his attempt at feigning ignorance given how he’d been acting as of late.

I can understand he’s having trouble being honest about it, but...

Chris Morgan was a young man beset by misfortune. His grandfather, Frank Morgan, was one of Helena's oldest and most loyal aides, a skilled warrior who rose to knighthood despite his commoner background. It was these exact traits that led Hodram Albrecht to loathe him.

Frank Morgan was later inflicted with Carrion disease, which would have been treatable with the help of medicine. But Albrecht got in the way of his family acquiring said medicine, allowing the disease to progress to an irreversible stage. By now, his body was severely crippled, and he was waiting for death to claim him.

Up until Helena's return to active duty, Chris was content with simply being a low-ranking knight. In his eyes, this war with O'ltormea was a chance to display his talents. However, he didn't seem to have gotten that chance. Well, perhaps that wasn't accurate. To a certain extent, things went according to his plan. But at the very end, everything went awry. The moment when he would have shone the brightest had been cruelly snatched away.

Chris had certainly displayed martial prowess and earned merit for himself in this war, to be sure. No one could fault or insult him for his performance. But even so, Chris's heart smoldered with discontent. He knew this, and that's why he continued to single-mindedly swing his spear.

"Do you hate him that much?" Helena asked him, to which Chris looked away. There was no need to clarify who she was talking about. Chris knew that better than anyone.

"I can't say that I...hate him, per se," Chris managed to say after a pause.

In truth, Chris felt no real hatred toward Ryoma Mikoshiba. In fact, his actions led to Helena's return to active service and the improvement of his treatment as a knight. Considering that, not only did he not have any reason to hate the man, he had a reason to feel grateful to him.

But Helena could see through his emotions. "Are you jealous, then?"

A shiver ran through Chris's shoulders. That alone told the whole story.

"Can I ask why?" Helena continued. "I see you as a close aide and a talented warrior who stands head and shoulders above the rest, Chris. When we return

home next week, you will probably be promoted to be a high-ranking knight for your service in this war... And still, you envy him?”

Chris remained silent. The fact of the matter was that Chris wasn’t in any position to envy anyone. On the contrary, he was more likely to be the subject of jealousy. He was well-kept and handsome, his skill with a spear was possibly the greatest in Rhoadseria, and even his pedigree was acceptable. His family wasn’t a noble family who had been there since the founding of the kingdom, but he was still the grandson of a skilled knight who had served Helena loyally.

When Albrecht still served as general, all of those factors only set Chris back, but with Helena now acting as general, they worked in his favor. For those less fortunate, Chris Morgan was a man in a position of privilege. Chris, however, couldn’t feel that way.

“Envy, huh? Maybe I am... I want to beat that man, and I want you to acknowledge me.”

“Chris. I do acknowledge you,” Helena said, visibly confused.

“I know that.” Chris shook his head sharply. “You do... But you only see me as a subordinate.”

This was the honest cry of his soul—admiration. Chris greatly admired Helena Steiner. His grandfather’s stories of her drew the image of a strong, just, and dignified hero. Since his youth, Chris had always looked up to her. Now, he had the privilege of fighting alongside her on the battlefield.

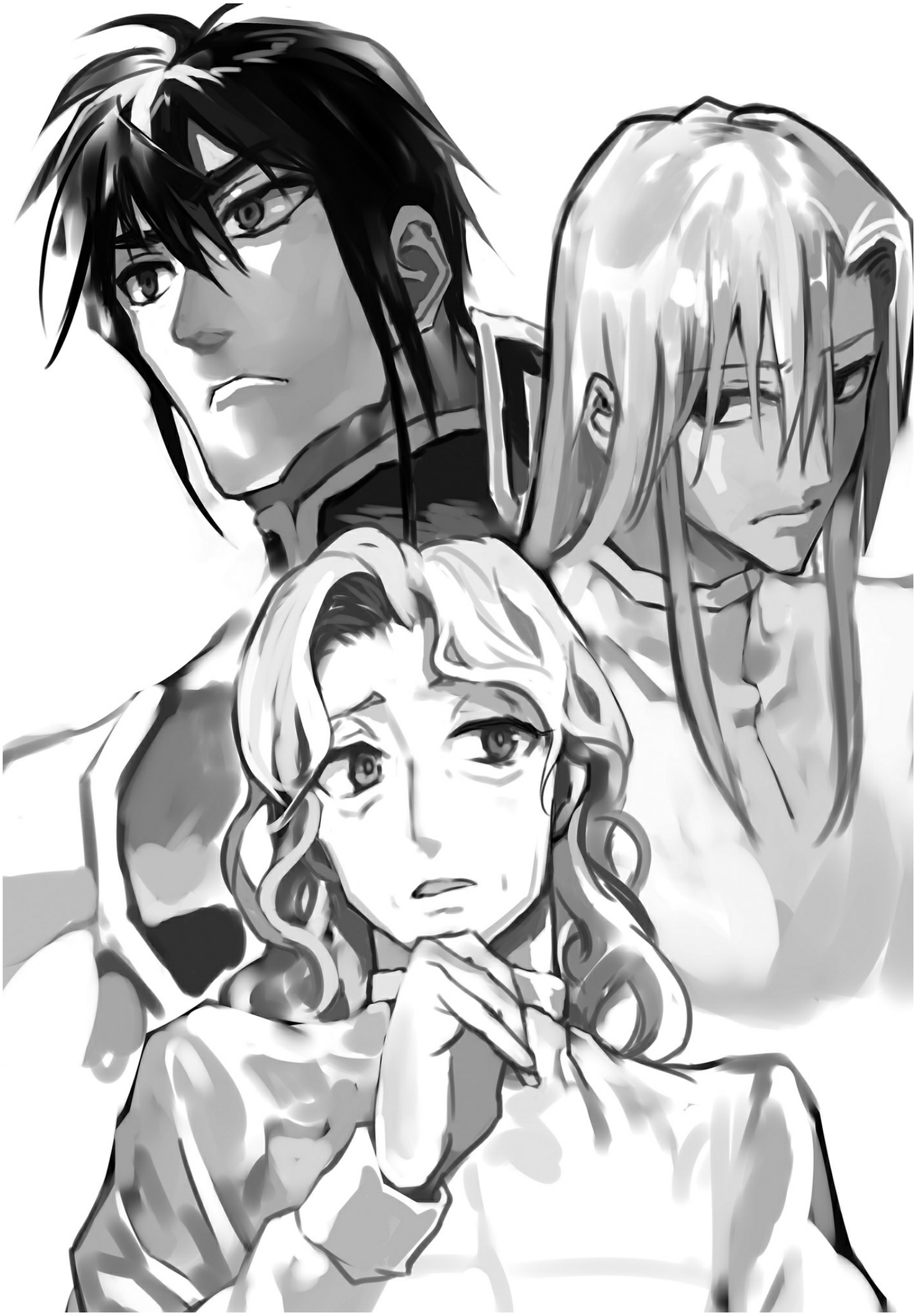
But his heart was still unfulfilled. No... If Ryoma wasn’t there, he probably would have been satisfied by this situation. But Chris saw this boy, who was younger than he was, standing side by side with Helena. At first he thought he was a haughty, reckless youth who acted out of impulse. But then Ryoma concluded the Rhoadserian civil war early. And this time, he joined Helena in the expedition to Xarooda on behalf of Rhoadseria and took control of the situation in the blink of an eye. At the time, Chris was intent on claiming Princess Shardina’s head. He’d prepared everything to make sure it would happen.

And then it got called off...

Helena had mentioned this when she discussed it with Ryoma, but when he was informed of the truce, Chris implored her to reconsider. As the commander on the scene, abandoning such a well-prepared and meticulous plan all of a sudden was difficult. But Helena knew it was about more than just that.

I can understand how he feels. Chris is young, after all.

Helena trusted Chris and acknowledged his strength. However, Chris was right; she did see him as a subordinate. But the very fact Chris was bothered by this was the real problem. Helena saw Ryoma as her equal because his eyes were looking ahead the same way hers did—maybe even further.



It was only natural she would. She was a general shouldering the fate of a country, and unless she was facing someone who shared the same outlook she did, she wouldn't be able to speak with them on the same level. Helena had to understand how her soldiers felt. Conversely, most soldiers couldn't understand how she saw things. Their outlooks were fundamentally too different.

A different post or position changed one's perspective greatly. This didn't mean those in higher positions were excused from understanding how their subordinates felt, but they certainly couldn't stand shoulder to shoulder as equals. Without sharing the same perspective, they couldn't consult with each other.

And so, if Chris's intention was to stand alongside Helena as an equal, martial training wasn't what he ought to have been devoting his time to. He would need to learn to expand his outlook instead.

The problem is, how am I going to make him realize that?

Simply saying it would have been easy. But that wouldn't help him mature in the truest sense of the word.

In that case, I may as well...

Helena was prepared. Chris was one of her most promising subordinates, and his growth would be a significant boon for Rhoadseria's military.

"How about you try talking to him for once, then? You were never really close, were you?"

Chris raised his eyes to meet hers, looking at her with surprise.

"Well, that's...!"

"I know you don't like him much. And especially now, I'd imagine coming face-to-face with him might be difficult for you. But if you want my acknowledgment, you should at least be able to handle him."

Chris fell silent again, prompting Helena to press on.

"My, do you dislike him that much? That's fine, then. But if you can't bring yourself to speak to him directly, you should stop making bold statements about standing at my side," Helena said, bringing a hand to her mouth and

chuckling.

How will he take it, then?

She was very much provoking him, but in her eyes, this was a gamble. At worst, he might even lash out at her in anger. Of course, she didn't think Chris, as passionately loyal as he was, would really do that. But there was the possibility she might strike a nerve and dig up some hidden anger.

Still, I can't let him end up like Albrecht. Helena's heart was heavy with pain. *I couldn't see the evil nesting in that man's heart. No, I didn't even try to see it. And it's about to happen again.*

Helena rose to knighthood from commoner status, ascending as high as the rank of general. But the path she took to get there was cruel and demanding. Her daily duties swamped her with work, and no one around her tried to understand how she felt. That was the darkness brooding within the heart of man. Envy, resentment, hatred, anger—so long as one didn't direct them at the wrong target, those emotions weren't necessarily bad. It was similar to the line between poison and medicine. That was precisely why she couldn't shut her eyes to the way her trusted aide's grandson was gradually allowing his heart to distort.

A few long moments of silence passed. Then Chris finally parted his lips to speak.

"And just what...would speaking to him change, exactly?"

Helena shook her head. "It's not a matter of things changing. The question is, Chris, whether you're able to take that step and change yourself."

Helena couldn't guarantee the two of them engaging in conversation would change anything. The way she saw it, their relationship would either improve, worsen, or remain completely unchanged. But no matter how it ended, the fact that he made an effort would remain. And that would serve as a trigger for change later down the line.

Chris remained silent in the wake of Helena's words but eventually gave a small, curt nod. Seeing this, Helena smiled affectionately, like a grandmother cherishing her grandson.

Afterword

I doubt there are many such readers left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. And to those of you who have kept up with the series since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

By the time I write this afterword, we're leaving the rainy season and are on the verge of summer. The changing seasons make one's health a lot more shaky, so I do hope you're all taking care of yourselves.

Actually, halfway through May I got sick and haven't quite recovered yet. The other day, I went for osteopathy and acupuncture for the first time, at a friend's recommendation. To my surprise, it wasn't so bad! If you're feeling unwell, maybe giving those avenues a try might help you.

Now, my health aside, last time I wasn't able to offer a summary of volume 9's story due to character count restrictions, so this time let's go with a simple synopsis. The highlights of volume 10 are, when all is said and done, Koichiro Mikoshiba's existence and the Organization.

As an author, I try to not let it get the better of me, but somehow I keep giving this unrestrained, playful old man screen time. Still, it's not possible to explain the full extent of all the lore of this story through Ryoma's perspective alone, so some characters have to serve as minor protagonists or narrators. As a matter of necessity, if nothing else...

But Koichiro's perspective proves quite comfortable for explaining the Organization's structure and history. Of course, the two other characters of note are Sudou and Saito. Just what new orders did Saito receive upon returning from Xarooda? And what is Sudou's true identity? Volume 10 is full of such mysteries, so read ahead and find out.

Now, I would like to extend my thanks to the editors who helped in the publishing of volume 10, as well as everyone who was involved in working on it. And of course, all you readers. The series can only keep going thanks to your

support.

Things are becoming rough in the publishing industry as of late, with the environment becoming a real race for survival. But within this environment, this series has published ten volumes and is still ongoing, despite not winning any contests or being rookie of the year. It really drives it home just how much of a miracle that is.

The upcoming volume 11 is scheduled for release in November, and I will put up my best efforts to deliver it to you in a timely manner. I hope you will continue to support *Record of Wortenia War* in the future.

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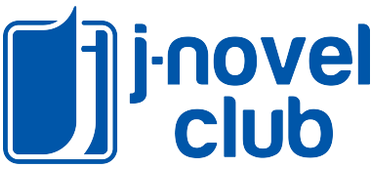
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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 10

by Ryota Hori

Translated by ZackZeal Edited by Suzanne Seals

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